

# Middle Eastern Politics & Culture: TODAY & YESTERDAY



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Chapter 1

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# Middle Eastern Politics

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(Image: Siria Bosra by Jose Javier Martin Esparto, Flickr.com (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0))



# The Secular Roots of a Religious Divide in Contemporary Iraq

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

*In 1991, explaining why it would have been a mistake to invade Baghdad after the Gulf War, Dick Cheney warned that removing Saddam Hussein would have inflamed ancient tensions between Sunnis and Shi'i. His fears were realized 15 years later when Iraq descended into a civil war from which it has not recovered. Journalists, commentators, and policy makers usually refer to this religious conflict as intractable with origins that date back over 1000 years. But as historian Stacy E. Holden writes this month, the real source of the region's conflicts are more recent and more secular. They can be traced to the political patterns and preferences of the Ottoman empire. And, over the 100 years since the end of Ottoman control in Iraq, those same power dynamics have continued to dominate the region through British imperialists, Baath-party power, and the U.S. occupation.*

*(Published November 2015)*

## By **STACY E. HOLDEN**

The Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq, centered in the central and northern part of the country, is a place where leaders torture and kill people who do not follow a draconian interpretation of Sunni Islam.

But ISIS has a particular hostility toward followers of **Shi'i Islam**, as three incidents from the summer of 2014 highlight. ISIS ordered the mass murder of 1,500 Shi'i militiamen in Tikrit, a Sunni stronghold and the former hometown of Saddam Hussein. When ISIS forces drove through villages surrounding Kirkuk, Shiite families played dead in the hopes that they would not be gunned down with others of their same identity. And when the Islamic State captured a prison in Mosul, its leaders ordered all Shi'is and other minority peoples into a ditch and killed them.

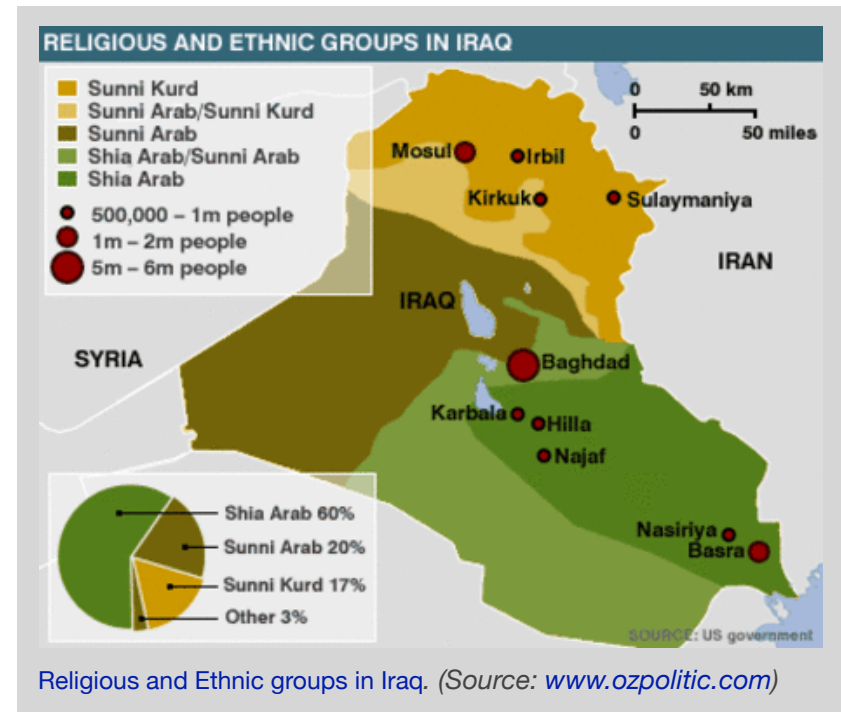


*The real source of the conflicts in Iraq are recent and secular and can be traced to the political patterns and preferences of the Ottoman empire. Artwork of the Battle of Chaldiran (1514). From Chehel Sotoun palace, Isfahan. (Source: Xiquinho Silva, CC by SA 2.0, wikipedia.org)*

Such targeted killing of non-Sunnis, particularly of those born as Shi'is, led a reporter for *The Economist* in September 2014 to write that the Islamic State “is both the product and the chief instigator of the ever deepening **Sunni-Shia enmity** that runs from Bahrain to Lebanon.”

In Iraq, the population is approximately 60% Shi'is and 20% Arab Sunnis. There is a widespread sense that the present conflict between these two sectarian groups is a case of longstanding, theologically driven hatreds reasserting themselves again. As such, some political pundits conclude, negotiations cannot overcome divine principles dictating distinct worldviews that preclude peaceful coexistence and the forging of a coherent nation-state.

When the Western media does inject pragmatic power considerations into its analysis of sectarian tensions in Iraq, they are of *courte durée*. Journalists often blame the present crisis on former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. He came to office in 2006 and used his position to promote Shi'i interests at the expense of the Sunni minority.



Many posited that Prime Minister al-Maliki's resignation in September 2014 and the appointment of the more inclusive Haider al-Abadi would improve the situation in Iraq. After all, Mr. al-Abadi formed a government consisting of both Shi'is and Sunnis, thereby making a deliberate effort to draw support from the Sunni Islamic State. And yet, more than one year after his appointment, the Islamic State has yet to be neutralized.

**Sunni and Shi'i identities** have both religious and political dimensions. And it is the politics, I argue, that causes the conflict in Iraq, while the religion provides a rhetoric accentuating difference between political players. In this way, there are secular

roots to the animosity that many outsiders view as an ancient and irreconcilable religious divide.

In order to understand the interplay between politics and religion we need to look back at the closing stages of [the Ottoman era](#) and the rise of modern nations in [the Middle East](#). The recent [Sunni-Shi'i struggles](#) for power and for influence over the institutions of the state emerged within the dynamics of the Ottoman era, when this Sunni empire contended for land and treasure with Shi'i Persia.



[The Ottoman Empire ended 100 years ago](#), but its legacy still influences sectarian relations in Iraq. When European powers disbanded it after [World War I](#), most power brokers in its Iraqi provinces were Sunni Arabs who had proven loyal to the Ottomans in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This would have

long-term implications for the development of modern Iraq, because these Sunnis and their descendants were able to perpetuate their monopolization of the institutions of the Iraqi state.

The present aggravation of relations between Sunnis and Shi'is in Iraq is less a legacy of religious conflict than a manifestation of Ottoman policies enunciated amidst [that empire's troubled end](#).

## The Sunni-Shi'i Split

[The Sunni-Shi'i split](#) dates to 10 October 680 CE (10 Muharram 61), and its origins stem from a war over control of the power—both political and economic—of the nascent Islamic empire being forged at that time. Power and influence, not dogma and doctrine, were at the core of the Sunni-Shi'i divide from its very beginning.

Islam spread quickly in the area now called [the Middle East](#). By the time of the Prophet Muhammad's death in 632, Muslims had united the Arabian Peninsula. The Prophet's successor, Abu Bakr (r. 632-634), led the first military excursion into the area that is now [Syria](#) and [Iraq](#). (This historic detail explains why Islamic State "caliph" Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi took this nom de guerre.) Abu Bakr as well as the next three so-called Rightly Guided Caliphs were chosen by a consensus of the community. This was not a democracy; it was instead a participatory oligarchy.

The concord sustaining this oligarchy during the first 48 years of [the Islamic Empire](#) crumbled in 680, as the Muslim elite and their

followers struggled to control the financial and political structures of the emerging Islamic empire.

The defining crisis stemmed from the assassination of Ali (r. 656-661), son-in-law of the Prophet and the last of the Rightly

Guided Caliphs, as he prayed at a mosque in Kufa, a city in present-day Iraq.

After Ali's death, two factions supported two different rulers. Some championed the appointment of Hassan, a son of Ali and so a grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. Others backed Muawiyya, based in what is now Syria, who controlled the most powerful army in the Islamic Empire.

Ultimately, Hassan and his brother Husayn, fearing civil war, came to an agreement with



Hasan ibn Ali served his father, Ali, during the Battle of Siffin, 657 CE. Folio from a 14th century Tarikhnama (Book of history) by Balami. (Source: Public domain, wikipedia.org)

Muawiyya. In 661, they ceded state power to him as long as he agreed not to establish a dynasty. This was not to be, for his son Yazid claimed state authority upon his father's death 19 years

later. Yazid proclaimed himself a king of the new Islamic empire by virtue of family ties. And so, community participation gave way to a system of dynastic succession by which power was transferred based on bloodlines, not merit or a consensus of the community.



Pilgrims gather for the ashura commemoration in Karbala, Iraq, January 19, 2008. The 10-day event commemorates the death of Husayn. (Source: photo by Sgt. Nicole Dykstra, wikipedia.org.)

This conflict of dynastic succession culminated in Karbala, in modern Iraq, when Yazid's troops mercilessly slaughtered Husayn and 70 of his followers in an event now commemorated as *ashura*. Shi'is believe that Husayn was a martyr who died the rightful leader of the political community.

This confrontation and resultant massacre engendered the Sunni-Shi'i split. Sunnis were content to have Yazid emerge victorious and establish the first great Islamic dynasty, one that would rule territories in Asia, Africa, and Europe. Shi'is continue to decry this Battle of Karbala as an internecine tragedy, insisting the power of the state should have passed to Husayn.

In general, there is nothing culturally divisive about [the Sunni-Shi'i split](#). Adherents of both sects celebrate the same holidays. They read the same Quran. They both pray five times a day facing Mecca.

Given such, it is not surprising to find that many provinces within the Arab-Islamic world have experienced normalized relations at certain times in history and also moments when Sunnis and Shi'is found that they could act in concert.

For example, in 750 CE, Sunnis and Shi'is together participated in the Abbasid Revolution, which would put in place a dynasty, the Abbasids (750-1258), remembered as fostering an inclusive and multiethnic state.

And in Iraq, Sunnis and Shi'is have often managed to maintain their own distinct religious customs while co-existing peacefully.

Nonetheless, the historic bid for power on the Fields of Karbala did lead to one important dogmatic difference between Sunnis and Shi'is: the Shi'i Doctrine of the Imamate. The prophet Muhammad had been a religious, political and military leader. Yazid and his successors, who represented the Sunni conception of leadership, assumed only the political and military duties,



*The Battle of Karbala, 680 CE. Painted by Abbas Al-Musavi between 1868 and 1933. (Source: Online Collection of Brooklyn Museum, 2010, wikipedia.org)*

leaving scholars to debate religious questions and settle them by consensus.

For Shi'is, however, there is one Imam who, though not a prophet, is a divinely inspired religio-political leader of the community. He is the authoritative interpreter of God's will as formulated in Islamic law, a law that, given his divine inspiration, he best understands. In this way, Shi'is believe in continued heavenly guidance through the divinely inspired leadership of an Imam.

More importantly, based on subsequent interpretations and understandings of the Sunni-Shi'i split, the overlords of Iraq—the Ottomans, the British, and the Baath party—all implemented policies based on mistaken assumptions about the divided loyalties of Shi'is. Shi'is, in turn, used the rhetoric of what these rulers perceived as a rival faction of Islam to oppose an



authoritarian political system dominated by adherents of Sunni Islam.

## The Ottoman Wars with Persia

The factionalism that now beleaguers Iraq stems from this seventh-century conflict as enunciated and acted upon during [the Ottoman Empire](#), particularly during its waning days in the in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Forged from the military forays of Turkish nomads in the early 14th century, the Ottomans, Sunni nomads from Anatolia, succeeded the Abbasids as the next great Islamic dynasty. Ottomans were a warring people, for the conquest of territory legitimized the rule of the reigning caliph. But the dominance of [Eastern Persia](#) prevented their conquest of territory beyond the Iraqi provinces, which became oft-contested borderlands.

By the 19th century, [the Ottoman Empire](#) had ruled the area now known as Iraq—then referred to by Westerners as [Mesopotamia](#)—for 300 years. This Mesopotamian territory consisted of three Ottoman provinces, with each centering on a principal city.

Basra was in the coastal south, and this was where the population was—and still is—predominantly Shi'i. Baghdad was in the central plains, and the people there were—and still are—primarily Arab and Sunni. Mosul was in the mountainous north, the heart of primarily Sunni Kurdish territory.

The 2.2 million inhabitants of this territory were at the easternmost limit of the Ottoman Empire, next to Persia, which,

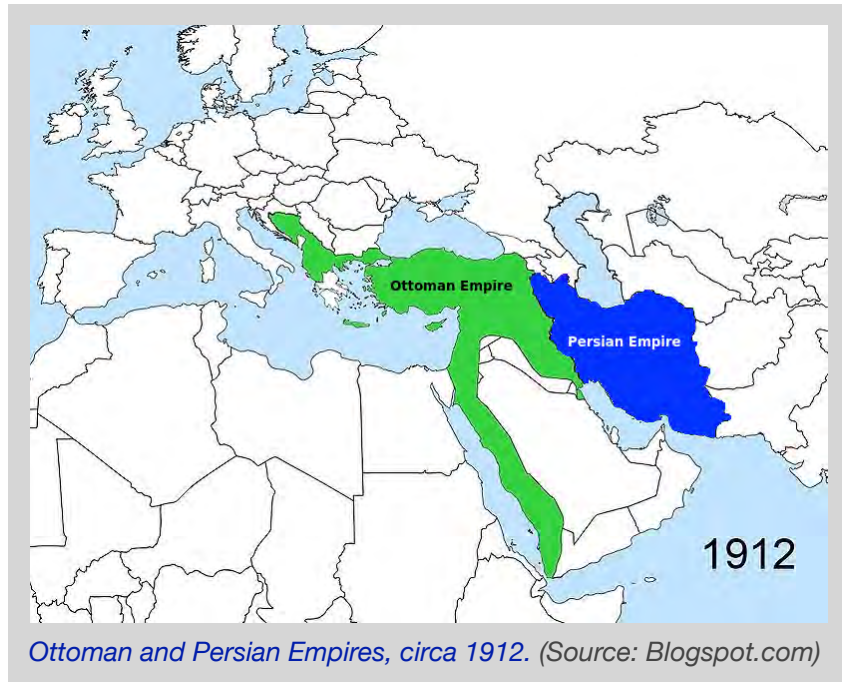


*Map of Mesopotamia.* (Source: Goran tek-en, wikipedia.org, CC BY-SA 3.0)

unlike the Ottoman Empire, was a polity ruled and inhabited almost exclusively by Shi'is (90% or more of the population practiced Shi'ism). The Shi'is in these Iraqi provinces increasingly became a marginalized majority and the Ottomans feared that the provincial Shi'is did not share their Sunni subjects' loyalty to the imperial state.

As Sunnis, Ottomans feared that their Shi'i subjects in Mesopotamia might fall under the sway of prominent Shi'i religious scholars and clerics in Persia and so act against Ottoman interests.

Neighboring Persia also regularly threatened—often in retaliation for Ottoman forays into its territory—an invasion in order to take the provinces of Basra and Baghdad. A Sunni dynasty was pitted against a Shi'i one. Ottoman and Persian forces fought wars in 1548-1555, 1574-1589, 1603, and 1616. In 1623, Persia managed to capture Baghdad, which it occupied until 1638.



Following a peace treaty, relations between the two political entities remained at a standstill until the late 18th century, when Persia, now under the Qajar dynasty, again threatened an offensive. By 1823, the Ottomans and the Qajars had already fought nine wars, leaving little doubt that inter-imperial bellicosity would not diminish even as, later in the century, [a new generation](#)

[of Young Ottomans](#) and Persians began to pressure the government for constitutional reform.

And so, the leaders of the Ottoman state decided to enact policies to protect against Shi'i subversion. For example, they promoted only Sunnis, not Shi'is, in the military and the government. In this way, Sunnis in the provinces of Iraq came to have more access to the economic and political benefits of the formal institutions of the evolving state.

### Sunni Dominance and British State Formation

[After World War I](#), England and France amalgamated the provinces of Mosul, Baghdad, and Basra to create the new state of Iraq. The British ruled this country for twelve years as a mandate. The British reified sectarian divisions fostered by 19th-century Ottoman policies, keeping the Sunnis as the political elite and perpetuated the Sunni dominance inherited from Ottoman era.

The British conceptualized Shi'is as restive and prone to irrational forms of protest. In the Ottoman era, Shi'is generally commemorated the death of Husayn, or *ashura*, with more fervor than Sunnis.

For example, many Shi'i villages and towns held a type of Islamic passion play that gave life to the massacre of Husayn and his 70 followers by an oppressive ruler, and this became an allegorical treatment of how economically and politically deprived Shi'is felt under the Ottomans. Some Shi'is who paraded to mosques in cities—as in Kufa, where Ali had been assassinated—practiced



*British troops entering Baghdad, Iraq March 1917. (Source: Mrs Stuart Menzies (1920), wikipedia.org)*

self-flagellation. This led one horrified Englishman to declare Shi'is “terrifying in their single-mindedness ... savage and revengeful.”

Shi'is were eager to contribute to the nascent state, but they were not enthusiastic about a system of colonial governance.

Thus, there was a revolt in 1920, one in which Sunnis and Shi'is often acted in concert against the British. Anti-colonial discourse in Sunni and Shi'i mosques could be heard as early as May, and armed revolt in the countryside began in June. Within five

months, 500 British troops had been killed in action while as many as 10,000 Iraqis lay dead.

Most importantly for the sectarian divisions in Iraq, the British blamed primarily Shi'i clerics who had spoken vociferously against a system of governance that they rightly grasped as blatantly unjust. The British jailed and exiled many Shi'i clerics, like Mahdi al-Khalisi.

In 1921, British politicians appointed Amir Faysal to rule over Iraq as a king, thereby establishing a new Sunni dynasty. Born in 1885 in Mecca, a city in the Arabian Peninsula that Muslims consider the holiest in Islam, Faysal had proven himself amenable to British interests. In 1916, he had participated in the celebrated Arab Revolt, a conflict that neutralized 30,000 Ottoman troops on the eastern front.

The British hoped that Faysal's putative descent from the Prophet Muhammad would legitimize this new dynasty. The new king brought with him a Sunni cohort to assist in ruling over Iraq. In this way, British rule promoted Sunni interests over those of Shi'is.

When the British allowed Iraqis to rule Iraq as independent country in 1932, Faysal promised “full and complete protection of



*King Faysal I. (Source: Jalal Naimi, public domain, wikipedia.org)*

life and liberty will be assured to all inhabitants of Iraq without distinction of birth, nationality, language, race or religion.”

Such a democratic notion, however, proved difficult to implement because the Sunni elite did not want to give up their political and economic advantages. Faysal and his successors—the Hashemite dynasty—did not fashion a pluralistic regime.

After all, a true constitutional monarchy in which democracy flourished in the majority-Shi'i state would have been inconvenient for the Sunni elite, who were rather enamored with their privileged position, and for their British patrons, who, concerned with investments in the oil industry, did not want to risk a government unfavorable to their interests.

Thus, a cycle of political violence came to define Iraqi politics throughout the 20th century. Discontented Iraqis—whether the beleaguered Shiite majority or the rebellious Kurdish minority—increasingly sought political change through militant means.

In 1936, Iraq had the dubious honor of being the first Middle Eastern state to experience a military coup, an effort aimed in part at the incorporation of Shi'is into the Prime Minister's government. Hashemite rule ended violently in 1958 as a revolutionary regime, one that tried to undercut the privileges of the ruling elite, executed the entire royal family.

Iraq would undergo three more military coups before the Baath party of Hassan al-Bakr and [Saddam Hussein](#) seized and consolidated power in 1968.

## Baathist Rule, 1968-2003

Founded in 1940, the Baath Party espoused a utopian political and economic philosophy that should have, in theory, resolved inter-sectarian strife in Iraq. The Baath offered a populist and pan-Arab ideology that privileged individual merit, not communal affiliation.

Developed in the waning days of the colonial era, it is not surprising to find that it has socialist tendencies in which leaders are encouraged to dismantle the existing elite, a class produced by largely European interventions. In practice, as manifested in Iraq, political instability in conjunction with the entrenchment of the Sunni elite did not foster an equitable distribution of power.

It seemed at first that the secular Baath Party would incorporate Shi'is into their government. In the 1960s, 50% of the party's civilian leaders had been Shi'is. Sunnis, however, who dominated in the military, asserted supremacy in the party after it took power, making it a vehicle for their personal aspirations. Hassan al-Bakr emerged as president, and he appointed his cousin Saddam Hussein as Vice President and head of security operations.





Hassan al-Bakr, General Secretary of the Arab Socialist Baath Party, circa 1974. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)

These Baathist leaders favored their own networks of patronage, generating a system of nepotism that allowed members of their family, like the Minister of Defense, who was also Hussein's brother-in-law, to benefit from the spoils of the political victory. By the early 1970s, Shi'is represented no more than 5% of Baath party leaders.

In this way, Baathist rule perpetuated the divide between Shi'is and Sunnis that existed under British and Ottoman rule. It was not that the Baath promoted religious

conflict per se, but instead its leaders acted in accord with their desire for greater access to political power and material benefits.

In response to the uneven distribution of power and resources, many Shi'is began to gather in the mosque to seek solutions in religious texts to their political woes. Disenfranchised Iraqis did not necessarily do so out of a primal need to assert their sectarian identity, but because all secular means of opposition had been closed to them.

The Hashemite monarchy, the revolutionary regimes of the 1950s and 1960s, and now the Baath Party had stamped out political parties, like the once-popular Communist Party, and along with them democratic process.

With no legitimate secular form of political activism, the mosque, a safe haven, became a place where the politically discontent could gather. With the emergence of political Islam in the 1970s and 1980s, Islamic holidays like *ashura*, when the legitimacy of a ruler can be tacitly called into question, came to be commemorated in Iraq with an ominous fervor by citizens of the south.

The inspiration for this politico-religious revival was the late Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, the father-in-law of the present-day firebrand cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. He headed the Islamic Call (Dawa) Party. Al-Sadr wanted Iraq to be ruled as a theocracy, not as a secular Baathist fiefdom. Given that so-called Baathist “law” was highly personal and arbitrary, the insistence on Islamic *sharia*, which is codified and just, held great appeal to many Iraqis.

Once again, events in [the eastern state of Persia, now Iran](#), contributed to the fate of Shi'is in Iraq.

In 1979, the highly secular [Iran](#) experienced a Shi'i Revolution to create the Islamic Republic of Ayatollah Khomeini, and the Iraqi Baath was no longer content merely to ignore Shi'i interests in their country; its leaders began to actively destroy them. On *ashura* in the very year of the Iranian Revolution, Iraqi troops



Saddam Hussein, fifth president of Iraq, circa 1979 (right). (Source: INA, public domain, wikipedia.org)



*Imam Husayn Shrine in Karbala, Iraq. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*

marched on Karbala and arrested the young men who passionately paraded to the shrine of Imam Husayn.

Wars with foreigners allowed the Baath to justify its marginalization of Shi'is.

**The Iran-Iraq War** was fought between 1980 and 1988, and it led to the deaths of as many as 1 million people. Just as during Ottoman times, the government of Iraq proved suspicious of its Shi'i subjects who, it feared, might prove loyal to clerics in Iran. So, the Baath terrorized Shi'is. In one case, Saddam Hussein exiled 250,000 Iraqi Shi'is whose loyalties were ostensibly to the enemy nation.

Similarly, the Persian Gulf War of 1991 also provided the Baath with an excuse for stamping out unrest and further marginalizing Shi'is in Iraq's southern regions. During this conflict, disillusioned Shi'is took over the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf, thereby expressing their rejection of a regime that had caused them distress. Using armed helicopters, the Baath put down the revolts in the south. In doing so, the Iraqi government killed 100,000 Iraqi civilians.

Finally, there was **the Iraq War**, which ended the Baath's reign in 2003. Much like the British occupation after World War I, **this conflict** heightened sectarian tensions rather than neutralizing them. **The United States fought this war** in part to bring democracy to **the Middle East**, and yet its administrators enacted policies that in retrospect clearly facilitated the organization of political groups according to communal interests, not civic ones.

L. Paul Bremer, who administered the Coalition Provisional Authority during the first year of **the occupation**, formed a 25-person Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) in July 2003. The IGC consisted of 13 Shi'is and five Arab Sunnis. These actions reproduced a society in which affiliation to a communal group, not democratically inclined political leanings, determined access to power.

In his memoir, Bremer laughingly dismisses the one appointee who represented a political party, a Communist denigrated as a 1970s throwback. The IGC ensured that access to power was once again determined by ethnic and sectarian identity, and so **a civil war soon broke out between Shi'is and Sunnis in Iraq.**



*Members of the U.S. Army pose under the "Hands of Victory" sculpture in Baghdad, Iraq during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, November 2003. (Source: Technical Sergeant John L. Houghton, wikipedia.org)*

The political dynamics in Iraq, and the supremacy of Sunni interests over a more collective sense of nationhood have proved remarkably consistent from the Ottoman Empire to the present.

## ISIS and Iraq

In 2006, Nuri al-Maliki ([right](#)) became Prime Minister of Iraq, and he remained in this post until summer 2014. For some Iraqis, it may have seemed that the injustices of the past—those begun under Ottoman rule—were finally righting themselves. Al-Maliki is a Shi'i who had been a member of the Islamic Call Party since the 1970s, and so had been an important oppositional voice against

the Baath. Thus, he was a former dissident with a strong sense of his Shi'i identity.

Al-Maliki's administration, however, did not lead to a new equilibrium in Iraqi society, but instead to a determined Shi'i effort to avenge past wrongs by disadvantaging Sunnis. On 16 August 2014, *The Economist* noted, "Some Sunnis came to support the extremists of IS [ISIS], seeing them—often reluctantly—as the only defense against a brutal security apparatus."



*Source: Sgt. Jerry Morrison, wikipedia.org*

In Iraq, [the Islamic State](#) is the most recent and most awful manifestation of a historic struggle between Sunnis and Shi'is for economic and political power, which dates to the Ottoman era.

The rise of the Islamic State as an aberrant entity in the midst of a long-standing state provides tangible evidence of the conclusion of Yara Badday, an Iraqi-American who is the daughter of a Shi'i father and a Sunni mother. She writes that "cultural differences themselves are not the cause of violent conflict, but rather the glaring inequalities over political power, land, and other economic assets."

Badday's statement encourages readers interested in the conflict and Iraq—as well as [tensions elsewhere in the Middle East](#)—to

look beyond simple analyses that rely heavily on religiously infused understandings of behavior.

After all, and as seen in Iraq over the past century or more, the rhetoric of religiosity all too often conceals more mundane manipulations by political actors pursuing their worldly desires for power and treasure. ♦

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# A New View on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: From Needs and Narratives to Negotiation

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

*On November 2, 2015, the world marked the 20th anniversary of the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Yitzhak Rabin by a far-right Jewish extremist. That anniversary was overshadowed by a renewed round of tension and violence between Israel and Palestinians. For many of us, these hostilities seem intractable and interminable, and peace between the two people impossible. This month, Bar Ilan University professor Jay Rothman argues that the failure to achieve peace between Israelis and Palestinians stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of the conflict itself. At its root, Rothman believes, the conflict is about identity and competing historical narratives (not simply diplomacy and high-level politics). Recognizing the roots of the dispute offers the best way to achieve an end to the violence.*

*(Published December 2015)*

## By JAY ROTHMAN

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu came to Washington in November 2015, he arrived amidst a low-water mark in U.S.-Israeli relations. He also left a country that was experiencing a new round of Israeli-Palestinian violence. And a peaceful resolution to this decades-long conflict seems farther away than ever.

We usually think about [the Middle East](#) “peace process” as a top-down, high-level, diplomatically formal business. We also wonder if it will ever end and whether it is doomed to failure.

Political administrations have changed and negotiators have come and gone but [the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians](#) seems as intractable as ever. After all, the negotiations so far have proceeded from the “land for peace” formula laid out in United Nations Security Council Resolution 242 of 1967, almost 50 years ago.



*The Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians stems from a mutual misunderstanding of identities and competing historical narratives. (Source: Uithe, CC BY-SY 3.0, wikipedia.org)*



*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New York, NY, September 27, 2012.*  
(Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)

Perhaps there is a more comprehensive way to look at the conflict.

As a problem of diplomacy and security to be solved in that “top-down” way, we have seen the impasse as a question of political give and take. It has been an ongoing fight over “who gets what, when, and how,” to borrow Harold Lasswell’s definition of politics.

But before we can get to a resolution over who gets what, we must first recognize that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a

prime and tragic example of the way two nations competing over the same territory struggle not only over conflicting political and economic interests but also with competing mythologies, cultures, and historical narratives.

View the video below:

[Universal Newsreel: Egypt Accepts United Nations Cease-Fire, June 9, 1967.](#)

All historical narratives—the stories we tell ourselves about the past—are constructed through acts of interpretation. The same set of historical facts can yield different meanings for different

people and that is surely the case for Israelis and Palestinians as they look at their histories.

The fierce debates over which interpretation is “right,” however, may miss the point because each version of this history is so central to the collective identity of each group and neither side is ever going to persuade the other that their interpretation is “wrong.”

Instead, each side needs to recognize how and why these historical narratives have become “true” for them. Reconciling the “competing mythologies” is essential if the next Arab-Israeli peace process, with the Palestinian question at its core, has any chance to succeed.

Rather than arguing over “facts”—the usual approach of pitting the “fact” of one side against the “fact” of the other—such an approach would demand that each side come to understand the deeper meaning of those “facts” to the people who believe them.

Before the details of peace can be worked out, each side needs to acknowledge more fully how the identity of the other side has developed over generations and been shaped by the conflict itself.

In the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—like so many other protracted and existential conflicts where so many demands are stated in mutually exclusive terms—only when the other side’s fundamental needs are met can its own be fulfilled.

Traditional diplomacy and endless fights over who gets what, how, and when have not solved this problem. The suffering continues.

It is time for a different approach.

## A Brief Chronology of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Even a chronology of the political events that have created the current situation can be the source of sharp disagreement. Historical “facts” are often not as transparent or objective as we would like them to be.



*Theodor Herzl, circa 1900.*  
Source: Cari Pietzner

Recognizing that any review of these events necessarily emphasizes some moments at the expense of others—and will likely raise objections from readers for the events I choose to focus on—a brief overview of how we got to where we are now is important to set the stage as we think of new pathways to peace.

The Zionist movement was founded at the end of the 19th century by Viennese journalist Theodor Herzl. Convinced that Europe would never rid itself of

anti-Semitism, he called for the “restoration of the Jewish state” in his 1896 book *The Jewish State*.

Although Jews had been immigrating steadily albeit in small numbers to Palestine for a couple decades before this time—mostly to flee increasingly oppressive conditions imposed upon the large populations of Jews in eastern Europe—large-scale, systematic programs for Jewish immigration to Palestine began in earnest following the first Zionist Congress in 1897.



*Map of Sykes-Picot Agreement, 1916, showing regions of proposed British and French influence. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*

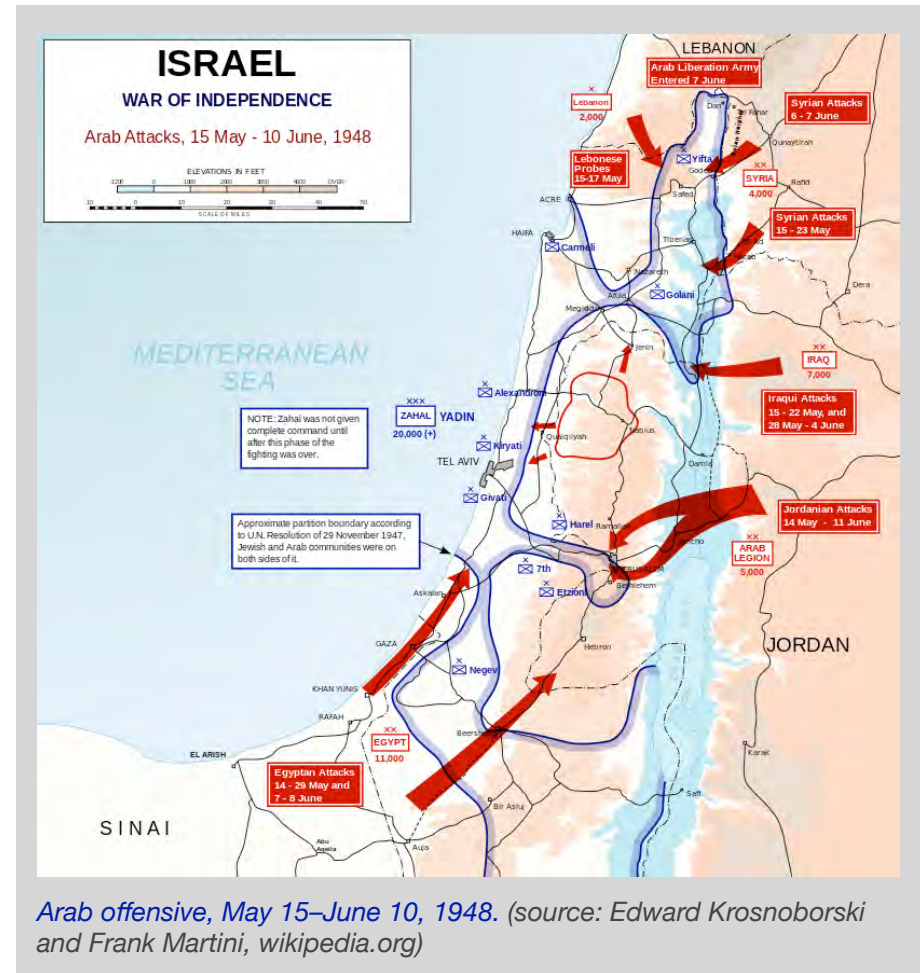
Relations between these new Jewish immigrants and the Arab populations in and around Palestine were generally strained and sometimes violent.

In the midst of [World War I](#), the French and the British issued the Sykes-Picot document drawing new colonial boundaries in the Middle East. In 1917, Britain issued the Balfour Declaration, promising to help establish a “national home [in Palestine] for the Jewish people.” Arabs saw both these diplomatic developments as treachery, generating hostility toward Jewish settlers.

Jewish arrivals in Palestine continued and peaked in 1935 at 60,000. The following year, feeling increasingly threatened by this influx, the Arabs in Palestine revolted against the British, who maintained rule over the area. This insurgency represented the most organized and vehement rejection of Zionism and British policies supporting it by Palestinian Arabs to date.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, international sympathy for the Zionist endeavor grew, and the State of Israel was established in a United Nations declaration in 1947 which envisioned a Jewish state and a Palestinian state.

The declaration was unanimously rejected by Arabs in and around Palestine, and war was immediately launched against the new Jewish state by all of its Arab neighbors. Israel emerged the military victor, gaining more territory than originally mandated by the United Nations. Some 700,000 to 800,000 Palestinians fled or were exiled. Thus began the Palestinian diaspora.



With a Jewish state now an accomplished geopolitical fact, Palestinians began to threaten Israel in a variety of ways.

The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) was founded in 1964 with the destruction of Israel among its basic principles. The PLO became even more militant after Israel’s military victory in 1967’s “Six Day War” when Israel captured the Sinai Peninsula

and [Gaza Strip](#) from [Egypt](#), the Golan Heights from [Syria](#), and the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan.

Across the 1970s, the PLO grew and was increasingly recognized internationally, despite the U.S. position not to engage with the organization.

At the end of the decade, President Jimmy Carter helped broker the Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel. But this

agreement did not include Palestinians, and the treaty was rejected by Arabs, especially Palestinians, as a “sellout.” Indeed, Egyptian President [Anwar Sadat](#) was soon assassinated for it.



*[Orient House, the former PLO headquarters in Jerusalem.](#) (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict escalated in 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon to

destroy the powerful military and political infrastructure the PLO had built in that shattered country. The PLO was defeated and “exiled” from Lebanon, but Israel was internally torn asunder as a majority of Israelis came to view this war as unnecessary—its first “non-defensive” war.

In late 1987, after a series of violent incidents between Israelis and Palestinians, the Palestinian communities in the West Bank

and Gaza Strip began a spontaneous uprising (which came to be known as the *Intifada*, from the Arabic for “shaking off”) against Israeli rule, which had been in place for 20 years.

For the first time, Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and not the PLO leaders in the diaspora, began to set the agenda for the Palestinian national movement.

In early 1991, the Gulf War pushed Israel and the Palestinians even further apart. In response to the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait, the United States led a coalition, which included several Arab states, against [Iraq](#). The PLO was one of the few supporters of the Iraqi regime. Israelis were hit by missile attacks from Iraq.

Due in large part to its victory over [Iraq](#) and with the simultaneous decline of Soviet influence, the United States gained new credibility and influence in the Middle East.

In October 1991, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker succeeded in organizing a Middle East peace conference in which representatives of Israel, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Palestinians sat down at the same table for the first time in history. In spite of an acrimonious beginning, bilateral negotiations between all the parties began by January 1992.

These discussions led eventually to the famous White House handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, affirming the Oslo accords.



*Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, U.S. President Bill Clinton, and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (left to right) during the Oslo Accords on September 13, 1993. (Source: Vince Musi, public domain, wikipedia.org)*

Despite its initial promise, the Oslo peace process soon bogged down. Rabin was assassinated by an Israeli extremist in 1995 and what appeared to be a path to peace soon spiraled into the Second Palestinian Intifada by 2000.

The collapse of negotiations after Oslo was followed by the rebuilding of psychological walls and **the construction of actual walls** dividing the Israelis and Palestinians to this day. Several more rounds of diplomatic processes were launched by successive U.S. presidents and their secretaries of state, with the latest failure in May 2014.

## The Myths of National Origin

Overviews of historical and political events only help us so far, however. Distinct from the chronology, we need to understand the underlying emotional, cultural, and psychological meanings that the parties involved have invested in these events.

The competing mythologies and historical narratives of **the Israeli-Palestinian conflict** are exclusive and oppositional, saturated with the sense that the other side lacks historical or political legitimacy.

Indeed, in 1969, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir was widely quoted as saying that was no such entity as a Palestinian People, and Arabs said that the “Zionist entity” was an alien presence in the Arab midst that must be swept into the sea.

Israelis and Palestinians are not alone. Such mutually exclusive hostilities have appeared in Cyprus, South Africa, and Sri Lanka in recent years. One analyst estimated 71 such conflicts between 1955-2004 fought over the quest for and denial of national identity and self-determination.



*Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, March 1, 1973. (Source: Marina Trikosko, wikipedia.org)*

The term myth is charged and I mean it here not as a synonym for fiction, but as narratives shared by a group of people which define their identity.

As the historian of nationalist movements Anthony Smith explains, these “myths of origins and descent” have six parts: 1) origins in time and space, 2) ancestry and descent, 3) migrations and liberations, 4) golden ages, 5) current sad decline and 6) future rebirth.

Problems arise when two such myths conflict in the same physical space, creating protracted disputes not just over political

details, land, and resources, but over the more existential questions of identity.

This is exactly what has happened with Israelis and Palestinians, whose competing narratives can be outlined as follows.

(1) *Origins in time and space.* According to the Biblical account, the Jews emerged as a people at the time of their exodus from Egypt, approximately 4,000 years ago and settled in the land God promised them.

The Palestinians trace their roots to stories of a peasant society living well and simply off the fruit of the land. They honor their connection to the land where their religions, either Christianity or Islam, flourished. As a people, they emerged in many ways in *sumud* (Arabic for “steadfastness”) against Turkish, British, and now Zionist colonialism. They work unceasingly for a future that will supplant their loathsome present and in which they will regain their dignity and build a state, like all others, in their homeland.



"Departure of the Israelites", by David Roberts, 1829. (Source: David Roberts, wikipedia.org)



Arab scholars at an Abbasid library. Illustration by Yahyá al-Wasiti, Baghdad, Iraq, 1237. (Source: Zereschk, wikipedia.org)

(2) *Ancestry and descent.* In addition to their belief, as either Christians or Muslims, that they are adherents of a religious true path, Palestinians also link themselves to the Arab purveyors of modern science and literature who thrived in the Middle Ages.

Religious Jews consider themselves to be the Chosen People, the children of Abraham, to whom God spoke, and of Moses, through whom God gave the Torah as a heritage for the People of Israel. Some secular Jews see themselves as descendants of great prophets who wrote profound poetry and provided instructions for a world of justice and righteousness.

(3) *Migrations and liberations.* After establishing the First Temple in Jerusalem and building a Hebrew civilization, the Jews were exiled by the Babylonians. Later, they returned to the Land of Israel and built the Second Temple and again flourished as a religious civilization. They were again exiled, this time by the Romans in 70 CE, and wandered for almost 2,000 years, living as strangers and outsiders in other lands, until they returned to reclaim what they continued to view as their land and rebuild modern Zion in 1948.

The Palestinians take pride in recalling that their forebears have been in Palestine in an unbroken continuity. Although millions are now in exile, this merely adds strength to their determination to return. Liberation, it is dreamed, will be a return to the control the Palestinians feel they once had over their lives and daily affairs.

(4) *Golden ages.* The Palestinians, through their connection with the Muslim, Christian, and Arab communities globally, glory in the greatness of Arab genius. Particularly in the Middle Ages, Islamic thought, philosophy, literature, and poetry were gifts transmitted to civilization. The Arab civilization was once an expansive and glorified one. Its leaders were feared and its greatness respected.

The Jews recall their golden age in the periods of the First and Second Temples.

Both peoples view their golden pasts as providing moral markers for the proud and dignified existence they seek in their own modern states—to be preserved and promoted by the Israelis or sought for and built by the Palestinians.

(5) *Their current sad decline.* The Jews speak of being in a situation of exile even to this day because, despite the homeland/state, most Jews still live in the diaspora. Moreover, Israel has continued to struggle for acceptance and existence since its uneasy founding.



*The phrase "Bismillah" (in the name of God) in an 18th-century Islamic calligraphy from the Ottoman region. (Source: Abdelghani AZZI, wikipedia.org)*



The Palestinians reject their current oppression and dispersion as unnatural and unacceptable. They are harassed by the Israelis, manipulated by their “fellow” Arabs in cynical and destructive ways, and internally fragmented.

(6) *Future rebirth*. The Palestinians maintain faith that justice demands that they have their own land and the self-determination and renewal that come with it.

The Jews in Israel had three dreams with the founding of their state: that it would serve as an ingathering of all Jewish exiles from the four corners of the globe, provide a place of peace and refuge for a tired people, and provide the Jewish people with social and cultural regeneration. For many Jews, these cherished goals have only been achieved to a limited degree.

## Conflicting Mythologies

For many Jews, [the founding of Israel in 1948](#) was heralded as the fulfillment of Zionist aspirations for national independence. Palestinians cursed 1948 as “the disaster.”

Perhaps given the contending national myths of each community, such diametrically opposite attitudes toward the founding of Israel were inevitable.

We can group those conflicting attitudes under three headings: the *memory and perpetuation of trauma* that each finds in their relationships with the other; the related *demonization* of the collective other; and the way in which each side engages in

*exclusive self-definition* by virtue of differentiation and rejection of the other side.

## Memories and the Perpetuation of Trauma

Despite colonization and oppression by others—Turks, British, and French—Palestinians regard the Israelis as their primary victimizers.

The 1948 massacre at the Palestinian village of Deir Yassin, or the 1982 killings in the Lebanese refugee camps of Sabra and Shatilla, or the ongoing suppression of Palestinian resistance to Israeli rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip confirm for Palestinians that Zionists are

usurpers who, with the aid of Western (and particularly U.S.) funding and designs, have taken Palestine by force, displaced the indigenous people, and conducted step-by-step expansion to this day.

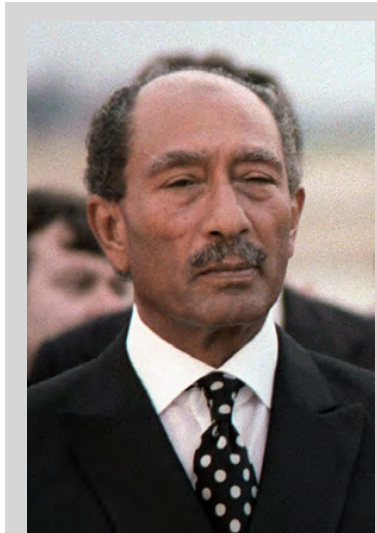
The memory of the Holocaust, in which six million European Jews were murdered, continues to resonate for most Israeli Jews and each act of violence against Israelis plays on that memory. Arab rejectionism and Palestinian militancy against Israel over the years are viewed by Israelis (many of whom do not, for the most



*Sabra and Shatila massacre memorial in Beirut, Lebanon.* (Source: Bertramz, CC BY 3.0, wikipedia.org)

part, distinguish between anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism) as new attempts at Jewish genocide

## Demonization of the Other



*Anwar Sadat, President of Egypt, at Andrews Air Force Base, 1980. (Source: (public domain, wikipedia.org)*

When Egyptian President Anwar Sadat visited Jerusalem in 1977, he said that some walls separating Israelis and Arabs had begun to fall, with many Arabs accepting that Israel was there to stay and Israel, particularly following the 1973 war, acknowledging that military might alone would not ensure its survival. “Yet, there remains another wall,” said Sadat in a speech in the Israeli Knesset:

This wall constitutes a psychological barrier between us, a barrier of suspicion, a barrier of rejection; a barrier of fear, of deception, a barrier of hallucination

without any action, deed or decision. A barrier of distorted and eroded interpretation of every event and statement. It is this psychological barrier that I have described in official statements as constituting 70 percent of the whole problem.

Although these comments were made about the Israeli-Arab conflict in general, they are equally applicable to the Israeli-Palestinian context as well. In other words, each community not

only sees its own devil in the other side but, in such a vision, a certain reality has been created along those lines.

Each side seems to rely on this enemy image as part of its own self-definition. Having an enemy allows each community to project onto the other those parts of themselves that they would rather not “own” — aggression, selfishness, and ill temper.

Projection bolsters a people’s collective self-esteem while fixing the rejection of the other group. Finding a way out of the conflict, therefore, is not simply a matter of negotiating but of redefining oneself in relationship to that other.

## Exclusive Self-Definition

As they built their own nation, Israelis disregarded or resisted the emerging aspirations of Arabs.

Simultaneously, in expressing their own emerging nationalism, Arabs articulated themselves in opposition to the West and the early Zionists that came from there (after the establishment of Israel, its mostly western population doubled in size with Jews flowing in from the Arab world where they were largely rejected as complicit with Zionism).

In order for Israelis to see their national project as legitimate, they rejected legitimacy of those same aspirations on the part of Palestinians. Since the start of the Zionist effort, and more intensively since 1948, Palestinians have felt the same way about Israel.



*Large-scale Jewish immigration during the British Mandate era motivated the Arab revolt of 1936-1939. (Source: Hanini, wikipedia.org)*

As the 20th century wore on, Zionists came to believe that their survival and safety would be guaranteed best, or perhaps only, to the extent that the Palestinian national movement was not viewed as legitimate by the world, and the Palestinians were not accepted as partners for peace in the region.

The Palestinian and Israeli claims, many Zionists came to believe, were mutually exclusive and zero-sum, and thus armed and existential battle was necessary: “We fight, therefore we are!” exclaimed Menachem Begin in 1972.

Likewise, most of the early Palestinian nationalists opposed Jewish nationalism, viewing it as imported Western imperialism. Indeed, it was partly this opposition—that is, self *in contrast and*



*Sbarro pizza restaurant bombed by a Hamas suicide bomber in Jerusalem during the Second Intifada. (Source: wikipedia.org)*

*opposition to others*—that helped define and advance Palestinian nationalism.

Later, Palestinian nationalism became articulated and enlivened in its expression of self through armed opposition to Israel via the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). In this sense, Palestinians and the Arab groups who have supported them aren’t merely fighting Israelis or Israeli policies, but Israel itself.

### **A New Way Out: The Meshing of Stories**

While each side in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will root it in decades, centuries, or even millennia of history, it is mostly a creation of the nationalism that swept the globe in the 20th

century. It stands alongside other tragic examples of national/communal conflicts so prevalent over the past hundred years.

I have suggested here that the stalemate has stemmed in part from failure to see the conflict as one of clashing narratives and competing mythologies in addition to one of territories, boundaries, and security arrangements.

In deep conflicts like this one, the parties' stories clash with alarming noise. And that noise reverberates to higher and higher levels as the vicious cycle of violence unfolds.

The trained eye and the open heart, however, can witness another dynamic running between the stories of parties who have suffered and inflicted such pain.

It is a meshing, a merging of underlying hopes, fears, and motivations that may provide some hope for a new way out, a new path to peace. This meshing of stories might lay the foundation for constructive cooperation to emerge out of years of deep conflict.

A more empathetic perspective would enable each side to better appreciate the perspectives, experiences, and needs of the other. It might also help clarify how much each side shares in common.

There is probably no issue that expresses the zero-sum nature of the conflict more than the competing claims over the land itself. For so many years, both Jews and Palestinians have expressed their love of the land of Palestine/Israel as integral to the dreams, memories, and myths of their people.

In a pastoral description written by an Arab in the 10th century, Palestine (Filastin) is seen as a treasure. For the Jews, the land of Israel has meant escape from bitter persecution and the renewal of a tired people. There is common ground here.

If each party is so committed to the same land, which symbolically and practically represents control of its own destiny, dignity, and expression of its own distinctive identity, refuge from a tragic past, and predictability in a safe future. And if neither can annihilate the other—as they seem to begin to understand—then each side may gain a new sense of *analytic empathy*.

The concept of analytic empathy, to be distinguished from emotional empathy, is used to summarize constructive insight that may be gained by parties about their adversaries' motivations in a conflict. It is insight that just as one's own side must have its needs fulfilled and will not cease pursuing those needs despite external resistance, so the other side too will not rest until it achieves such needs.

Thus a hardheaded realism about the necessity of cooperation for the fulfillment of each side's respective needs, not at the expense of the other, but rather achieved in part through gains for them as well, for the sake of self, may evolve.

Based on such realism, parties may begin to seek solutions developed to address the concrete interests and underlying needs of each side—cooperatively. ♦

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## Erdoğan's Presidential Dreams, Turkey's Constitutional Politics

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*In the past several months, former Turkish Prime Minister and current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has made international headlines for statements about the roles and rights of women in Turkey, for constructing a massive new presidential palace, and for arrests of journalists. Some opponents worry that Erdoğan intends to impose his brand of Islamism on the long-secular Turkish political system. This month, historian Patrick Scharfe reminds us that Erdoğan's agenda also involves fundamentally rewriting the Turkish constitution to create a powerful presidency in place of its traditional figurehead role. To understand where the Turkish political system might be headed under Erdoğan requires us to understand the historical forces and military coups that have shaped it.*

*(Published February 2015)*

### By **PATRICK SCHARFE**

With his election as president of [Turkey](#) in August of 2014, the spectacular career of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has entered a new phase, and the same could be true for the “New Turkey” he has proclaimed.

After 11 years as Turkish prime minister and head of the ruling Justice and Development Party (known by its Turkish acronym AKP), Erdoğan's staying power as the leader of Turkey is remarkable in a country long plagued by political instability and successive military coups. Perhaps more notably, he has begun to successfully challenge the ideological basis of the Turkish Republic since its founding in 1923: the uncompromising secularism of the first Turkish president, [Mustafa Kemal Atatürk](#).

Although Erdoğan insists that he is committed to secularism, he has won the hearts of millions of conservative and religious voters with subtle and overt



*As he seeks to expand presidential power, Erdoğan oversaw the recent construction of Ak Saray (the White Palace). His placement of this building on nationally protected land was controversial. (Source: Ex13, CC BY-SA 4.0, wikipedia.org)*



*Muhammed Fethullah Gülen. This Turkish preacher founded the Gülen movement. Here is he pictured with Pope John Paul II in 1998. (Source: CC BY-SA 3.0 de, wikipedia.org)*

appeals to Islamic identity, from restrictions on alcohol and abortion to the lifting of restrictions on the Islamic headscarf. He has achieved unprecedented levels of electoral support, aided also by perceptions of good economic management.

Now, with a declared intention to act as a powerful president, Erdoğan's political authority may reach an entirely new level, and his ambitions are symbolized by the recent

construction of [a grandiose, 1100-room presidential palace](#).

There is only one caveat: Erdoğan will have to overhaul the Turkish constitution before he can transform the traditionally weak presidency into a position from which to dominate Turkish politics.

This prospect [deeply worries](#) his opponents and not without some justification.

Political scientists generally argue that presidential systems are more vulnerable to authoritarianism than party-centric parliamentary systems like Turkey has had up to this point. More specifically, Erdoğan's consistent electoral success has generated increasing opposition toward his government by those outside his

political base. For many years, Turkey's secularist opposition has decried Erdoğan not only for allegedly having a "secret" Islamist agenda, but also for prosecuting oppositional journalists, bureaucrats, and military officers on politicized charges.

Even among intellectuals of a moderately religious bent, opposition toward an ever more self-confident Erdoğan is growing. Moderate supporters had previously seen Erdoğan as a useful foil to Turkey's "deep state"—a union of authoritarian generals, judges, and government bureaucrats who have, until recently, guarded the status quo in Turkey—but less so recently.

Most notably, a longstanding entente between the AKP and the moderate religious group known as Hizmet ("Service") led by Fethullah Gülen was shattered in 2013 when Gülen-linked prosecutors uncovered evidence of corruption in elite AKP circles. Since then, the conservative journalists of Zaman—Turkey's leading newspaper, owned by Fethullah Gülen—have become quite critical of Erdoğan. In retaliation, Erdoğan's government [arrested](#) at least 23 Gülenist journalists in late 2014, including some at Zaman.



*Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. (Source Gobierno de Chile, CC BY 3.0 cl, wikipedia.org)*

The extent of political power wielded by Erdoğan as president has now become a primary question of public debate.

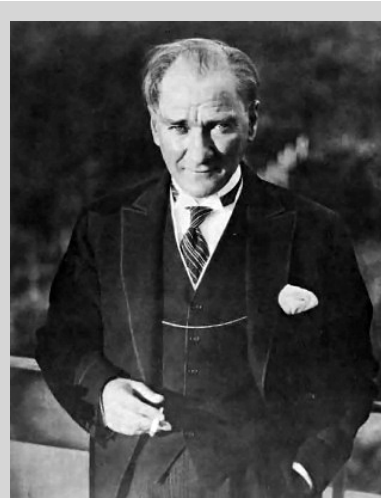
Turkish presidents since World War II have normally taken a low profile due to Turkey's parliamentary system (as defined and redefined in successive constitutions). In contrast to presidential systems like that of the United States, the Turkish prime minister holds most of the legislative and executive power, while the presidency has recently been more of a ceremonial post "above politics."

For example, the outgoing president Abdullah Gül, an AKP co-founder and [one-time intra-party rival](#) to Erdoğan, did not oppose a single parliamentary bill in his seven years as president.

However, the "New Turkey," Erdoğan has vowed, will have "new customs," and he insists that concerns about presidential power are emanating only from "non-democratic elements."

He is ready to amend the Turkish constitution to create a stronger presidency, an act that would require only a handful of votes beyond his own party's current parliamentary majority. Of course, this would still require striking some kind of a deal with one of the other parties, which are likely to oppose him.

But such an attempt would be aided by the deep illegitimacy of the existing Turkish constitution, which was written in the wake of Turkey's last and most violent military coup. There is in fact broad agreement that the current constitution, drafted at military behest in 1982, must be replaced. Concerns about this document's



*Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Founder of the Turkish Republic. (Source: Wikipedia.org, public domain)*

failure to guarantee basic civil rights are shared across the Turkish political spectrum.

Thus, the political showdown which is sure to come—and will almost certainly remake the very essence of Turkish politics—must be understood against the backdrop of the long and fraught history of constitutions in Turkey.

Erdoğan's dreams of presidential power would not be plausible at this moment without the bitter memories of past constitutions' military origins. To the AKP

faithful, unelected and secular-leaning "deep state" institutions, tainted by association with past coups, must be brought to heel by a powerful elected president, namely [Recep Tayyip Erdoğan](#).

## **Constitution-Making and Presidential Power in the Early Republic**

The current discussions over constitutional reform are nothing new. Turkey's constitution has been overturned several times in the years since the country's founding in the wake of World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. And debate over the constitution has been a consistent characteristic of Turkey's political history in the twentieth century.





*"Where is a Turk his own master?"  
Mustafa Kemal Pasha appears on the cover of Time magazine's March 24, 1923 issue. (Source: Time Magazine, wikipedia.org)*

With Istanbul under Allied occupation in 1921, an ad hoc national assembly in Ankara—the inland city which became Turkey's new capital—passed a "Fundamental Organization Law" (Teşkilat-i Esasiye Kanunu), the predecessor to the Turkish Republic's first constitution.

Although it was not dictated to the assembly by force, the animating spirit behind this document was a military officer named Mustafa Kemal (not yet called [Atatürk](#), or "Father Turk," as he would be later known), who had been a successful

World War I general and was still nominally serving the Ottoman government.

Rather than being a full constitution, the Fundamental Organization Law of 1921 was a temporary expedient intended to facilitate military resistance against the post-war order dictated by the Allies. It was therefore Mustafa Kemal's nationalist army that held the real power, not the fledgling national assembly.

In 1923, Turkish nationalist efforts to revise the post-war peace terms and to assert Turkey's national sovereignty were crowned by the Treaty of Lausanne, which recognized the new Republic of

Turkey. As a result, the young republic was ready for a genuine constitution to solidify the legal basis of the regime.

The existing Turkish Grand National Assembly was entirely dominated by the newly created Republican People's Party (known by its Turkish acronym CHP), which had been organized by Mustafa Kemal and consisted of his supporters. In 1924, the National Assembly ratified a new constitution, one that remained in place for almost four decades.

Interestingly, though, the constitution composed by that body contained few hints of Turkey's emerging one-party authoritarian system, in which the CHP managed virtually all aspects of public life. Instead, the authors of the 1924 constitution gave free rein to philosophical impulses ultimately derived from French political thought. This document's majoritarian vision of democracy (rooted in the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau) vested most power in the National Assembly rather than the presidency.

This division of powers favoring the Parliament may come as a surprise given [President Mustafa Kemal's](#) paramount position in the new regime, but Turkish constitutionalism had developed during years of struggle against sultanic rule. Despite the authoritarian means used to implement its secularist and modernizing reforms, the early Turkish Republic was careful not to create the impression that a new sultan had come to replace the Ottomans.

Indeed, of all the criticisms directed at Atatürk at home or abroad, one of the most infuriating to him was the accusation that he was Turkey's dictator. He consciously delegated most executive



*Turkish Prime Minister Adnan Menderes. (Source: wikipedia.org, public domain)*

power to his prime minister, İsmet İnönü, and by the 1930s he often found himself “bored to tears” for lack of work. “In our country,” he wrote to his secretary, “the president’s only function is to sign documents.”

As head of the all-powerful ruling party, Atatürk did have unparalleled latitude to remake Turkey in his own image, but Atatürk’s willingness to abide strictly by the constitutional form of government he had created proved decisive in establishing a stable parliamentary system.

Less than a decade after his death in 1938, Turkey became a genuine multiparty democracy. The first non-CHP government came to power in 1950 with the election of Adnan Menderes from the conservative but also pro-western Democrat Party (DP).

But this did not mean the end of Turkish authoritarianism.

## **The “Liberal” Constitution of 1960**

If a limited presidency had helped prevent the emergence of a dictatorial executive branch, this did not stop the rise of illiberal majoritarianism (i.e., repressive policies practiced by a popularly

elected majority government). During a decade in power in the 1950s, Menderes’s Democrat Party unleashed a “white terror” against its opponents, accusing them of communist ties.

At the same time, the Turkish military and bureaucratic “deep state” forged by Atatürk and his CHP were not ready to hand power over to Menderes and his fellow upstarts, especially because the DP government had already sent a number of high military officers into retirement.

In 1960, a small group of officers staged a military coup and set the pattern of Turkish politics for years to come. Whenever civilian politicians were perceived as incapable of maintaining stability, the Turkish military stepped in to remake the political and constitutional order.

In the year of direct military rule beginning in May 1960, the leading officers not only practiced political repression (including the execution of Menderes), but also completely rewrote the Turkish constitution.

The constitution of 1961, sometimes known as the “liberal constitution,” was written by an assembly chosen by the military. In reaction to the excesses of the Menderes government (such as the expropriation of CHP assets by the DP government), the independence of institutions such as the judiciary and the universities was guaranteed, and an expanded conception of civil rights was enshrined.

To promote a system of checks and balances, a new constitutional court was established to review the constitutionality

of new legislation. The presidential term was extended to seven years, but the presidency was not given much added executive power.

Why did a constitution originating in a military coup have so many liberal features?

A strong majority of the (appointed) assembly in 1961 were members of the politically progressive, but also statist CHP. And the CHP had a close relationship with the Turkish military that allowed them to push forward a progressive constitutional agenda.

Until recently, the perception of CHP links to the military had been played down in public discussions but never fully eliminated. In the eyes of politicians like Erdoğan, the CHP—still Turkey's second most important party—remains a party of coup plotters (*darbecis*), aiming to thwart with the will of the people through unelected institutions like the Constitutional Court.

In March of 2014, Erdoğan explicitly [compared himself](#) with Menderes: “At that time, they called Menderes a dictator, and now they are calling me one....” Like the DP in the 1950s, recent AKP governments have shown a willingness to move against opposition journalists and officials in the name of the popular will.



*Taksim Square Peaceful Protests, 2013  
Women in headscarves attending the protests. (Source: Mstyslav Chernov, CC BY-SA 3.0, wikipedia.org)*

Clearly, the current Turkish leader acts in the tradition of Turkish democratic majoritarianism represented by Adnan Menderes.

To the dismay of the military, the politicians of the Democrat Party re-emerged in a strong form during the 1960s, even as the political spectrum splintered generally. The military gradually became estranged from all political parties, even the CHP which moved increasingly to the left.

Another military intervention in 1971, albeit not quite a coup, resulted in further constitutional amendments and a purge of progressive military officers. This time, far from solidifying civil rights, the new amendments curtailed constitutional rights.

The political instability of the 1960s was as present in Turkey as elsewhere, and the military saw broad political rights as a cause of this volatility. Yet, despite military intervention, political violence worsened during the 1970s with fighting between left and right on the streets of Istanbul.

## **The Military Constitution of 1982 and After**

In 1980, General Kenan Evren and the military-led National Security Council staged a military coup in order to crack down on political violence and “terror organizations” of the left and right. In the course of the coup, over 43,000 people were arrested.

Yet again, the dual purpose of the coup was both political repression and the remaking of the constitutional order.



*Turkey's Presidential Flag  
16 stars on this flag represent 16 claimed  
historical Turkic empires. (Source: .dsm.,  
public domain, wikipedia.org)*

A new constituent assembly was chosen by the National Security Council, but this time members of all political parties were excluded. In writing the 1982 constitution, military officers and the bureaucratic elite took the lead in creating a more restrictive constitution, designed

to shield the Turkish state from the turbulent democratic politics of the years between 1960 and 1980.

In this constitution, the emphasis was placed on defining the state's role and privileges rather than the citizen's rights. Many articles can be translated with the phrase, "The state shall...." In its initial formulation, the state was referred to as "sublime" (yüce) and "sacred" (kutsal). Although this language has not survived subsequent amendments since 1982, it is no wonder that the 1982 constitution holds virtually no legitimacy on most of the Turkish political spectrum from the Islamist right to the socialist left, even though it remains in force up to the present day.

This constitution has had particular consequences for the role of presidential authority, because it gave Turkey's traditionally weak president somewhat expanded powers. As before, the Turkish president was elected by the National Assembly for a seven-year

term as head of state while the prime minister served as head of the government. But now the president was granted the power to make a wide range of appointments, including all members of the Constitutional Court and many university administrators. In a crisis, the president was granted the right to rule by decree. In practice, this power has not been used, and Turkey's parliamentary system has remained intact.

There have been different interpretations concerning the extent of presidential power granted under the 1982 constitution, but given that approval of the constitution was combined with the "election" of Gen. Kenan Evren as president, there seems to have been a link between the new constitution and the office of the presidency.

Evren served as president until 1989 and undeniably put his stamp on Turkey through his control over institutions such as the judiciary and education. (Evren, now 97, was sentenced to life in prison this June for his role in the coup.)

Thus, Erdoğan may be correct when he claims that the current constitution allows for greater presidential power than has been practiced in recent years.

None of the various Turkish constitutions was crafted by a genuinely representative body, and so Turkish parliaments in the past three decades have had the difficult task of re-shaping the democratically illegitimate and statist constitution of 1982 into a broadly acceptable document.



*Turkey's 1980 Military Coup. (Source: sabah.com.tr)*

Over time, approximately 70% of the original text has been altered. A major stimulus for these amendments came in the form of [European Union](#) accession negotiations, which began to heat up in the late 1990s. Rafts of constitutional amendments were passed in 1999, 2002, and 2004 in order to bring Turkish law in line with European norms.

These amendments were written by, and supported by, a broad spectrum of Turkish political parties, including Erdoğan's AKP, which was founded in 2001 from among the more moderate remnants of a banned Islamist-leaning party.

## **Constitutional Reform in the AKP Era**

Despite the AKP's electoral victory in 2002, early AKP governments went to great lengths to preserve multiparty cooperation, especially in matters of constitutional reform. Erdoğan himself had been disqualified from political office due to

a previous conviction on politicized charges of “inciting racial or religious strife,” and he was only allowed to run for parliament thanks to CHP support of a special constitutional amendment.

In retrospect, the level of cooperation across the political spectrum that existed at that time was remarkable. A custom had developed that constitutional amendments were usually written by an All-Party Parliamentary Accord Committee in which each party in parliament was represented equally, and this practice was successfully continued under AKP rule, at least initially.

Early goodwill toward Erdoğan and the AKP among anti-statist intellectuals and others began to break down when Erdoğan—himself the former object of a politically motivated prosecution—started to prosecute his own political opponents.



*The Controversial “Ergenekon” Trials. (Source, Erdem Gunes, AA)*



1980 Coup Leader and Later Turkish President Kenan Evren.  
(Source: wikipedia.org)

For example, in 2007, Erdoğan [seized the newspaper Sabah](#) on a legal technicality and forced its sale. Sabah was then purchased by a company led by Erdoğan's son-in-law, and it is now seen as a mouthpiece for the government. While Erdoğan is far from the first Turkish politician to engage in this sort of behavior, such actions have fuelled passionate opposition to his government.

Matters came to a head during the so-called

Ergenekon trials (2008-2011) in which a number of leading military officers, politicians, and journalists were accused of conspiring against the government. Haunted by a fear of military intervention, Erdoğan's prosecutors alleged the existence of an authoritarian and ultra-nationalist "deep state" network (known as "Ergenekon") aiming to overthrow the AKP government.

The opposition argued that these prosecutions were used as a sweeping attack against Erdoğan's opponents generally, but concerns about possible threats to the AKP government were not wholly unjustified. Even before coming to power, the AKP was menaced with closure by the Constitutional Court for allegedly

violating Turkey's official secularism, and the party narrowly escaped closure again in 2008.

Faced with such threats, the AKP began using constitutional reform to protect itself from entrenched state elites.

In 2007, Abdullah Gül, the AKP candidate for president, should have won easy election to the presidency based on the AKP's

parliamentary majority, but the opposition boycotted the election, objecting to the idea of a non-secularist president. In particular, Gül's headscarf-wearing wife caused a stir among Turkish secularists.

As a result, the AKP called for fresh elections and drafted a referendum for a constitutional amendment to create, for the first time, a presidency directly elected by the people of Turkey (rather than by members of the parliament).

In 2010, another referendum passed a new set of constitutional amendments that bundled broadly popular changes with more partisan measures designed to increase AKP influence on the Constitutional Court. Although opposition parties did not support



Turkey's Presidential Seal

As it is seen used on documents.  
(Source: Cankaya government, public domain, wikipedia.org)

the referendum, the legal threat of closure against the AKP was finally lifted.

The AKP's internal rules limited AKP deputies (including Erdoğan) to only three terms in parliament, so it is quite possible that Erdoğan had already envisioned himself eventually being elected president by the time of the 2007 referendum in which voters approved direct election of the president.

By bringing the presidency into direct contact with the voters, its character changed from being an instrument of “deep state” tutelage over various institutions (such as the judiciary and the universities) to being a potential expression of the popular will. There is no question that this is how Erdoğan views himself since his election as president in August 2014.

## **Recent Attempts to Write a New Constitution**

In the 2011 parliamentary campaign, the necessity of a wholly new constitution was agreed upon by all four major parties: the AKP, the CHP, the ultra-nationalist MHP, and the mostly Kurdish BDP. Under its new leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the CHP attempted to distance itself from perceptions of closeness to the military and to move toward being seen as [a more normal social democratic party](#).

Both the CHP and AKP called for greater oversight over military affairs, and both envisioned a new constitution enshrining full democratic freedoms, in contrast to the hedging and loopholes found in the current version. The AKP termed such reforms

“becoming normal” (normalleşmek), a goal from which the CHP could hardly dissent.

Initially, the constitutional reform process seemed to have great potential. The AKP won the 2011 election handily with nearly 50% of the votes and a large majority in parliament, one of the best results for any party in decades. A “Constitutional Reconciliation Commission” was created with equal representation for the four major parties on the model of previous committees. Substantial progress was made in composing the early articles concerning general civil rights.

However, these elements of apparent ideological consensus did not translate into successful cooperation. There were considerable, possibly unbridgeable differences between certain parties that made consensus unlikely at best. The positions of the ultra-nationalist MHP and the pro-Kurdish BDP are diametrically opposed regarding the issue of Kurdish autonomy, for example.

Much more seriously, AKP proposals for a stronger presidency or even a full presidential system were viewed as unacceptable by the opposition as a whole. The opposition parties knew that a powerful presidency would suit Erdoğan's personal political ambitions perfectly, and it is largely for this reason that the constitutional reform process slowed to a halt and finally collapsed at the end of 2013.

A two-thirds majority in parliament is needed for any constitutional change, leaving the AKP just short of the ability to amend the constitution unilaterally.



*Ne mutlu Türküm diyene*

*This motto of Turkey's education system translates to "How happy is the one who says I am a Turk." Atatürk coined the phrase during a 1933 speech. Here it is emblazoned on a mountainside. (Source: Murathan, CC BY-SA 3.0, wikipedia.org)*

Conceivably, a new constitution granting expansive presidential powers could be passed with the support of the BDP, for example, if sufficient concessions were granted concerning Kurdish autonomy. This strategy, however, could alienate many Turkish nationalist voters in future elections. To be sure, the ultra-nationalists of yesteryear who supported military tutelage over Turkish politics would see an alliance between Islam-oriented and Kurdish political forces as a catastrophe.

In the meantime, Turkish politics has become more polarized than even just a few years ago. Sparked by a conflict over urban space in Istanbul, the youthful Gezi Park protests made headlines throughout the summer of 2013, and Erdoğan's anger toward opposition activists prompted him to temporarily ban Twitter in early 2014.

The AKP's rivalry with its fellow religious conservatives in Fethullah Gülen's Hizmet movement has even led Erdoğan to seek Gülen's extradition from the United States, so far unsuccessfully. With a new parliamentary election on the horizon, Erdoğan has said that constitutional reform efforts and the enactment of a strong executive presidency will be put off until 2015.

President Erdoğan does face a range of challenges, and the creation of a powerful presidency would be a departure from the Turkish Republic's historical norms. That said, it would be foolish to imagine that Erdoğan cannot succeed now after so many past victories.

For every Turk who sees him as a would-be dictatorial president, there are others who consider him the representative of the conservative Turkish masses and the fulfillment of democratic majoritarianism. ♦



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# Clampdown and Blowback: How State Repression Has Radicalized Islamist Groups in Egypt

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

*With the election of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to the presidency, the pendulum of Egyptian politics has once again taken a dramatic swing. A former military man, al-Sisi helped orchestrate the coup against his predecessor—President Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood—followed by a severe crackdown on Islamic groups. As historian Elizabeth Perego details, this is not the first effort to suppress the Brotherhood, and these campaigns have usually radicalized the Islamists.*

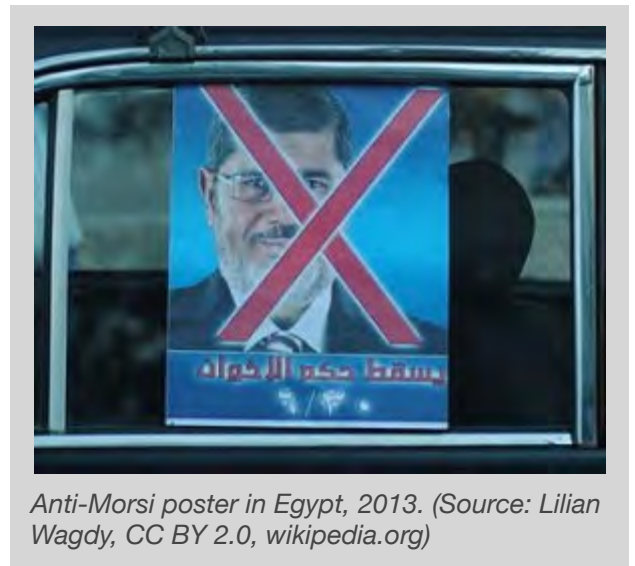
*(Published July 2014)*

By **ELIZABETH PEREGO**

“You have created a new Taliban and a new al-Qaeda in Egypt,” a protestor **shook with fury as he shouted** at the camera in a message to Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the military strongman recently voted President of Egypt.

The footage was shot about a year ago, just after al-Sisi and the Egyptian army forcibly overthrew Mohamed Morsi, then the first democratically elected Egyptian president and leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, on July 3, 2013. The video quickly went viral on **news and social media sites** and was watched not only by fellow Morsi supporters but by analysts of the region who feared the man might be right.

The protestor wanted al-Sisi to know that efforts on the part of the army ruthlessly to suppress Islamic groups like the Muslim Brotherhood and to oust elected Islamists from government would increasingly be met with violence and a shift of Islamic groups to political extremism.





*Pro-Morsi supporters protesting against the coup of against the Muslim Brotherhood government in the streets of Damietta on July 5, 2013. (Source: Mohammed Elsayed, CC BY-SA 3.0, wikipedia.org)*

Recent events have suggested that the man's predictions for the future of Egypt may be coming true.

Since the coup that ousted Morsi, the Egyptian state has launched a vicious campaign to wipe out and suppress the Muslim Brotherhood (Jamā`at al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn), one of the most important Islamic revivalist organizations of the past

century. The Brotherhood has worked since its founding in 1928 towards the creation of an Islamic society through a network of philanthropic organizations, health and social welfare efforts, religious centers, schools, periodicals, political organizations, and extra-legal, at times aggressive, tactics.

Following the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in the early days of the Arab Spring in 2011, Morsi and the Brotherhood were elected in Egypt in 2012, much to the military's disapproval.

Over the year since Morsi's overthrow, an estimated 1,400 have died as a result of political violence, many of them Ikhwān (Brotherhood) supporters denouncing the military's overthrow of the president for the coup it was.

Egyptian military and police agents have also arrested and sometimes tortured suspected Brotherhood sympathizers, including women and children.

Meanwhile, Morsi has been charged with provoking violence in the streets of Egypt in the lead-up to the July 3 coup as well as colluding with Palestinian Hamas and Lebanese Hezbollah to plan a terrorist attack on Egypt. He faces the death penalty if convicted of these unfounded charges.



*The Muslim Brotherhood was founded by Hassan al-Banna in 1928. (Source: wikipedia.org, public domain)*

The state has been quick to blame the Ikhwān for any and all attacks carried out against civilians or state agents. The army's wariness of the Brotherhood led Egypt to outlaw the party and seize of all of their assets in September 2013, and to label them a terrorist organization at the end of December.

And in a move that provoked international condemnation, an Egyptian court sentenced 529 supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood to death in a single trial in late March 2014 for having participated in August 2013 riots in the city of al-Minya which left one police officer dead. (A judge later commuted all but 37 of the sentences to time in prison; however, in April of this year

an Egyptian court again sentenced a further 683 Ikhwān supporters to death.)

With the election in May of al-Sisi (Morsi's former defense minister-cum-coup architect), the circumstances are not likely to improve. In a television interview that aired right before the elections, al-Sisi vowed to wipe out the Brotherhood if elected president.

Al-Sisi's treatment of the Brotherhood and its partisans has not deterred some Egyptians from genuinely supporting the military strongman. In the weeks leading up to the election from which he predictably emerged victorious, journalists did not have a difficult time finding al-Sisi enthusiasts to interview.

Now that the general is receiving praise from large numbers of Egyptians for having supposedly saved the country from the Ikhwān's clutches, some North African analysts are wondering out loud whether the Egyptian military may have been pushing pro-Islamist Egyptians to the brink of violence in order to swoop in as saviors against supposedly dangerous Islamism.

The military's actions have not been without consequence.

As the government inflicts more acts of horrendous violence upon Muslim Brotherhood partisans, fringes of the broad Islamist movement are increasingly joining up with hardline groups espousing armed struggle. They hope to inflict revenge upon the state that robbed Morsi and the Brotherhood of the political power the Egyptian people legitimately invested in them through the 2012 elections.

On December 24, 2013, a car bomb set off outside of the Security Directorate in Mansoura killed 16 and left hundreds wounded, echoing an attack by armed agents against military conscripts that left 25 dead in August.

A month later, on January 24, 2014, the eve of the third anniversary of former Egyptian dictator Hosni Mubarak's departure from power saw a series of four bomb explosions in public places during morning rush hour in central Cairo. The attacks left six dead and dozens more injured.

These bombings, as well as some attacks on [Coptic Christians](#), reflect how armed associations are harming civilians in their quest for vengeance and justice. As of late May, there have been more than 300 coordinated attacks on civilians and security forces. The gunpowder appears lit for a long, violent struggle over Egypt's future.

The prediction of a new Taliban and al-Qaeda has precedent in the region's recent past. Historically speaking, the harder states clamp down on the activities of Islamists, the more likely members of these groups are to counter this aggression, at times



*Hosni Mubarak*

*The 2011 Egyptian Revolution removed President Hosni Mubarak from power. (Source: Presidenza della Repubblica, wikipedia.org)*



*From left to right: President Gamal Abdel Nasser, Vice President Anwar Sadat, ASU head Ali Sabri, and Vice President Hussein el-Shafei, all important leaders of the Arab Socialist Union in Alexandria, 1968. (Source: wikipedia.org, public domain)*

espousing ultraconservative views of Islam.

The history of the encounters of the Muslim Brotherhood with various Egyptian leaders and regimes since the birth of the world's first modern Islamist movement elucidates how

state repression of this group has typically culminated in the radicalization of the organization. [Three examples](#) in particular serve to illustrate this point: Gamal Abdel Nasser's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1950s and 1960s, Anwar Sadat's "autumn of fury" and subsequent assassination in 1981, and the Mubarak regime's suppression of the Brotherhood in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

## **Milestones to Radicalization: Nasser and the Suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood**

Al-Sisi is currently following a path of violence against the Muslim Brotherhood well-trod by earlier Egyptian military leaders. Attempts by Nasser's regime from the mid-1950s through the 1960s to weed out the Ikhwān encouraged many among the latter

to embrace a more stringent view of Islam and a hardline stance against a secular, nationalist state.

After coming to power, Nasser moved quickly to solidify his power, outlawing political parties and forcing the Brotherhood to transform into more of a social association.

In 1954, Nasser's government launched a campaign to weed out the Ikhwān organization after publicly blaming a Brother for an assassination attempt on Nasser. The military-led regime rounded up Ikhwān members and threw tens of thousands in jail, torturing and executing many of the organization's leaders, including one of the group's major thinkers, Sayyid Qutb.

Prior to Nasser's decision to wipe out the Islamist party, the Ikhwān had by no means been an entirely peaceful movement. They had a paramilitary group that engaged in certain activities in the late 1940s that would qualify as terrorism. Yet some Ikhwān partisans' use of violence was not out of the ordinary: turmoil and bloodshed marked the period preceding fall of the monarchy in Egypt in 1953. All Egyptians were operating in a context of uncertainty and instability in the 1940s and 1950s as



*Sayyid Qutb was one of the major thinkers of the Ikhwan organization. (Source: wikipedia.org, public domain)*



*Gamal Abdel Nasser and supporters in Alexandria following the signing of the British withdrawal order on October 1954. (Source: wikipedia.org, public domain)*

they struggled to free themselves from **British colonial control**.

While in prison as part of Nasser's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, Qutb penned *Ma'ālim fī al-Ṭarīq*, frequently translated in English as *Milestones*. Experts on Islamist doctrine in the 20th century almost universally agree that the work signaled an ideological break with Qutb's earlier doctrine and that the

experience of prison weighed heavily on the volume's content.

Prior to the widespread suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood beginning in 1954, while Qutb had preached against extravagant, materialistic Western lifestyles, he had not yet elaborated the theories that would later prove grist to extremists' mill.

Indeed, *Milestones*, which appeared in 1964, brimmed with ire at those Qutb believed were claiming to be Muslims but were, in his view, undermining Islam. He wrote that the world of the mid-20th century had fallen into disarray resembling the world prior to the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad. According to Qutb, they had returned to the pre-Islamic era of *jāhiliyya*, "a state of ignorance of the guidance from God."

The Muslims of his day had a duty to rid the world of this ignorance and ensure that all Muslims were only submitting themselves to God's instruction. He thus envisioned the eventual disappearance of government by men replaced with a system in which individuals subjected themselves to the *sharī'a* as the ideal post- *jāhiliyya* world.

By declaring that the world had returned to *jāhiliyya*, Qutb opened the door for his followers to lob the charge of *kāfir*, or unbeliever, at those Muslims who were following governments whose rule was not based on Islamic principles and who, unlike Qutb's vision of true Muslims, tacitly accepted the rule of men and the nationalist and socialist governments.

According to some interpretations of *Milestones*, Qutb's concept of *jāhiliyya* validated *takfīr*, or the denunciation of individuals as *kāfir*, an action that would make these persons ineligible for protection under Muslim law and subject to death according to some understandings of Islamic tenets. Some Muslim Brothers while still in jail in the 1960s even began proclaiming fellow prisoners as *kāfir*, a status that some believed required death as a punishment.

Qutb's notion that the world had entered a new age



*Emblem of the Muslim Brotherhood which was founded in Egypt. (Source: wikipedia.org, public domain)*

of jāhiliyya went on to become a critical concept at the core of global jihadism, even if there was no way for Qutb at the time of writing to anticipate this consequence of his book.

Qutb's works from this period espoused such incendiary and dangerous thoughts that Nasser's regime executed him by hanging in 1966 (although it is interesting to note that Milestones was printed initially with consent of the state, which only later banned the book, rounding up those Brothers in possession of it and throwing them in jail). The Egyptian state thereby rendered him a martyr in the eyes of many Islamists and permitted his doctrine to develop a life of its own.

Had Nasser not unleashed a campaign of torture and terror upon the Ikhwān, Qutb might have never crafted Milestones.

It is worth noting that not all members of the Muslim Brotherhood agreed with the more radical interpretations of Qutb's theory of jāhiliyya. Some outright renounced the exercising of takfīr. The second guide of the organization, Hasan al-Hudaybi, was among those Ikhwān against declaring apostasy on other Muslims.

His views encapsulated moderate positions towards the Egyptian state as well as other Muslims that the Brotherhood's members overwhelmingly adopted and have continued to uphold over the past few decades. Yet Nasser's repression of the Ikhwān had already done its damage, planting a vision of the validity of takfīr for generations to come.

## Pathways to Peace and Return to the Margins: The Brotherhood under Sadat

If imprisonment, torture, and executions pushed Muslim Brotherhood theorist Qutb to radicalization, then quite the opposite initially occurred under Anwar Sadat (Nasser's successor) when policies of greater tolerance and acceptance paved the way to peaceful civic participation by the Ikhwān in the 1970s.

Ascending to power in 1970, Sadat lessened pressure on the Ikhwān. The Muslim Brotherhood was still illegal and was



*President Jimmy Carter (center of standing) shaking hands with Egyptian President Anwar Sadat (left) and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (right) at the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty on the grounds of the White House, 1976. (Source: Leffler Warren, [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov))*

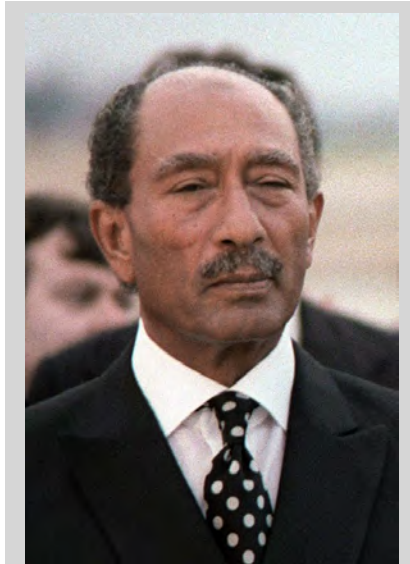
occasionally subjected to state-imposed constraints in their activities. However, the Egyptian state closed the concentration camps that had been holding arrested members of the Brotherhood, and the government permitted them to take important positions in students' and workers' unions and professional organizations.

Sadat had three main goals in this policy change, however limited, towards the Brotherhood.

Internal power struggles and balancing different political groups were one cause. Sadat aimed to promote the Brothers in order to counter the influence of pro-Nasser, leftist elements who opposed Sadat's turn to western capitalism.

Further, Sadat incorporated some tenets of sharī'a into national laws. This move was designed to distance himself from Nasser and present himself as devout at a moment when many Egyptians were turning to religion for solace after the devastating loss to Israel during the [Arab-Israeli War of 1967](#).

Finally, Sadat's efforts to privatize the economy that had been nationalized under Nasser and to marginalize socialist politicians appealed to members of a religiously conservative bourgeoisie.



*Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. (Source: Public domain, wikipedia.org)*

The latter made ideal allies for the president in his campaign to distance himself from Nasser's policies, particularly socialism, without losing legitimacy and support.

In the meantime, Muslim Brothers who preferred revolt and refused al-Hudaybi's call for coexistence had split from the movement to form their own organizations. They broke away from mainstream Ikhwān in light of the leadership's willingness to negotiate with what they considered an apostate Egyptian regime.

The first of such groups was Takfīr wal-Hijra, born like Qutb's more radical worldview in Nasser-era prison cells and concentration camps. Its adherents considered Qutb's plea for a separation of true Muslims from a jāhiliyya society to mean a division in every aspect of life, including politics, between themselves and non-Muslims. Members of this organization desired the overthrow of the Egyptian state and the establishment of a state based exclusively on sharī'a.

Similarly, Al-Jamā'a al-Islāmīya originated in student groups on Egyptian campuses in the 1970s and supported the use of violence as a means to inaugurate a regime based on their interpretation of Muslim principles.

In 1979, Tanzīm al-Jihād came on the scene as well, another incendiary group that wanted to spark an Islamist revolution in Egypt. They quickly became known as Qutbists due to their adherence to the Qutb's idea of jāhiliyya, their interpretation of his writings to allow for takfīr, and their belief in the need of men to be subject only to God's rule.





Hosni Mubarak. (Source: World Economic Forum, commons.wikimedia.org)

The mutual tolerance between Sadat and Egypt's Islamists persisted until the president shifted his stance on Israel with the Camp David Accords and subsequent [1979 Egypt-Israeli Peace Treaty](#), trading ceasefire/cooperation with the longtime enemy to regain territory lost in the 1967 defeat. The anger many Islamists in the country felt towards Sadat's recognition of and dealings with Israel unraveled the pact of peaceful coexistence that he had fostered with the Brotherhood and stoked the embers of radicalism among Muslims in Egypt.

That same year, the successful [overthrow of the Iranian government](#) and the establishment of the [Islamic Republic in Iran](#) lent hope to the radical fringes' aspirations for overturning the Egyptian regime which only years earlier had so brutally repressed them.

Seething from Sadat's treaty with Israel and encouraged by Khomeini's success in Iran, the more extremist elements of Egypt's Islamist movement calculated that the moment had come for a coup against the state.

In his anger against the Egypt-Israel treaty, the leader of the Jihād group, Muhammad Abd al-Salam Faraj, condemned Sadat as an apostate and, consequently, an enemy who should be neutralized. He expressed these ideas in a pamphlet, *The Neglected Duty*, which circulated broadly among Islamists and Islamist sympathizers at the time. Sadat's government did not fail to take notice.

Aware of the gathering rage against him and his regime, Sadat embarked upon a series of measures intended to suppress

Egypt's broad Islamist movement. For instance, following the treaty with Israel the Sadat regime banned student unions, al-Jamā'a's main power base.

During his "autumn of fury" mere weeks before his death, Sadat rounded up and arrested political opponents, including Ikhwān. These missteps and the growing Islamist disapproval of his regime proved **fatal for Sadat**, who was assassinated by al-Jihād on October 6, 1981.

## Mubarak and the Brotherhood

In the wake of Sadat's death, the government under a new president, Hosni Mubarak, quickly decided to initiate a **national reconciliation** with the Islamist groups and other political actors whom Sadat's crackdown had antagonized.

Mubarak released the political opponents, including the Muslim Brotherhood's supreme guide. As the decade went on, laxity allowed for the Brothers to take lead roles again in trade unions and student organizations. Ikhwān were able to run for parliament as independent candidates, successfully winning seats. Coalitions were even built between the Brotherhood and the liberal New Wafd Party, a nationalist liberal party.

The Mubarak regime undoubtedly attempted to use the Brotherhood as a sort of buffer against the rise of more radical **Salafist groups**. Mubarak's state in the 1980s proved willing to tolerate the movement as long as the group strove to fulfill their political objectives through non-violent means.

And much like during Sadat's reign in the early and mid-1970s this period of tolerance coincided with a calming of the Islamist forces in Egypt.

The tides turned for the Ikhwān, however, when they became too powerful for Mubarak and his allies to tolerate any longer. They gradually grew in strength through civic associations and elections, eventually taking control of important organizations such as the Egyptian Bar Association in 1992.



*Most viewers will have seen Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in military dress. He resigned from the military in March of 2014 after overthrowing President Mohamed Morsi. (Source: Rog.Del, wikimedia.org)*

Concurrently, the rise to power of an Islamist party in Algeria—the first then-legal Islamist association in North Africa to assume widespread control of a nation, even if only on a municipal level—caused the Cairo authorities to fear that the Brotherhood could have similar success in Egypt.

As a result of these fears, beginning in the late 1980s and lasting through the 1990s, especially in 1995, Mubarak's regime repressed the Brotherhood, eventually sentencing hundreds to time in prison in military tribunals. In a foreshadowing of events in Egypt today, the government also

began blaming the Muslim Brotherhood for the violent acts that other oppositional groups committed against security agents, civilians, and tourists.

The Egyptian state then entered into an armed conflict with Islamist groups during the 1990s that was certainly fueled by the government's detainment, imprisonment, and torture of Egypt's more moderate Islamist forces. An estimated 1,600 people died during this period.

## The Al-Sisi Presidency and Islam in Egypt

As al-Sisi begins his term as Egyptian president this month, the situation in Egypt today mirrors earlier moments in which armed forces claiming to stand for secular values and international and domestic security have sought to eliminate Islamist parties through tyrannical means. Al-Sisi, like so many before him, has manipulated negative stereotypes of Islamist parties to justify brutal treatment and stay in power despite a lack of legitimacy.

Liberal elements of Egyptian society as well as current military would do well to remember the reality that state-inflicted violence against once legal Islamist movements begets violence, a vicious cycle that can end in high civilian casualties. That the Muslim Brotherhood, with its leader Morsi, had been freely elected in 2012 and then overthrown a year later in a military coup will certainly not be soon forgotten.

While the warnings of the protestors of “a new Taliban” or “new al-Qaeda” may not entirely come to pass, it seems certain that the recent repression, arrests, mock trials, torture, and killings of the

Muslim Brotherhood will only lead to greater instability for Egypt. ♦

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## A Fresh Start for Pakistan

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*Recent elections in Pakistan brought new hope that the country—a longstanding, if fraught, ally of the U.S.—was making a break from its long tradition of political instability and military control. This month historian Eric A. Strahorn explores the origins of Pakistan's political troubles from independence through the war on terror.*

*(Published April 2014)*

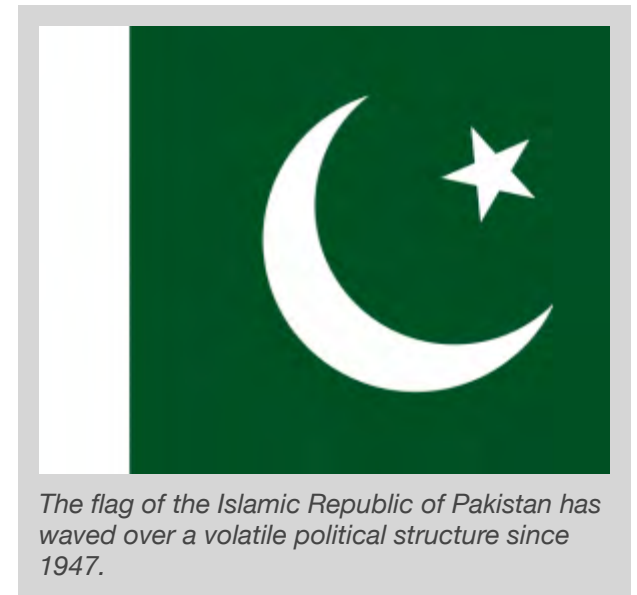
### By **ERIC A. STRAHORN**

After being out of power for 13 years, 7 months, and 21 days, Nawaz Sharif was reelected prime minister of Pakistan on June 5, 2013.

This prosaic electoral event brought substantial hope for Pakistan's future and marked several firsts.

It was the first time in Pakistan's turbulent political history that one democratically elected government served out its full term and passed the reins of power to a democratically elected government from a different political party. For half of its history Pakistan has been ruled by the military and dictators.

It was also the first time a Pakistani prime minister won a third term. Sharif's previous two terms, 1990-1993 and 1997-1999, ended early and abruptly due to internal dissent leading ultimately to his exile in Saudi Arabia for seven years in 2000.



*The flag of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan has waved over a volatile political structure since 1947.*

Many hope Sharif's majority support will enable him to tackle some of the country's persistent problems, such as terrorism, corruption, power shortages, regional disputes, a sluggish economy, [U.S. drone strikes](#), and sour relations between the civilian government and the military.

But the road ahead looks difficult.

From its postcolonial beginnings in 1947, Pakistan's political elites have faced regional, communal, and religious obstacles to building a stable, enduring political structure. It took years to produce the first constitution and even longer to hold national elections. Debates raged over whether Pakistan should be a secular or Islamic state and over which regional and political elites should rule.



*Mohandas K. Gandhi spinning yarn, late 1920s. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*

At the same time, Pakistan suffered from complexities of geography and poor relations with neighbors. It began independent life divided into the almost unworkable split of West and East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh). And it has struggled against its larger neighbor India over control of territory.

Today, Pakistan confronts the destabilizing effects of the U.S.-led war in [Afghanistan](#), the spread of Taliban forces across the region,

and a changing relationship with the United States (its ally for decades).

So far, the optimism of last summer's political transition seems premature. With increasing terrorist attacks and the imposition of Sharif's controversial new

security laws, discontent is mounting. On December 24, 2013, a Gilani Research Foundation opinion poll that showed that only 27% of Pakistanis believe the country is moving in the right direction.

Pakistan's fbutton for redoresh start has yet to materialize.

## **An Inauspicious Beginning: Independence and Partition**

Salmon Rushdie has famously described Pakistan as "a place ... insufficiently imagined."

Pakistan shook itself free from the United Kingdom in 1947 after almost 100 years of colonial control under the British Raj. The long process of gaining independence had been dominated by two nationalist organizations, the Indian National Congress led by



*Muhammad Ali Jinnah speech, 1943. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*



*Abdul Ghaffar Khan with Jawaharlal Nehru and Sardar Patel (l-r)*

*Abdul Ghaffar Khan, here on the left in 1946, eventually led the Muslim League in West Pakistan, which created its own paramilitary force in the mid-1950s to defy President Iskander Mirza's government. Khan was a supporter of Mahatma Gandhi, an opponent of Partition, and an advocate of democracy. (Source: Kulwant Roy, wikipedia.org)*

Mohandas K. Gandhi and the Muslim League led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

Gandhi and the Congress argued that despite South Asia's complicated mosaic of ethnicities, languages, and religions the entire population shared a single nationality. They were Indian.

Jinnah, in his "Two Nations Theory," argued that while they may live side by side, the Hindus and Muslims of South Asia constituted two separate nations.

In a single polity, Jinnah worried, the Muslims of South Asia would become a permanent minority with little political influence and few if any rights. Therefore, the Muslims of South Asia needed their own homeland: Pakistan.

But what was Pakistan to be? Some proposals suggested that it be a highly autonomous region inside a larger Indian federation while others advocated a separate sovereign state.

When it came time for independence, the British, Muslim League, and Congress agreed to partition all of South Asia between Pakistan and [India](#). Areas with substantial Muslim majorities were assigned to Pakistan.

However these Muslim majority zones were not geographically contiguous so that Pakistan had two "wings," East and West, a thousand miles apart. Moreover, the large provinces of [Punjab and Bengal](#) were both split into two so that Muslim-majority West Punjab and East Bengal joined Pakistan while East Punjab and West Bengal went to India. The borders between India and Pakistan were hurriedly determined by the Radcliffe Commission. Jinnah denounced the boundaries of this "moth-eaten Pakistan."

Partition was accompanied by the movement of millions of refugees who found themselves on the "wrong" side of the new borders. Fleeing chaos and sometimes grotesque violence among Hindus, [Muslims](#), and Sikhs, refugees arrived in their new countries destitute. Governments struggled to respond because few had anticipated the vast scale of migrations.

One of the most serious territorial disputes between India and Pakistan was the status of the province of Kashmir.

Located in the Himalayas, Kashmir shared borders with Pakistan and India and both countries laid claim to it. War erupted, and with the ceasefire in 1948 India occupied about two thirds of the province with Pakistan holding the other third. The war was costly to both countries, but it settled little.

The status of Kashmir has continued to be a flashpoint between them to this day. And Pakistan's fear of the larger Indian military has resulted in an outsized proportion of its budget going to defense—up to 70% early on.

At the same time, the new government of Pakistan faced numerous other problems.

Jinnah preferred for Pakistan to have a secular liberal democracy, but this sentiment was not necessarily widely shared by the new nation's citizens and leaders.

Pakistan started off at a disadvantage economically and institutionally. The republic of [India](#) inherited the assets of British India including the capital in New Delhi. India and Pakistan negotiated a division of other assets like military equipment, office furniture, and gold reserves, but much of Pakistan's share was never delivered. The government of Pakistan occupied temporary facilities in Karachi until the construction of a new capital in Islamabad in 1960.

According to historian Ian Talbot, “the Pakistani sense of inferiority and insecurity was psychologically rooted in the country's status as a seceding state rather than inheritor of the Raj. Membership of international organisations such as the United Nations devolved upon India, whereas Pakistan had to go cap-in-hand to apply for membership.”

## Pakistan, the Early Years: Political Instability and Regional Fighting

Independence unleashed a wide spectrum of competing political parties and ideologies, not least between East and West Pakistan. In this atmosphere, political elites failed to create a stable and legitimate political structure. Less than 10 years later, Pakistan was under military rule.

Led by Jinnah, the Muslim League had been the driving force behind the demand for an independent Pakistan in the 1940s. As Jinnah's prestige and authority were unmatched in 1947, he became the head of state, Governor-General, of Pakistan. But he died the following year leaving a power vacuum.

The Constituent Assembly, tasked with writing a constitution and serving as an interim parliament, lost its legitimacy rapidly. Its members had not been elected in 1947, and while the assembly dithered and debated, the Government of India Act of 1935 (revised in 1947) served as an interim constitution for Pakistan until 1956.

Liaquat Ali Khan, who was named prime minister in 1947, found it difficult to craft a consensus



*General Muhammad Yahya Khan removed Ayub from power in 1969, abrogated the Constitution of 1962, banned all political parties, and declared martial law. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*



despite his considerable influence. Difficult issues included the Islamic character of the state and legal system; should the new state follow British legal precedents or sharia?

East Pakistan had a larger population while West Pakistan had the greater political influence, exacerbating disagreement over a federal system. Advocates for a strong central government argued that a powerful center was necessary to pull the country together, while advocates for stronger provinces argued that a weak center would preserve local differences.

Following from the multi-lingual nature of Pakistan was the question of the national language. On one hand, they wanted to avoid using English, which was the language of imperialism, but on the other there was no Indian language common to all parts of the country.

In East Pakistan the vast majority of the population spoke Bengali, little used in the West, where dozens of languages were spoken. Punjabi had the most speakers, but almost all lived in Punjab province.

In the end, the national government chose Urdu even though few people spoke it. Urdu was the mother tongue of many of the



*Bengali Liberation Fighters*

*Fighters in the Bengali liberation forces during the war between East and West Pakistan in 1971. (Source: liberationwarmuseumbd.org)*



*Indian soldiers fighting in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1947 (Source: Public Domain)*

refugees from north India, but for most of the population, it was a literary language learned by the elite.

Pakistan's contentious beginnings culminated in the controversial Public and Representative Office Disqualification Act (PRODA) in 1949—which created categories of political crimes—and the 1951 legal case known as the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case in which 11 people including Major-General Akbar Khan and members of Pakistan's Communist Party were accused of plotting a coup. The government then cracked down on trade unions and several prominent writers. A few months later, the prime minister was assassinated.

The next prime minister, Khawaja Nazimuddin, a Bengali politician, tried to bring some order to the political system but remained in office for only two years. He declared martial law in 1953, but was soon dismissed from office by the Governor-General. Another politician from East Pakistan, Chaudhri Muhammad Ali, was then named prime minister, and finally succeeded in getting a constitution approved by the Constituent Assembly in 1956.

The momentum towards political stabilization, however, did not last.

The new constitution provided for a general election but it was never held due to disagreements over how electoral districts would be drawn up. The Constituent Assembly continued to serve poorly as an interim parliament for two more years until martial law was declared in 1958.



*Iskander Mirza, shown here with the Shah of Iran in 1955, became Pakistan's first president in 1956. He quickly imposed "president's rule" on East Pakistan.*

Regional tensions exacerbated the political difficulties in both wings of the country. In East Pakistan, a crisis erupted in the provincial Legislative Assembly first over the authority of the speaker and then the budget. The government of East Pakistan lost a confidence vote in the assembly and President Iskander Mirza imposed "President's Rule."

In West Pakistan, the situation also deteriorated. The Muslim League created its own paramilitary force while the Pashtun leader Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a supporter of Mahatma Gandhi, opponent of Partition, and advocate of democracy, pressed his supporters to defy the government.

The threat of civil war was all too real.

In 1958, Mirza declared martial law and appointed General Muhammad Ayub Khan to the position of Chief Martial Law Administrator and then named him prime minister. After three weeks, Ayub Khan forced Mirza out of office and assumed the presidency.

The rising young politician Zulfikar Ali Bhutto—whose family came to play a central political role in Pakistan—joined the government as minister of commerce. This was not the Pakistan envisaged by Jinnah and the other founders.

## **Wars and Military Dictatorships**

In 1959, under a new constitution, the newly self-titled Field Marshal Ayub issued the Basic Democracies Order, which again revised the political structure. Political parties were disbanded

and numerous politicians were disqualified from holding office, elections were held only for the local governments, and Ayub took on the title of president.

While keeping democracy in check, Ayub sought to shift the focus to economic development seeing growth as the route to the country's salvation. If political solutions could not be easily found, then perhaps economic success would cover over the constitutional crises.

In the process, Pakistan became a cold war ally of the United States. Seeking economic and military aid to defend against its neighbor India, Pakistan joined the Central Treaty Organization and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, two of a series of alliances designed to contain the Soviet Union. India, a founder of the Non-Aligned Movement, declined.

Pakistan and the United States subsequently developed close military ties. The U.S. established an air force base near the city of Peshawar in northern West Pakistan close to the border with Afghanistan.

This base was used for U-2 spy plane missions over Soviet territory until the Soviets shot down the plane piloted by Gary Powers in 1960. Under pressure from the Soviets, Pakistan secured the planes' removal, but the United States maintained a CIA listening post there until 1970.

In 1962, Ayub ended martial law with a new constitution that created a virtually dictatorial presidential system. Nonetheless, political parties were restored, and in 1965, a presidential election

was held with Ayub and Jinnah's sister Fatima as the candidates. Ayub won and declared prematurely that his victory was a "clear and final verdict on the Constitution."

## **Kashmir and the Rise of Bhutto**

In 1965, the long-running border dispute between India and Pakistan, especially over Kashmir, erupted into warfare. The fighting was relatively brief, but the army of Pakistan was overwhelmed. When Ayub acknowledged that Pakistan could not win and sought an end to the conflict it was a major blow to his prestige.

Pakistani politics once again spun into turmoil.

Bhutto, who had risen to foreign minister, broke with Ayub and created the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in 1967. Ostensibly socialist, the PPP quickly became Bhutto's personal vehicle in a contest for power.

Ayub was forced to resign by the army head General Muhammad Yahya Khan in 1969. Following a similar script to those who came before him, Yahya abrogated the 1962 Constitution, banned all political parties, and declared martial law.



*Kashmir*

*The territory of the Himalayan Kashmir region remains hotly disputed among Pakistan, India, and China. (Source: Atif Gulzar, wikipedia.org)*

He then called a national parliamentary election for October 1970, but he postponed it after a series of serious floods in East Pakistan. In the midst of this, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Mujib), a Bengali nationalist and later prime minister of Bangladesh, and the Awami League produced a list of demands and began calling for greater autonomy for East Pakistan, including a separate currency, tax system and militia.

The election was rescheduled for December, but in November a massive cyclone hit East Bengal and killed more than a million people. Relief efforts by the central government were widely seen in East Pakistan as inadequate and indicative of the indifference of western leaders toward the east.

When the first general election in Pakistan's history finally took place, the Awami League won 167 of 169 of East Pakistan's seats while Bhutto's PPP won 81 seats. And reflecting the chasm separating the eastern and western parts of Pakistan, neither party won any seats in the other wing of the country.

As the leader of the largest party, Mujib expected to be asked to form a government, but Bhutto, who was influential among the generals in Yahya's inner circle, had a different idea. When Yahya declared Mujib prime minister, the PPP and many leading generals objected.

## Splitting East and West: the Birth of Bangladesh

In the political jockeying that followed the elections, the army began reinforcing its garrisons in East Pakistan. It transferred Bengali troops to the west and moved soldiers from the west to the east.



*Zulfikar Ali Bhutto meets with U.S. President Richard Nixon in 1973 in the Oval Office. He had created the socialist Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in 1967. (Source: White House Photo Office, public domain, wikipedia.org)*



*President of Pakistan Asif Ali Zardari, President of Tajikistan Emomali Rahmon, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev, and President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai in 2009 (left to right). (Source: Kremlin.ru, CC BY 4.0, wikipedia.org)*

In a conciliatory gesture, Yahya ordered the National Assembly to hold its first meeting in Dhaka, the capital of East Pakistan. He then delayed the opening to give the politicians more time to sort out a government. Bengali politicians were offended by the delay and some began to call for an independent Bangladesh. Massive protests, strikes, and riots erupted throughout the province.

The call for an independent Bangladesh was the culmination of years of political discontent and cultural marginalization in East Pakistan. Their Bengali language had not been adopted as a national language of Pakistan. Bengalis were underrepresented in army officer ranks as well as the civil service. And the national capital had been placed in West Pakistan.

As violence grew, the Pakistani army launched Operation Searchlight in March 1971. It attacked the remaining Bengali army units and rounded up and killed civilians including professionals like doctors, lawyers, and writers. Hindus were targeted as enemies of Pakistan. It was only in 2013 that several perpetrators of this mass slaughter were convicted in a Bangladeshi court.

After waves of refugees from Bangladesh fled to India, the government of Indira Gandhi announced that it couldn't effectively cope with the millions crossing the border. Gandhi not only wanted to stop the flow of refugees but saw the opportunity to strike a blow against rival Pakistan. She ordered the intervention of the Indian army and after a short war with fighting in both the east and the west, Pakistan was forced to surrender and accept the independence of Bangladesh on December 16, 1971.

## **Déjà vu all over again: The Bhutto and Zia Years**

Losing the civil war was devastating to the remainder of Pakistan. Yahya was forced to resign and Bhutto took office as the country's first civilian president in thirteen years.

At the same time, the example of secession of one part of Pakistan set off other demands for local power in the western parts of Pakistan, especially in the province of [Balochistan](#) in the southwest of the country. Bhutto rejected the unrest as the work of "secessionists" and sent in the army to suppress it.

In 1973, Bhutto approved another new constitution that in theory reduced the power of the president in favor of the National

Assembly and the prime minister. According to historian Safdar Mahmood, it “heralded a new era of democracy and political stability in Pakistan,” but in practice things fell short.

Protests and riots grew as the opposition denounced the 1977 election as rigged. Bhutto had opposition politicians arrested and turned to the head of the army, General Zia-ul-haq, to impose martial law.



*Indira Gandhi, the fourth prime minister of India, declared that India could not cope with the millions of refugees crossing the border from East Pakistan / Bangladesh in 1971. (Source: public domain, commons.wikimedia.org)*

Instead, Zia staged a coup and had Bhutto executed in 1979.

On assuming the presidency, Zia instituted an Islamization of the mostly secular political system and revised the constitution to increase the power of the president. Zia incorrectly hoped that the Islamization of Pakistan would lead to a greater national unity.

Opposition to Zia grew during the early 1980s and in a bid to calm the situation he lifted martial law in 1985 and called an election but banned political parties from participating. The election failed to quell the unrest.

Zia then allowed the daughter of Bhutto, Benazir, to return from exile. The younger Bhutto was able to unify the opposition and as the protests increased, Zia died in an airplane crash in 1988.

In the midst of this decade of political turbulence, U.S.-Pakistani relations took on a new urgency.

Initially, the United States had viewed Zia as an illegitimate and distasteful dictator. But with the Soviet invasion of [Afghanistan](#) in 1979, the United States offered Zia billions of dollars in economic and military aid to secure his cooperation.

## **Alternating Governments**

With the death of Zia, democracy in Pakistan received new life.

The two major parties were the PPP led by Bhutto and the Muslim League led by Nawaz Sharif. The constitution as revised by Zia remained in force, giving the president extensive power. Both Bhutto and Sharif were elected twice and then dismissed twice by presidents allied with the military.

In 1999, Sharif’s second term ended early by a coup led by General Pervez Musharraf. Musharraf, like earlier coup leaders, promised to restore order and step aside for early elections. And like the others, he failed to follow through.

Opposition to Musharraf was initially muted but grew over time. One major problem he faced was neighboring Afghanistan. The Soviet Union had withdrawn from the country in 1989, but Afghanistan was soon plunged into civil war.

The United States had lost interest in Afghanistan, but Pakistan faced a flood of refugees across the porous border. It organized refugee camps and in these camps the Taliban was born. Assisted by elements within Pakistan's Directorate for Inter-Service Intelligence, the Taliban evolved into a major political movement best known for its strict interpretation of Islamic law.

Following 9/11, American interest in Afghanistan was renewed. This posed a problem for Musharraf because a substantial segment of Pakistani society was sympathetic towards the Taliban. Under intense American pressure, Musharraf decided to cooperate with the U.S. invasion of his neighbor.

As Musharraf's popularity waned, the opposition led by Bhutto and Sharif in exile pushed him to resign. Musharraf agreed to step down as the head of the army and to call an election which he would contest as a civilian. Bhutto was allowed to return once again from exile but as she campaigned for office she was assassinated in 2007.

The following year, Musharraf resigned and Bhutto's widower Asif Ali Zardari won the presidential election and the PPP won the following parliamentary election. Zardari, nicknamed "Mr. Ten Percent" because he was widely believed to take a commission on most government contracts, had served as a member of Bhutto's second government.

His popularity waned rapidly as the country faced economic difficulties and the effects of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. Zardari cooperated with the United States and tried to improve relations

with India. Yet, like Musharraf, he also desperately tried to avoid alienating Taliban sympathizers.

In 2009, he was obligated to transfer control over Pakistan's nuclear weapons to the prime minister, Yousaf Raza Gillani. With continued allegations of corruption, Zardari came under increased pressure to resign.

While the PPP government managed to finish its five-year term, the party became extremely unpopular. Sharif's Muslim League won the 2013 election with a substantial majority.

### **Sharif: Third Time's a Charm or More of the Same?**

Many believed that Sharif, after thirteen years in the wilderness, would approach his third term in office in a less confrontational and more effective fashion.

While Sharif's third government may be somewhat less provocative in style, substantively little has changed. In most areas other than the economy, Sharif has been unable to fulfill his promises.

He has continued his policies of economic reform, including the privatization of government run enterprises. Companies like Pakistan International Airlines and Pakistan Steel are in the process of being privatized. Foreign direct investment has gone up while the rate of GDP growth is higher than it was last year.

However, Sharif has so far been unable to improve Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan, India, or the United States.

In early 2014, Pakistan and Afghanistan traded accusations over continuing cross-border terrorism.

More importantly, Sharif has not been able to persuade the United States to stop sending drones to Pakistan. [Drone strikes](#) have led to widespread anti-American sentiment.

Sharif's government has also had difficulty improving domestic security. Terrorist attacks have increased and efforts to negotiate with the Tehrik-e-Taliban (the Taliban in Pakistan) have been sporadic. In response, the government has implemented stringent new security laws including the Protection of Pakistan Ordinance [PPO] that have attracted protests from opposition parties and human rights organizations.

The implementation of the PPO suggests that the long awaited political stability remains elusive. Despite the positive nature of the transfer of power from one democratically elected government to another, the structural problems in the Pakistani political system persist, as does the unusually difficult geopolitical neighborhood in which Pakistan resides. ♦

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## Alawites and the Fate of Syria

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*The Civil War in Syria has become one of the most bloody and geopolitically important events to come out of the Arab Spring. While the war has become in many ways a sectarian Shi'a-Sunni battle, in Syria there is a third religious group that has played a pivotal role in the history of that country: the Alawites. This month historian Ayse Baltacioglu-Brammer outlines the history of this little known community and describes how they became perhaps the most important power bloc in Syria after the 1970s. She reminds us that we cannot understand the civil war raging in Syria without understanding the Alawites.*

*(Published January 2014)*

### By **AYSE BALTACIOGLU-BRAMMER**

When in early March 2011 the “Arab Spring”—a wave of pro-democracy demonstrations that began in Tunisia in late 2010 and swept across [Libya](#) and Egypt—finally reached Syria, people from various religious and ethnic backgrounds (Muslims, non-Muslims, and Alawites; Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen) rallied together to oppose the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the “elected” president of Syria.

The unrest resulted from a combination of socio-economic and political problems that had been building for years and that affect especially Syria’s large rural population. The drought of 2007-2010, high unemployment rates, inflation, income inequality, and declining oil resources all contributed to profound discontent on the part of the opposition movement. Moreover, harsh and arbitrary political repression had also eroded Bashar al-Assad’s long-cultivated facade as a “reformer.”



*This image depicts Ali, a Jesus-like figure in Alawite theology. Religiously and communally separate from the Muslim populations of Syria, Alawites have ruled for decades through the Assad family. Their unique history sheds light on the civil war raging in Syria today. (Source:public domain)*



*This French post card from around 1900 pictures an Alawite man from Latakia with a hatchet, sword, and rifle. (Source: French postcard, wikipedia.org)*

In the early days of the rebellion, the frequent protest chant, "Syrians are one!" indicated the determination of the demonstrators to show the unity of the opposition movement, which, according to them, was above any sectarian and ethnic division and dispute. In an unusual show of solidarity, in Latakia, the fifth largest city in Syria and one with a major Alawite population, a Sunni Imam led prayers for Alawites, while the Alawite Shaykh led prayers at a Sunni Mosque.

However, two years after the conflict began in the midst of tremendous hope and optimism, it has degenerated into a civil war

with more than 100,000 deaths and 2 million refugees. And it has put Syria at the center of nasty geopolitical struggles involving the United States, Russia, [Iran](#), Lebanon, and [Turkey](#).

The war today has in many ways become a war fought between the majority Sunnis, on one side, and Shi'ites with the support of minority Alawites on the other.

Alawites are adherents of a syncretistic belief with close affinity to Shi'ite Islam and, importantly, the Assad family is Alawite. But despite their crucial role in the unfolding struggles in Syria, they are little known outside the region.

In most discussions of the Syrian civil war, the most neglected question is: How and why did an opposition movement that initially included various religious and ethnic segments of the Syrian society against a dictatorial regime

turn [into another sectarian war between Sunnis and Shi'ites?](#)

Answering this question requires us to appreciate the peculiar position occupied by Syrian Alawites and the role played by them in the creation of the modern state of Syria.

We also need to understand how sectarian differences have long been used as a political tool by the Assad family—who have ruled Syria since Bashar al-Assad's father Hafez al-Assad took power in the 1970s—and, before them, by the French who controlled Syria for much of the 20th century.

## Who are the Alawites?

Today Alawites comprise 12-15% of the Syria's population, or about 2 million people. They mainly live in the mountainous areas of Latakia on the northwestern coast, where they constitute almost two-thirds of the population.



*Alawite women photographed in Syria in the 1920s. (Source: French postcard, wikipedia.org)*

The Alawites are composed of several main tribes with numerous sub-tribes. Syria's Alawites are also divided among two distinct groups: more conservative members of the community, who mainly live in rural regions as peasant farmers and value the traditional aspects and rituals of the belief, and the middle-class, educated, urban Alawites who have been assimilated into Twelver Shi'ism aided by Iranian and Lebanese propaganda. [Twelver Shi'ism is the principal and largest branch of [Shi'ite Islam](#).]

Syria's Alawites are a part of the broader Alawite population who live between northern Lebanon and southern-central Turkey. While not doctrinally Shi'ite, Alawites hold Ali (d. 661), who is considered the first Imam by the Shi'ites (and the fourth caliph by the Sunnis), in special reverence.

The sect is believed to have been founded by Ibn Nusayr (d. ca. 868), who was allegedly a disciple of the tenth and eleventh Shi'ite Imams and declared himself the bab (gateway to truth), a key figure in Shi'ite theology. Alawites were called "Nusayris" until the French, when they seized control of Syria in 1920, imposed the name "Alawite," meaning the followers of Ali, in order to accentuate the sect's similarities to Shi'ite Islam.

The origins of the Alawite sect, however, still remain obscure.

While some scholars claim that it began as a Shi'ite faction, others argue that early Alawites were pagans who adopted themes and motifs first from Christianity and then from Islam. In essence, Alawism is an antinomian religion with limited religious obligations. Despite similarities to the Shi'ite branch of Islam,

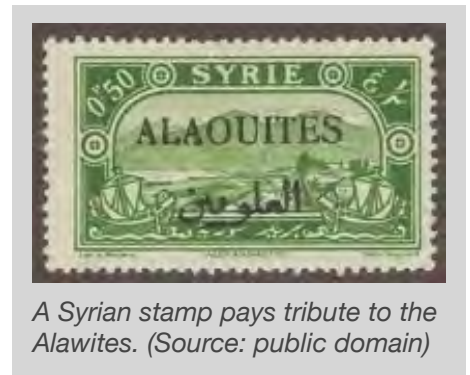
some argue that Ibn Nusayr's doctrines made Alawism almost a separate religion.

The Alawites believe in the absolute unity and transcendence of God, who is indefinable and unknowable. God, however, reveals himself periodically to humankind in a Trinitarian form. This, according to the Alawite theology, has happened seven times in history, the last and final being in Ali, Muhammad, and Salman al-Farisi, who was a Persian disciple and close companion of Muhammad.

The Alawites hold Ali to be the (Jesus-like) incarnation of divinity. While mainstream Muslims (both Sunni and Shi'ite) proclaim their faith with the phrase "There is no deity but God and Muhammad is His prophet," Alawites assert, "There is no deity but Ali, no veil but Muhammad, and nobab but Salman."

Alawites, furthermore, ignore Islamic sanitary practices, dietary restrictions, and religious rituals. The syncretistic nature of the Alawite belief is further evident in its calendar, which is replete with festivals of Christian, Persian, and Muslim origin.

Giving Ali primacy over the Muhammad, a feature shared by various ghulāt (Shi'ite extremist) sects, permitting wine drinking, not requiring women to be veiled, holding ceremonies at night, and several pagan practices have led mainstream Muslims to label Alawites to be often singled out as heretics or extremists.



In Syria, ethnically and linguistically Arab, the Alawites developed certain characteristics that isolated them from the Sunni Syrian population.

## Alawites before the 20th Century

Uncertainty about Alawites' religious identity confused observers and produced suspicion among political and religious authorities that often resulted in persecution over the centuries.

The first proponents of the Alawite faith fled to Syria from Iraq in the 10th century. In the 11th century they were forced out of the Levantine cities and into the inhospitable coastal mountains of northwestern Syria, which has remained the heartland of the Alawites ever since.

In the 14th century, Alawite marginalization was perpetuated by the first anti-Alawite fatwa (legal decision) by a Sunni scholar, Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328), which essentially proclaimed Alawite belief as heresy. Thereafter Alawites suffered major repression by the Mamluks (r. 1250-1517) who ruled the region. Geographically isolated, Alawites maintained their religious integrity in the face of continuous attacks and invasions.

In the Ottoman era (1517-1918), ill treatment continued as Alawites were considered neither Muslim nor dhimmi (a religious group with certain autonomy with regard to communal practices such as Christians and Jews) by the Ottoman government in Istanbul. On the other hand, during much of Ottoman rule, Alawites could practice their religion and a few enjoyed official positions.

The main reason for tension between central Ottoman authority and the Alawite community stemmed from Ottoman efforts to impose its authority by collecting revenue from their local regions. Alawites, who acquired a reputation as “fierce and unruly mountain people,” frequently resisted paying taxes and plundered the Sunni villages.



*Syrian President Hafez al-Assad of Syria greets President Nixon on his arrival at Damascus airport in 1974. (White House photo, public domain, wikipedia.org)*

Attempts by later Ottoman governments to enroll Alawites in the army served as another reason for the Alawite uprisings and perpetuated the strong resentment towards Sunnis, who had so often been seen as their oppressors.

At the end of the 19th century, Alawites rose up against the Ottoman government demanding more autonomy. The rule of Ottoman sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876-1908) did little to diminish these desires, even though he allowed some Alawites to make careers in the Ottoman army and bureaucracy.

The Alawites enjoyed little benefit from the centralized Ottoman government and its largely Sunni-based policies that attempted to convert locals to Sunni Islam through building of mosques in Alawite villages and Sunni training of Alawite children. The “Turkification” policies pursued by the Young Turks—a group of

secularist and nationalist activists who organized a revolution against the Ottoman monarchy in 1908 and ruled the empire until 1918—accelerated the cooperation of the Alawites with new actors in the region: the French.

## Alawites during the French Mandate and the Alawite State of 1922



*An Alawite falconer in Banyas, Syria, during World War II. Photo by Frank Hurley.*

The Alawite region became a part of Syria as a byproduct of the notoriously secret 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement between France and Britain. It was placed under the French mandate after the end of World War I.

After defeating and evicting the British-backed Syrian King Faysal in 1920, France, in a divide-and-rule strategy,

partitioned Syrian territories into four parts, one of which was Latakia, where most of the population was Alawite.

By promoting separate identities and creating autonomous zones in Syria along the lines of ethnic and sectarian differences, the French mandate aimed to maximize French control and influence in Syria. Muslim and Christian minorities were the main allies of the French against the Arab nationalism rooted among the urban Sunni elite.

Furthermore, Alawite territory was geographically crucial because French forces could use it to control the whole Levant coast.

During the mandate era, many local leaders supported the creation of a separate Alawite nation. Alawite cooperation with French authorities culminated on July 1, 1922 when Alawite territory became an independent state. The new state had low taxation and a sizeable French subsidy.

This independence did not last long. Although Latakia lost its autonomous status in December 1936, the province continued to benefit from a “special administrative and financial regime.”

In return, Alawites helped maintain French rule in the region. For instance, they provided a disproportionate number of soldiers to the French mandate government, forming about half of the troupes spéciales du Levant.

Alawite peasants, who were not only religiously repressed and socially isolated by mainstream Sunni Muslims but also economically exploited by their fellow Alawite landowners, rushed to enlist their sons for the mandate army. As a result, a large number of Alawites from mountain and rural areas became officers and they formed the backbone of the political apparatus that would emerge in the 1960s.

French policy ultimately served its purpose to increase the sense of separateness between the political center and the autonomous states in Syria's outlying areas.



*The Syrian Independence Flag, official flag of the country from 1932 to 1958, has been taken up by the Free Syrian Army. (Source: public domain, wikimedia.org)*

In Paris in 1936, when France entered into negotiations with Syrian nationalists about Syrian independence, some Alawites sent memoranda written by community leaders emphasizing “the profoundness of the abyss” between Alawites

and Sunni Syrians. Alawite leaders, such as Sulayman Ali al-Assad, the grandfather of Hafez al-Assad, rejected any type of attachment to an independent Syria and wished to stay autonomous under French protection.

Yet the Alawite community remained divided over the future of the community. Despite a deep sense of religious difference, an increasing number of Alawites and Sunni Arabs were coming to believe that the inclusion of Alawites in a unified Syria was inevitable. People both within and without Syria worked toward a rapprochement between the predominant Muslims and minority Alawites.

For instance, Muhammad Amin al-Husseini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, who was the Sunni Muslim cleric in charge of Jerusalem's Islamic holy places from 1921 to 1938 and known as a leading Arab nationalist, issued a fatwa declaring Syrian Alawites to be known as Muslim. With this fatwa, al-Husseini aimed to unite the Syrian people against the Western occupation.

Following in his footsteps, several Alawite sheikhs made further statements emphasizing their adherence to the Muslim community (albeit Shi'ite) and to Arab nationalism. Also, a group of Alawite students were sent to the Najaf province of Iraq to be trained on the Shi'ite doctrines of Islam.

For all the benefits of French rule for the Alawites, the French Mandate ultimately did little to improve the economic conditions of the Alawite population as a whole. Newly-emerged ideologist parties such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) utilized this fact to turn Alawites against the French and toward Arab nationalism.

## **Alawites after World War II**

It was during the Second World War that the future of the Syrian state and its constituent parts were shaped. When war broke out in 1939, a new generation of Alawites proved more flexible in cooperating with Syrian nationalists, most of whom were Sunni urban elites.

With the formation of Vichy France in mid-1940, ultimate power and authority in Syria rested with the British, who favored the creation of a unified independent Syria under the leadership of urban Sunni elite. Even though the Alawite territories belonged to independent Syria, historical mistrust between the Alawites and Sunnis made the transformation a lengthy and painful process.

After the war, Syria obtained independence in 1946, but entered into a period of political instability, unrest, and experimentation with pan-Arab connections to Egypt.

Once they recognized that their future lay within independent Syria, Alawites started to play an active role in two key institutions: the armed forces and political parties.

The Ba'ath party, founded in 1947 by several Muslim and Christian Arab politicians and intellectuals to integrate the ideologies of Arab nationalism, socialism, secularism, and anti-imperialism, was more attractive to Alawites than the [Muslim Brotherhood](#), a Sunni conservative religious organization headquartered in Egypt with a large urban Sunni base in Syria.

Alawites and other minorities continued to be over-represented in the army due to two main factors. Middle-class Sunni families tended to despise the army as a profession, which, according to them, was the place for “the lazy, the rebellious, and the academically backward.” Alawites, on the other hand, saw the military as the main opportunity for a better life.

Second, many Alawites, who had been coping with dire economic circumstances, could not afford to pay the fee to exempt their children from military service.

The Alawite presence in the military culminated in a set of coups in the 1960s. The final coup was carried out by General Hafez al-



*President Hafez al-Assad with his family in the early 1970s. From left to right: Bashar, Maher, Anisa Makhoul, Majd, Bushra, and Basil. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*



*Syrians celebrate their independence in 1946. (Source: public domain)*

Assad, himself an Alawite, and brought the Alawite minority to power in Syria in November 1970. In February 1971, Hafez al-Assad became the first Alawite President of Syria.

## **Alawites and the Assad Dynasty**

Born to a relatively well-off Alawite family in a remote village located in northwestern Syria, Hafez al-Assad joined the Ba'ath Party in 1946 and rose to the rank of de facto commander of the Syrian army by 1969. Sectarian solidarity has been a crucial component of Assad family rule from the beginning. He relied on the Alawite community to consolidate his power and to establish his dynasty.

In the early stages of his rule, Hafez al-Assad emphasized Syria's pan-Arab orientation that required him to embrace the majority Sunni population. In 1971, he reinstated the old presidential

Islamic oath, lifted restrictions on Muslim institutions, and encouraged the construction of new mosques.

At the same time, however, Assad not only placed trusted Alawites in key positions of the regime's security apparatus, but he also improved their living conditions, long among the most degraded in the Arab world. While rural Alawites benefitted from infrastructure improvements such as electricity, water, new roads, and agricultural subsidies, a group of urban Alawites enjoyed employment opportunities in the army and the state bureaucracy.

Overall, Alawites felt a sense of pride that "one of their own" had raised himself to such a high position.

In the end, Assad was unable to win the allegiance of large sections of Sunni Muslim urban society, particularly the conservatives with connections to the [Muslim Brotherhood](#). His failure to fully bridge the divide was not only related to the heterodox character of his faith and certain anti-Islamic policies he adopted, but also to policies that favored his co-sectarians over the rest of the Syrian population.

The clashes between the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the president, who symbolized the Alawite minority, culminated in rebellions against the regime in late 1970s and early 1980s.

Simultaneously, language used by the Muslim Brotherhood and its supporters only served to magnify Alawite insecurity, lead Alawites to back the Assad regime, and exacerbate ongoing tension. For them, Alawites were kuffars (disbelievers).

The peak of this struggle was the battle in Hama in early February 1982, where Alawite (but also some Kurdish) troops killed around 30,000 Sunni civilians, effectively tying the fate of the Alawites to the Assad regime.

From that moment, politics in Syria have been dominated by sectarian divisions.

Sectarian insecurity among the Alawites—who believed that the fall of the regime could lead to revenge against their community following the events in Hama—led to a firm support for hereditary succession in Syrian government. An Alawite attendant at Hafiz al-Assad's funeral in 2000, therefore, did not hesitate to utter, “for us the most important [thing] is that the president should come from the Assad family.”



## The Rule of Bashar al-Assad

Even though Bashar al-Assad's inaugural slogan, “change through continuity,” was reassuring for Alawites, the same slogan was interpreted by the Sunni Syrian majority as an invitation to push for political change.

Bashar al-Assad's initial policies conveyed a message of economic and political reform, but his main strategy was



redistributing the spoils of power among the loyal supporters of the regime and his family. These actions, rightfully called the "corporatization of corruption" by former Syrian vice president Abd al-Halim Khaddam, worked against not only the Sunni majority, but also many Alawites, who were left out of the small inner core that includes Bashar al-Assad, his brother, sister, brother-in-law, and cousins.

While the regime and its clients enjoyed unchecked power and wealth at the expense of the majority of Syrians, several instances of sectarian violence between Alawites and Sunnis erupted in Syria. The most recent of these outbreaks occurred in the summer of 2008. Bashar al-Assad used this violence as evidence to argue to Alawites that his authoritarian regime was the only protection for them from what he called Sunni fundamentalism and intolerance.



*Syrian First Lady Asma al-Assad was widely criticized for wearing a calorie watch bracelet while distributing food to homeless Syrians. (Source: public domain)*

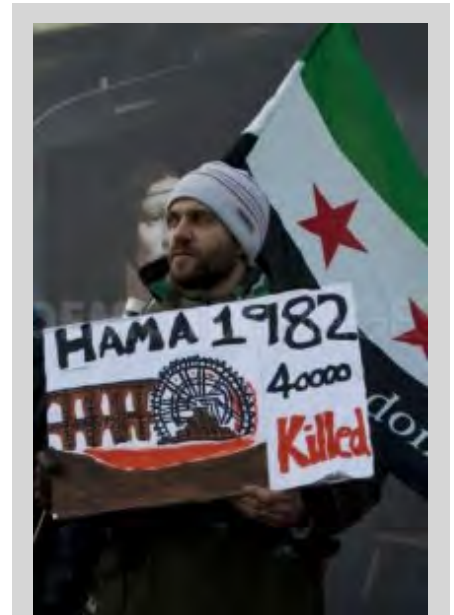
Moderate Alawites have challenged Assad's fear-based justifications for his rule and many more liberal Alawites later joined the early protests against the Assad regime. They were much more concerned with Assad's political oppression, corruption, nepotism, and economic troubles than with sectarian bonds.

The prospect of shattering the historical alliance between the Assad regime and Syria's Alawites was a tantalizing opportunity for Sunni oppositional leaders.

With this goal in mind, former Syrian Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Bayanouni reached out to the Alawites in 2006, stating: "The Alawites in Syria are part of the Syrian people and comprise many national factions ... [The] present regime has tried to hide behind this community and mobilize it against Syrian society. But I believe that many Alawite elements oppose the regime, and there are Alawites who are being repressed. Therefore, I believe that all national forces and all components of the Syrian society, including the sons of the Alawite community, must participate in any future change operation in Syria."

This statement differed dramatically from the antagonistic tone of previous Muslim Brotherhood statements about the heretical nature of the Alawite sect.

Bashar al-Assad, as a keen politician and skilled strategist, would not allow any type of rapprochement between his co-sectarians



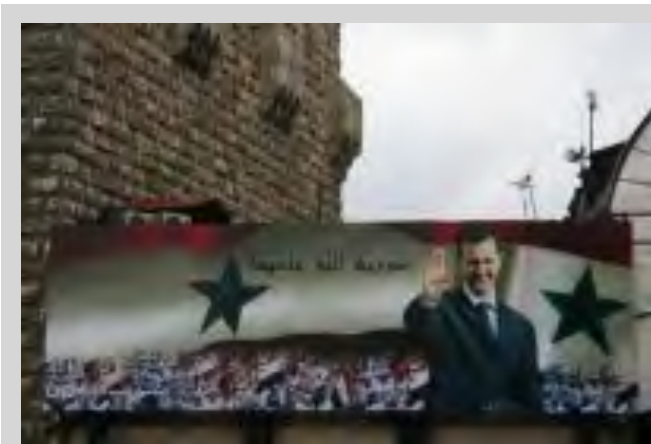
*A protestor marks the 30th anniversary of the Hama massacre in 2012.*

and the Sunni majority, which has been against the Assad regime for decades.

Beginning early in his reign, Bashar al-Assad not only began actively to emphasize his Alawite roots but also manipulated to his benefit an increasing trend among the Alawites of Syria: conversion to mainstream Shi'ite Islam. He followed policies of forging ties both with Alawites and Shi'ites in Syria as a conscious effort to transform the nature of the opposition, from a united front against his anti-democratic rule to [sectarian conflict between the Sunnis and Shi'ites](#).

## From Arab Spring to Civil War

The events of the Arab Spring destabilized Bashar al-Assad's complicated efforts to balance and contain the forces opposed to



*Billboard with portrait of Bashar al-Assad and the text "Allah protects Syria" on the old city wall of Damascus in 2006. Photo by Bertil Videt.*

his regime and emboldened these diverse challengers to stand together against him.

After protests began in Syria in January 2011, he quickly came to realize that the opposition movement was too powerful to control by turning yet again to the entrenched dependency between the Assad family and the Alawite minority.

As the regime used ever-increasing violence as its only recourse to suppress the opposition, Bashar al-Assad began to develop a new state policy to attract foreign support (especially from [Iran](#) and Hezbollah in Lebanon) to secure his regime not just as another authoritarian government whose popularity was in decline, but rather as a Shi'ite state entrenched in the region against neighboring Sunni states, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey.

Al-Assad began to position himself as a pious Shi'ite through public events, appearances, and organizations. And the main Shi'ite political and military organizations in the region, Hezbollah and Iran, decided to back up the Assad regime in very concrete ways. They sent much needed financial and military support and ideologically bolstered Bashar al-Assad's fight against the Sunni "terrorists."



*Bashar al-Assad in prayer. He cultivated ties to Shi'ite Islam to take advantage of a trend among Alawites converting to the mainstream religion. (Source: public domain)*

The past eighteen months have proved that Bashar al-Assad's strategy is serving its purpose as the nature of the conflict has transitioned into sectarian violence between Iran- and Hezbollah-backed Shi'ites and [Sunnis](#), some of whom are backed by al-Qaida.

As has occurred repeatedly in its history, religious affiliations matter more than any other allegiance in the Syrian political arena and, after an initial burst of opposition to the Assad government, Syria's Alawites have remained generally supportive (if wary) of his regime.

Despite a general feeling emerging in many Alawite villages that the Assad regime no longer represents them—particularly after affiliating itself with orthodox Shi'ite actors of the region, who have been known for their hostility against heterodox branches of Shi'ite Islam, including the Alawites—there is still a great deal of political power to gain for Bashar al-Assad from exploiting the deep-seated Alawite insecurity against the Sunni majority.

The Assad regime has already proved its willingness to drag Alawites, the Syrian state, and even the region, down with it into a violent sectarian chaos if it continues to be challenged.

Nevertheless, there remains an opportunity—perhaps now only a hope—for Alawites and Sunnis to break free from this political deadlock and form a supra-sectarian opposition that triggered the movement two years ago. ♦

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## Syria's Islamic Movement and the 2011-12 Uprising

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*The events of the "Arab Spring" took the world by surprise. Yet, the roots of those rebellions run deep and nowhere more so than in Syria, where the fighting continues to be fierce and deadly. This month, Fred H. Lawson traces the history of one leading force in the ongoing Syrian uprising: the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. The Brothers led a violent campaign to overthrow the Syrian regime in the 1970s, but more recently have advanced a platform that calls for liberal reform and constitutional government. Whatever the outcome of the current struggle, the Muslim Brotherhood is certain to play a central role in Syria's future.*

*(Published July 2012)*

### By **FRED LAWSON**

At the end of March 2012, Syria's major opposition groups gathered in Istanbul to work out a coordinated strategy to overthrow the Ba'th Party-led regime of President Bashar al-Asad.

Despite the obvious importance of the meeting—Russian President Dmitry Medvedev presciently called it the last chance to avert a prolonged and bloody civil war—opponents of the Ba'thi order

remained deeply divided. Much of the internal friction grew out of deep-seated mistrust and animosity between Islamists (groups whose political platform calls for government policy to rest on the tenets of Islam) and non-Islamists (ones whose political ideology is not built on overtly religious principles).

Important constituencies of the umbrella opposition group, the Syrian National Council (SNC), are staunch non-Islamists. Two weeks before the March conference, prominent civil rights activists resigned from the SNC, charging that it

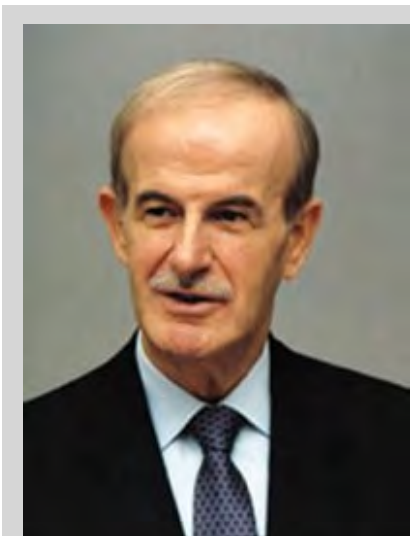


*The father of a Syrian general killed in the civil war attends his son's funeral in Damascus in January 2012. Photo by Elizabeth Arrott.*

had fallen under the control of Syria's primary Islamist organization, the Muslim Brothers (also known as the Muslim Brotherhood).

Representatives of the country's Kurdish population walked out of the Istanbul meeting as well, complaining that the SNC had no intention of setting up a secular state that would give Kurds adequate political and cultural autonomy.

In the days leading up to the Istanbul congress, the Muslim Brothers released a revised Covenant of National Honor, which laid out a "new social contract" that promised to "protect the fundamental rights of individuals and groups from any abuse or excesses, and ensure equitable representation of all components of society."



Former Syrian President Hafiz al-Assad. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)

The Covenant envisaged the establishment of a republican parliamentary system of government, in which members of parliament would be selected through popular elections. It advocated a separation of powers among the executive, legislature and judiciary, and stipulated that the rights of citizens would be "endorsed by heavenly religions and international conventions."

Some of these democratic elements were discernible in the platform that the SNC drew up during the March meeting. But the rhetoric of SNC Chairman Burhan Ghalioun's closing address, which called on delegates to take a formal oath in support of the proposed Transitional Authority in Syria, evoked the medieval Islamic ceremony of swearing public allegiance to the ruler (bay'ah).

Liberal activists associated with a rival opposition camp, the National Coordinating Committee, protested that the SNC had pandered to the United States and Europe while abandoning the fighters on the ground. At the same time, dissident members of the Free Officers Movement pulled away from the SNC-affiliated Free Syrian Army (FSA), pointing to the inordinate influence that the Muslim Brotherhood exerts over SNC policy.

Nevertheless, the Turkish government welcomed the SNC's platform and pushed for the SNC to be recognized by the international community as the only legitimate representative of the Syrian people.



A French drawing depicting Damascus in 1920. (Source: Chevalier Henri Goybet, CC BY-SA 3.0, wikipedia.org)

When the collection of Western and Arab Gulf states known as the Friends of Syria convened in Istanbul on April 1, it endorsed Turkey's position and pledged to step up material and moral support for the SNC and FSA alike. Gulf foreign ministers set up a sizable fund to enable the SNC to distribute regular salaries to FSA troops and construct a tighter command structure.

These foreign measures to fund and support the SNC—and the tactical setbacks suffered later in April by the Syria-based leadership of the uprising, the Local Coordinating Committees—helped strengthen Syria's Islamist organizations in the midst of the current violence and unrest.



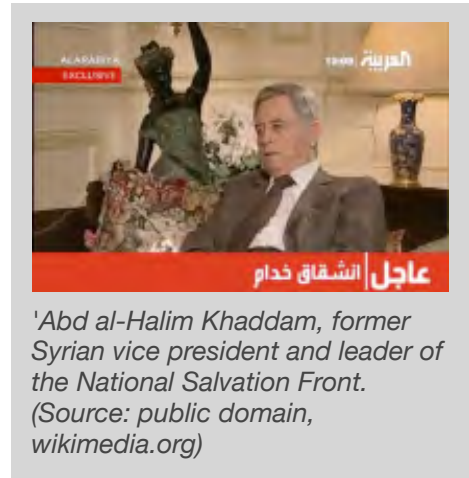
*A Free Syrian Army fighter prepares to shot an RPG on the Syrian Army in Homs. (Source: public domain)*

Since early in the last century, a variegated Islamist movement—most notably the Muslim Brothers—has played a central role in Syria's politics and society. Today, Islamist political groups remain perhaps the most influential, powerful,

and well organized force in Syria's opposition to Bashshar al-Asad. However, the political agenda of the Muslim Brotherhood has changed substantially over the decades, as have relations between the ruling regime and the Brotherhood.

## The End of Colonial Rule in Syria and the Beginnings of the Islamist Movement

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, a variety of nationalist movements struggled against the French-dominated imperial order that was imposed on Syria at the end of World War I.



*'Abd al-Halim Khaddam, former Syrian vice president and leader of the National Salvation Front. (Source: public domain, wikimedia.org)*

The leading nationalist party, the National Bloc, consisted of liberal constitutionalists, but during the late 1930s an Islamist current started to gain momentum.

Islamist organizations responded to the severe economic problems facing the country by offering financial assistance and social programs to the general public, filling a vacuum left by the national government.

Well-to-do urban merchants and tradespeople, almost all of whom adhered to the orthodox Sunni interpretation of Islam, set up a variety of civic and benevolent societies. Some of these associations—such as the House of the Elect in Aleppo, the Society of the Bond in Homs and the Young Men's Muslim Association in Damascus—were headed by religious scholars with formal training in Islamic law. Their charity and activism earned the loyalty of many Syrian Muslims.

During World War II, the House of the Elect relocated to Damascus. There it forged links to other Islamist societies and in 1944 rechristened itself the Syrian incarnation of the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement that had originated in Egypt sixteen years earlier.

In 1946, shortly after French imperial authorities pulled out of the country, the Brothers elected prominent religious scholar and activist Mustafa al-Siba'i to be its first General Supervisor.

In its early months, the Muslim Brotherhood called on the National Bloc-led government of newly independent Syria to nurture Islamic morals and ethics, and to refrain from practicing political and economic discrimination—as the French had done—along religious lines.

The organization's early manifestos underscored broad goals of combating popular ignorance, immorality and economic deprivation. The Brothers also pushed for the consolidation of a fully independent and self-sufficient Syria.

These objectives were disseminated through neighborhood schools and periodicals sponsored by the organization, most notably "The Lighthouse," a newspaper published in Aleppo.

After Syria's defeat in the [1948 Palestine war](#), the Muslim Brotherhood expanded its membership in urban areas, especially Damascus, where members consistently won a fifth of the parliamentary seats allotted to the capital area.

Throughout the democratic era of the 1950s, the Brothers competed not only against the veteran liberals of the National Bloc, but also against a range of newer, more radical parties. These included the Syrian Communist Party, supporters of Egypt's President Gamal 'Abd al-Nasir, and the Arab Socialist Resurrection (Ba'th) Party, which called for regional unity and wholesale redistribution of wealth.

Rivalry between the Muslim Brothers and Nasirists proved particularly intense, since both appealed to the same constituency, the Sunni petite bourgeoisie of the larger cities and towns.

Growing competition from Communists and Ba'this during the mid-1950s led the Brothers to formulate a mixed bag of economic and social reforms that pointed in the direction of "Islamic socialism." Not surprisingly, the organization's members welcomed Syria's 1961 secession from the Egypt-dominated [United Arab Republic](#), which had been set up in 1958 by military commanders affiliated with the Ba'th Party.

## **Islamists and the Ba'th Regime**

The rise to power of the [Ba'th Party](#) in Syria led to a redefinition of the political platform of the Muslim Brothers.

In March 1963, officers with ties to the Ba'th Party and other radical movements engineered a coup d'état that pushed out the liberal constitutionalist elite. In response, the Muslim Brothers mobilized popular opposition to the redistributive economic and



social policies that the avowedly socialist, secularist regime introduced.

The Brothers further criticized the Ba'th Party for inserting significant numbers of cadres into key positions in the state apparatus, particularly individuals who hailed from the disadvantaged and heterodox 'Alawi and Isma'ili communities of the western and southern provinces.



Policies adopted by the Ba'thi leadership in 1964-65 not only damaged the interests of large landowners, rich merchants and private industrialists, all of whom were predominantly Sunni, but also jeopardized the livelihoods of the small-scale manufacturers and shopkeepers who had long backed the Muslim Brotherhood. Religious notables sympathetic to the

Brothers orchestrated a succession of public demonstrations and protests against the regime, particularly in the north-central cities of Aleppo, Hama and Homs.

Faced with widespread popular disaffection, the authorities turned for help to radical activists in the labor movement and the Syrian Communist Party. The regime also cultivated closer relations with the Soviet Union, the German Democratic Republic and the other countries of the Communist bloc. East Germany, in

particular, provided the government with substantial economic and technical assistance, which came heavily imbued with notions of secularist modernism.

The political-economic program espoused by the Ba'th Party-Communist alliance in the mid-1960s led the Muslim Brothers to jettison the remains of its earlier platform of Islamic socialism. The organization instead became a champion of private property and limited state authority, principles congruent with the interests of Syria's beleaguered urban petite bourgeoisie.

In the wake of Syria's defeat in the [1967 war against Israel](#), and with the rise of a more pragmatic wing of the Ba'th Party led by [Hafiz al-Asad](#) in 1969-70, a schism developed inside the Muslim Brotherhood. Militants in Aleppo and Hama pressed for armed struggle (jihad) against the Ba'thi regime, but were countered by the Damascus-based followers of 'Isam al-'Attar, who had replaced Mustafa al-Siba'i as General Supervisor in 1957.

The Damascus moderates discerned a convergence of interest between small-scale manufacturers and tradespeople and the pragmatic wing of the Ba'th, which expressed a willingness to



A pro-Asad student rally at Tishreen University in Latakia. (Source: Sammy.aw, CC BY-SA 2.5, wikipedia.org)

deregulate the economy and solicit investments from the Arab oil-producing countries of the Gulf.

## Parting of Ways: President Hafiz al-Asad and Muslim Opposition

During the 1970s, Islamist tensions with Ba'th Party escalated and increasingly turned to violence.

The moderate wing of the Muslim Brotherhood led by al-'Attar initially welcomed the November 1970 coup that brought Hafiz al-Asad to the presidency, and took provisional steps to reconcile with the Ba'thi pragmatists.

Militants in the northern cities, by contrast, rejected any sort of rapprochement with the Ba'th Party, and the honeymoon between the al-Asad leadership and the Damascus wing of the Muslim Brothers soon collapsed.

When the government issued a revised, overtly secularist constitution in 1973, the Brothers launched a series of mass protests, forcing the government to back down and stipulate that Syria's head of state must be a Muslim.

This phase of the Islamist movement's campaign against the Ba'th Party-dominated order is closely identified with the leadership of 'Adnan Sa'd al-Din, a schoolteacher and writer from Hama, who became General Supervisor of the Muslim Brothers in a disputed election in 1971.

Several factors laid the groundwork for the turn to armed struggle during Sa'd al-Din's term in office: the flagrant corruption that accompanied the implementation of the government's economic liberalization program; Syria's military intervention in the civil war that broke out in Lebanon in 1975 and above all, the rising political and economic influence of the 'Alawi minority, whose gains came largely at the expense of urban and rural Sunnis.

At first, Islamist militants targeted prominent figures in the Ba'th Party and armed forces, particularly high-ranking 'Alawis. But through the 1970s, violence broadened to include assaults on government facilities and public symbols of Ba'thi rule, including district party offices, police stations and military encampments.

Militants drew encouragement from the [1978-79 revolution in Iran](#), in which a network of Islamist guerrilla forces fought alongside religious scholars and tradespeople (so-called bazaaris) in the cities to overthrow a well-entrenched authoritarian regime.



Armed struggle against the Ba'thi leadership in Syria peaked at the close of the decade, with the execution of eighty-three 'Alawi cadets at the military academy in Aleppo in June 1979, a cluster of mass demonstrations and boycotts in Aleppo, Hama and Homs in March 1980, and a failed attempt to assassinate President Hafiz al-Asad later that year.

In the face of escalating violence, the authorities decreed in July 1980 that membership in the Muslim Brotherhood would incur the death penalty. The government then cracked down on the organization using its formidable elite military and security units, whose ranks consisted almost exclusively of 'Alawi personnel.

## **Violent Suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s**

The Brothers regrouped under the banner of the Islamic Front in Syria, a broad alliance of Islamist organizations that came together in October 1980.

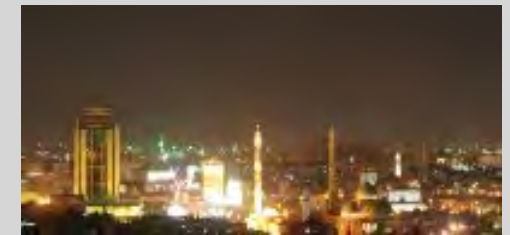
Muhammad al-Bayanuni, a respected member of the religious hierarchy of Aleppo, became the Islamic Front's Secretary General, but its leading light remained 'Adnan Sa'd al-Din, the General Supervisor of the Muslim Brothers. The chief ideologue of the Islamic Front was a prominent religious scholar from Hama, Sa'id Hawwa, who along with Sa'd al-Din had been a leader of the northern militants during the mid-1970s.

Six years of armed struggle culminated in the February 1982 confrontation between the Muslim Brothers and the Ba'thi regime in the long-time Islamist stronghold of Hama. Militants proclaimed

a popular uprising and seized control of several neighborhoods in the heart of the city. It took elite military and security forces two weeks to crush the revolt, during which time between 5,000 and 20,000 civilians were killed and the central business district and historic grand mosque were razed to the ground.

The showdown dealt a devastating blow to the Muslim Brothers, and put Islamist activists on notice that the authorities would no longer tolerate violent challenges to Ba'th Party rule.

After the crushing defeat at Hama, prospects for Syria's Muslim Brotherhood dimmed dramatically. Armed struggle proved an utter failure, and severely damaged the organization's reputation among the general public.



*Aleppo, the largest city in Syria.  
(Source: Richard Renwick, CC BY 2.0,  
wikipedia.org)*

Divisions inside the leadership over whether or not to maintain a belligerent posture toward the regime, as well as over relations with Islamist movements based in neighboring countries, contributed to the weakness of the Brothers throughout the 1980s. Desperate for allies, the organization forged a coalition with an assortment of parties and movements opposed to the Ba'th Party, which emerged in mid-1982 as the National Alliance for the Liberation of Syria.

## Rapprochement at the End of the 20th Century?

By the early 1990s, contacts between the leadership of the Muslim Brothers and the authorities became more frequent, and in December 1995 General Supervisor 'Abd al-Fattah Abu Ghuddah returned to Syria from exile in Saudi Arabia.

Abu Ghuddah pledged to refrain from any kind of political activity, and settled down to teach theology and Islamic law in Aleppo. The organization's leadership in London then elected 'Ali Sadr al-Din al-Bayanuni to the post of General Supervisor.

As the decade went by, prominent Islamists expressed increasingly moderate, liberal sentiments. In August 1999, Brothers associated with Abu Ghuddah issued a proclamation that called on the regime to abandon autocratic rule and establish a political system based on "democracy, freedom and political pluralism."



*An opposition demonstration in Homs in February 2012. (Source: Bo Yaser, wikimedia.org)*

Such demands were reiterated after the death of Hafiz al-Asad in June 2000.

When Bashshar al-Asad was elected to the presidency a month later, General Supervisor al-Bayanuni told reporters that the Muslim Brothers did not even have to be

permitted to operate legally inside Syria. It would be enough to come up with some kind of "formula" that would allow the organization to "express its views" concerning important public issues.

In May 2001, the Brothers published a Covenant of National Honor, which called for the creation of a "modern state," that is, "a state of rotation" in which "free and honest ballot boxes are the basis for the rotation of power between all the sons of the homeland." The document made no mention of the traditional Islamic concept of consultation between rulers and ruled (shura), nor of the implementation of state laws that encourage public adherence to the Islamic way of life (shari'ah).

An April 2005 statement once again demanded "free and fair elections" and immediate termination of the state of emergency imposed in 1963.

General Supervisor al-Bayanuni announced in January 2006 that the organization had decided to join the National Salvation Front, headed by Syria's former vice president 'Abd al-Halim Khaddam, in a campaign to replace the Ba'thi order with a liberal democratic system. In taking this step, the Brotherhood openly allied itself with the civil rights activists who had issued the [Damascus](#)



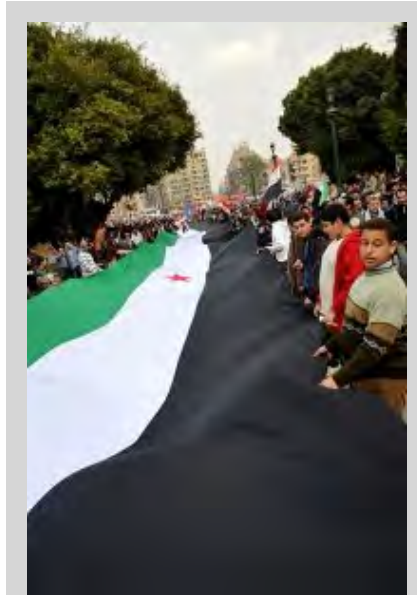
*A Syrian spray-paints "Down with Bashshar" on a city wall during the 2011 uprising. (Source: jan Sefti, wikimedia.org)*

**Declaration** in October 2005, as well as with dissident Ba'this allied to Khaddam.

Not all Islamist militants agreed with these political moves. Cadres opposed to negotiating with the regime and working with Khaddam resorted to armed struggle in an attempt to discredit al-Bayanuni's leadership. Gunmen attacked a United Nations office in Damascus in April 2004, and clashes with the security forces erupted in villages around Hama during the summer of 2005.

A more intense firefight occurred in the suburbs of Aleppo that December, and security forces carried out a large-scale raid on a militant hideout in the coastal mountains in March 2006. Under pressure from the militants, and unable to exert any real influence inside the National Salvation Front, General Supervisor al-Bayanuni announced in April 2009 that the Muslim Brothers had pulled out of the Front.

A year later, an influential radical Islamist castigated the Brothers for negotiating with the authorities and asserted that a resumption of armed struggle was the only way "to force the Ba'thist regime into introducing serious political reforms."



*Demonstrators in Cairo support the Syrians against al-Asad's government in February 2012. (Source: Aljazeera English, CC BY-SA 2.0, wikipedia.org)*

The organization's leadership council in July 2010 replaced al-Bayanuni with Muhammad Riyad al-Shaqfah, a 66-year-old engineer from Hama. The new General Supervisor appointed Muhammad Faruq Taifur, also from Hama, to be his deputy. Both men had engaged in armed struggle against the Ba'th Party during the early 1980s, and Taifur had been a particularly outspoken critic of al-Bayanuni's dealings with the government.

### **Islamist Activism and the 2011-12 Uprising**

Sporadic manifestations of popular discontent in Aleppo and Damascus in February and March 2011 elicited no immediate response from the Muslim Brothers.

In fact, when widespread unrest flared around Dir'a in mid-March, state officials alleged that General Supervisor al-Shaqfah had helped to instigate the violence. Al-Shaqfah responded by issuing a carefully worded statement that expressed sympathy for the objectives of the protesters but kept the Brotherhood at arm's length from the disorders.

Representatives of the Brothers traveled to the Turkish city of Antalya in September to join other opposition groups based outside the country in setting up the Syrian National Council. Of the 29 members of the original SNC secretariat, four were Muslim Brothers, a number matched only by the civil rights activists associated with the 2005 Damascus Declaration.

Meanwhile, inside Syria local militias composed largely of former soldiers launched attacks against Ba'th Party offices, military installations and other targets associated with the regime

beginning in June 2011. Virtually all of these guerrilla formations took names drawn from the early days of Islam: examples included the 'Ali bin Abi Talib and Abu Bakr al-Sadiq Brigades in Jabal al-Zawiyyah and the God is Greatest (Allahu Akbar) Brigade of Al Bu Kamal.

Some of the militias built ties to the Free Syrian Army, and therefore indirectly to the Muslim Brotherhood, but others received inspiration from independent preachers of a more radical, populist disposition.

One such figure, 'Adnan al-'Ar'ur, galvanized the crowd at a public rally in Idlib in early November, prompting General Supervisor al-Shaqfah to invite the Turkish army to cross the border into northern Syria to protect the civilian population.

Religious notables who might have played a role in mobilizing popular opposition to the Ba'thi regime largely refrained from doing so.

[Thomas Pierret](#) reports that the al-Hasan mosque in the Midan district of Damascus served as the staging point for a series of protests in July 2011, but that preachers who spoke out in support of the demonstrators found themselves forced out of their official posts and physically attacked.

"After August 2011," Pierret observes, "mosques gradually lost their importance in the uprising for at least two reasons: first, in Damascus and Aleppo, repression succeeded in making demonstrations increasingly rare in rebellious places of worship; second, in the regions where the opposition was most powerful

(the governorates of Homs, Hama, Idlib, and [the countryside around] Damascus), it became increasingly militarized and took control of several towns and neighborhoods, thus reducing the importance of mosques as 'safe' zones for demonstrations."

By May 2012, the frequency and destructiveness of car and suicide bombings in Aleppo and Damascus had risen sharply. No demands or claims of responsibility accompanied the attacks, and opposition spokespeople tended to charge that they had been carried out by the security forces in an effort to discredit the regime's adversaries.

Such bombings were more likely the work of the Assistance Front for the People of Syria, whose public pronouncements echoed the rhetoric of al-Qa'idah. The Front's adoption of indiscriminate violence posed a fundamental dilemma for the Muslim Brothers.

On one hand, such attacks underscored the deteriorating position of the mainstream Islamist movement, and of the SNC as a whole, in the face of unrelenting, brutal repression on the part of the regime.

General Supervisor al-Shaqfah, in a rare display of desperation, gravitated toward the militants in mid-May when he told a Saudi newspaper that the only way forward for the opposition was "through the use of weapons."

On the other hand, any shift in a more militant direction contradicted the liberal democratic principles enshrined in the Covenant of National Honor. More importantly, signs of a change from liberal reform to armed struggle played directly into the

hands of the regime, which consistently warned that the moderate platform advanced by the Brotherhood was little more than a façade.

Aware of the dilemma, the organization's representatives stood aside as civil rights activists tried to replace Ghalioun with a more overtly secularist figure at a May 2012 SNC congress in Rome. Ghalioun won re-election, and immediately announced that he would use funds from Saudi Arabia and Qatar to strengthen the weaponry of the Free Syrian Army.

Activists inside Syria nevertheless complained that Ghalioun's re-election smacked of personalized leadership, a charge that persuaded Ghalioun to resign his post.

He was replaced as head of the SNC by a Sweden-based Kurdish academic, 'Abd al-Basit Saida, in a bid by the Muslim Brothers to reassure Syria's restive Kurds that their interests would be accorded greater attention in future.

## **Syria in the Context of the Arab Spring**

Islamist political movements have played a crucial role in many countries during and in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, and Syria is no exception.

Syria's Muslim Brothers closely resemble the primary component of the Islamist movement in contemporary Tunisia, the Awakening Party.

Both organizations were ruthlessly suppressed under the old regime; the leaderships of both built up an extensive infrastructure outside their respective countries, and maintained little if any contact with grassroots activists at home. Both gradually shifted their platforms away from violent confrontation and in the direction of liberal democratic principles and practices; and both forged tactical alliances with proponents of western-style civil rights as conflict against the regime escalated.

As a result, the Awakening Party in Tunisia can credibly claim that it refused to compromise with the corrupt and dictatorial regime of President Zain al-'Abidin Bin 'Ali. Islamist critics of the party can find no grounds for mobilizing challenges from the extreme end of the political spectrum, although there is smoldering resentment among younger activists against the aged leaders who spent the last two decades residing in Europe and Saudi Arabia.

The Awakening Party consequently faces little competition from radical offshoots, and enjoys a high degree of internal unity. There is every reason to expect that given the chance, it will make good on its liberal democratic platform.



*Current Syrian President  
Bashshar al-Asad. (Source:  
Fobio Rodrigues,  
wikimedia.org)*

[Egypt's Muslim Brothers](#) have taken a much different path from Syria and Tunisia, so we can expect Islamist movements to play a different role in the Egyptian case. Despite being formally outlawed during the era of President Husni Mubarak, the organization sponsored candidates in parliamentary elections, ran an influential newspaper and played an active part in the life of civic associations.

Islamist critics can find compelling grounds for charging that the Egyptian Brotherhood was not tough enough in resisting the old regime, and a variety of radical Islamist parties have in fact sprouted up to challenge it in the post-Mubarak era.

More importantly, younger Muslim Brothers joined the protesters in Liberation (Tahrir) Square, against the explicit orders of senior leaders. Lingering tensions between youthful activists and an elderly, largely out-of-touch leadership give the Brothers a strong incentive to act in an assertive and inflexible way in the ongoing negotiations over the constitution and the presidency. There is thus good reason to doubt that the Egyptian Muslim Brothers will remain firm proponents of liberal democracy.

Syria's Muslim Brothers have more in common with Tunisia's Awakening Party than it does with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. Dealings with the authorities in the late 1990s were kept tightly under wraps and have been largely forgotten, so the present leadership can claim that it consistently resisted the Ba'th Party.

The reformist program advanced by the organization during the 1950s and 1960s laid the foundation for its current liberal democratic platform. Moreover, the indigenous militant wing of

the Syrian Islamist movement remains virtually non-existent, while the Assistance Front seems to be connected to The Islamic State in the Land between the Two Rivers, an affiliate of al-Qa'idah based across the border in [Iraq](#).

Islamist critics of Syria's Muslim Brotherhood have therefore been unable to generate much traction, so the organization exhibits a remarkable degree of solidarity in its campaign against the al-Asad regime.

As the Syrian uprising continues, and the numbers of human casualties rise with horrifying rapidity, the Islamist movement in general, and the Muslim Brothers in particular, can be expected to dominate the Syrian opposition for the foreseeable future. ♦

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## From Gaza to Jerusalem: Is the Two State Solution under Siege?

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*In May, when an Israeli naval raid left nine self-described peace activists dead, commentators around the globe could scarcely stop themselves from saying "here we go again." Reports of violence and conflict between Israel and its neighbors are such regular occurrences in the news that they can have a numbing effect: the situation seems rooted in a tortured past and destined for a hopeless future. Leaders come and go, international mediation waxes and wanes and the disputes seem no closer to resolution. This month, as the Obama Administration attempts to restart the Israeli-Palestinian talks, historian M. M. Silver outlines the contours of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict across the last one hundred years. He reminds us that if the conflicts are of long-standing, the solutions have also been discussed for decades as well.*

*(Published October 2010)*

### By **M. M. SILVER**

In May, a six-ship flotilla originating in Turkey headed toward the Gaza Strip in an attempt to break the Israeli blockade of the area. The ships ignored Israel's demands to inspect the cargo they carried, and Israeli navy commandos boarded the vessels before the boats pulled into Gaza waters. Nine passengers affiliated with the Turkish Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief were killed in an altercation that again brought the world's attention to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and heightened international tensions.

The Gaza imbroglio has been the latest flashpoint in what seems an ongoing and never ending set of disputes, conflicts, aggressive actions, and violent clashes. It is also the most recent backdrop to current attempts to breathe new life into the Middle East peace process.



*An Israeli soldier stands guard on the road to Ismailia during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War. As a new round of peace talks begin this month between Palestinians and Israelis, will this Washington-sponsored effort finally bring some measure of closure to the long struggle or will the attempt to find a two-state solution erupt again into open conflict, as it has so often throughout the 20th century? (Source: Noar Amar, CC-BY-2.5, wikipedia.org)*

This month, the Obama Administration has restarted its efforts to broker a lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians through a series of regular meetings, scheduled to begin September 14-15 in Egypt. As in previous efforts at peace, arriving at a peaceful solution will not be an easy task.

The conflict's causes are (it almost goes without saying) complex, combining conflicting land claims of rival nationalist movements, religious emotion, international strategic factors, and basic disagreements over the narrative of history.



*U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace George Mitchell meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas during U.S.-sponsored talks in Washington on September 2, 2010. (Source: U.S. Department of State)*

Over the years, the geography of the conflict has shifted, never staying in one place for too long, and involving ever-shifting antagonists.

After Israel's establishment, as a result of a war in 1948, the country's dispute for the next quarter century was regional in character, and is best described simply as the "Israeli-Arab" conflict. The bewildering and embittering character of the dispute is reflected in the fact that from 1948 to 1973 Israel and Egypt fought four wars, and the Israel-Egypt fighting was just one of several theaters of the conflict.

Since 1973, it is most accurate to refer to the topic as the "Israeli-Palestinian" dispute, since all-out warfare between Israel and other Arab states abated, but violence between Israelis and Palestinians has at times reached agonizing levels. This was particularly true during the two Palestinian uprisings (Intifadas, 1987-1993 and 2000-2005) in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (territories conquered by Israel during the 1967 Six Day War).

Ostensibly a conflict between two nations, Jewish Israelis and Christian and Muslim Palestinians, for control of one land, the 1973-2010 phase of the conflict has sprawled north and south, from Lebanon to the Gaza Strip, and involved an array of secular and religious groups on the Arab side, such as the [Palestine Liberation Organization](#), [Hezbollah](#), and  [Hamas](#).

Although the causes and character of the recent, tragic clash involving the Gaza-bound flotilla remain in dispute, this much seems agreed upon:

In late summer 2005, Israel dismantled its settlements and withdrew from the Gaza Strip. Political control in this densely populated Palestinian area was subsequently won by Hamas, an Islamic movement beholden to a declared policy of opposing the existence of a Jewish state.

After Israel's withdrawal, militant groups used the Gaza Strip as a base to launch dozens of missile attacks against towns in Israel's southern Negev region. In retaliation, Israel launched its anti-terror "Cast Lead" military operation in winter 2008-09.

Its security concerns far from being allayed, Israel has enforced a blockade on the Gaza Strip for months. Middle East and European groups contend that this siege has precipitated a humanitarian crisis. And some activists, banded together in a "Free Gaza" movement, have organized ships in an effort to run Israel's blockade and bring supplies into the Gaza Strip. And then came the fatal shipboard altercation.

As Washington tries to bring the current antagonists together, they will face many obstacles to their efforts to hammer out to some sort of peace agreement: Israeli border security, the right of Palestinian return, the fate of Jerusalem, Israeli settlement in the Occupied Territories, the role of Hamas, and international pressures, among many others.

Yet, a central question facing the world as the Obama administration's talks begin is whether the "two-state" and "land-for-peace" solutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which have been at the heart of so many previous efforts at peace, remain viable approaches.



*A rocket fired from Gaza towards Israel. (Source: paffairs sanfrancisco, CC BY-SA 2.0)*

## **A Prehistory of the Current Conflict**

Most historians date the origins of the Israel-Palestine controversy to the era preceding World War I. It was then that a politicized Jewish national movement, [Zionism](#), began to build an infrastructure for a Jewish state in the then Ottoman-controlled Palestinian lands.

What was the Middle East like before Zionism joined the neighborhood? The extent to which Jews and Muslims—and Judaism and Islam—coexisted in conflict or cooperation prior to the rise of Jewish and Arab national consciousness at the end of the 19th century remains an intriguing subject of historical discussion. But, a clear majority of Israeli and Palestinian

historians agree that the fighting in the country for the past century or so is a new sort of historical phenomenon.

After World War I, the British took over the Palestinian lands under the neo-colonial "Mandate" system. And for three decades before 1948, when Israel became an independent state, Zionists had a measure of international support for their pioneering efforts, via the [1917 Balfour Declaration](#) in favor of a Jewish "national home."

Arabs pointed to other promises and assurances given by the British during World War One; and they resisted Zionist state-building efforts in the country, perceiving them as outright colonial intrusion.

Though not uniformly organized, such Arab opposition became increasingly assertive. Uprisings in 1929 and 1936-39 were unmistakable indications of the depth and passion of the crisis in Mandate Palestine.

We will focus here on just one aspect of this fascinating pre-1948 period, due to its pertinence to current discussions of Israel and the Palestinian Authority: the origins of the "two-state" formula.

A two-state proposal was formally submitted by a 1937 British panel, in the "Peel" report. This specific plan for dividing the land among the two peoples was prefaced by a remarkably incisive prefatory analysis of the nationalist, religious, political, and economic causes of the dispute. Thus, the idea of a compromise, splitting Israel/Palestine into two states for two peoples (and three religions) is far from a recent idea. Instead, it has been on the table for 75 years.

And, quite significantly, the Zionists agreed to the idea in principle both in 1937, and again a decade later when the United Nations endorsed a two-state partition plan (in both these instances, the Arab side flatly rejected the two-state formula).

Today, most Israelis would say that these past two-state proposals failed because of Arab intransigence, and this interpretation finds support in close studies of the diplomacy of the late British Mandate period. To this, Palestinians reply indignantly, "why is it 'intransigent' to oppose the partition of something that is already yours?" Equally true.



A Palestinian Pound, the unit of currency during the Palestinian Mandate, 1939. ( Source: Chesdovi, public domain, wikipedia.org)

And here we come to the main point of comparison between the pre-1948 period and contemporary dilemmas—neither side, neither the Zionists nor the Palestinians, were happy with the specific details of the 1937 or 1947 proposal.

The 1937 Peel two-state plan, for instance, endorsed removing a quarter of a million Arabs from areas designated for an extremely small Jewish state. The fact that this would not have been the largest population transfer enacted on the globe during the interwar period hardly mitigates the humanitarian dilemmas posed by the specific contents of this serious peace plan.

Three quarters of a century ago the devil was in the details of a two-state solution. That adage holds true today.

## 1948 and the Stories People Tell

Then came the war of 1948.

How the different sides refer to the war is tremendously revealing. Israelis speak of the 1948 fighting as the War of Independence. They celebrate the victory as a miraculous underdog triumph of an embattled, small community warding off invading Arab armies, and ending 2000 years of Jewish powerlessness, the most gruesome manifestation of which was the Holocaust.

Indeed, for Israelis, the "War of Independence" conceptualization serves as moral and historical redress for the Holocaust. This basic perception of 1948 as near-miraculous redemption from the ruins of the Holocaust remains the way almost all Israelis see the war today.

For Palestinians, on the other hand, 1948 is referred to as "Naqba," meaning outright catastrophe, the dispossession of some 700,000 persons from their homes, and exile to refugee camps in Jordan, the Gaza Strip and elsewhere.

For decades, mainstream Israeli historiography interpreted this exodus of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees primarily in terms of internal Arab politics, Arab leadership, and Arab communal structure. Israeli histories either implicitly or explicitly denied that the new Jewish state bore any substantive culpability for the refugee issue.



*David Ben-Gurion (First Prime Minister of Israel) announcing the Declaration of the State of Israel, May 14 1948, Tel Aviv, Israel, beneath a portrait of Theodor Herzl, founder of modern Zionism: (Source: Rudi Weissenstein, wikimedia.org)*

## The "Land for Peace" Formula: 1967 to the Oslo Accords



*Nakba, a Palestinian Refugee Camp, 1948. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*

Together with the British Mandate pre-history and the 1948 war, the 1967 Six Day War is considered the third historical occurrence which "changed everything" in the Israeli-Arab dispute.

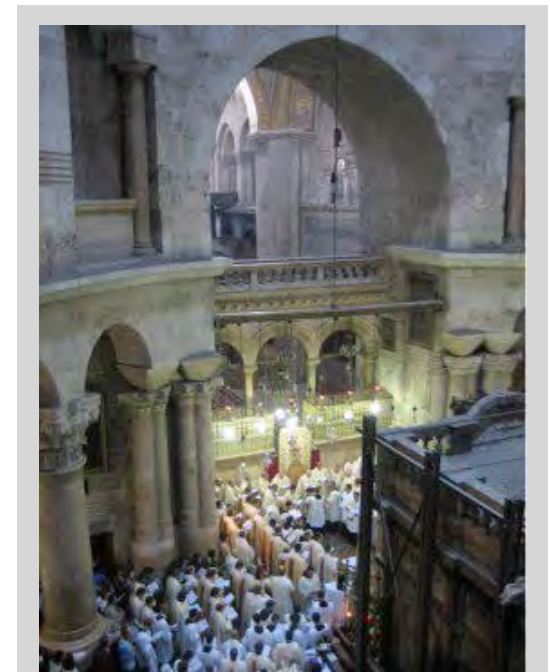
Perhaps the most important result of the 1967 war was the bringing of all of Jerusalem under Israeli control. After Israel's establishment as a result of the 1948 war, no event galvanized national feeling in Israel more than the unification of Jerusalem. It is an event that remains celebrated in songs, stories, and visual images known to any Israeli from the time he or she is first conscious of public events.

In the aftermath of its sweeping 1967 victory, Israel continues to be challenged by the question of how to deal with lands it conquered (including the Gaza Strip, West Bank, and Golan Heights).

Some lands won in the 1967 war have been returned to Arab sides. Most significantly, the Sinai Peninsula was given back to Egypt, under the late 1970s [Camp David accords](#). The logic of these concessions came to be known as the "land for peace" formula.

For three decades, from the early 1970s to the first years of the 21st century, a significant portion of Israel's electorate (though not necessarily a majority) upheld this formula. They argued, often passionately, that the dispute with the Arabs would end when territories won in the 1967 war were conceded to the Palestinians to become the geographic basis of their state.

This viewpoint—the staple of the center-left in



*Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem (Source: Darko Tepert Donatos, wikipedia.org)*

Israeli politics—gained the upper hand in the early 1990s, resulting from a confluence of local and global geopolitical factors, including the end of the Cold War, the first Palestinian intifada uprising, and the first Persian Gulf War.

From Israel's viewpoint, the ascendance of the left is the background to the dramatic 1990s Oslo peace process.

As a result of the Oslo initiatives (signed 1993), Israel accepted partial territorial concessions—areas on the West Bank are today under joint security and political control, and the Gaza Strip is controlled by the Palestinians, via Hamas. (Although Israel controls and monitors border crossings into Gaza, as does Egypt on the southern end of the Gaza Strip.)

In many parts of the world, this Oslo peace process rendered the two-state formula a familiar and legitimate concept. And—it is crucial to point out—Israel essentially endorsed this legitimization of the two-state formula. It formally acknowledged the PLO as the authentic representative of the Palestinian people, and then established an array of relations with the apparatus of the embryonic Palestinian state, called the Palestinian National Authority.

The problem is that while the Oslo process dramatically altered the political realities—and the map—of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, it did not reinforce faith in the viability of the two-state solution as a remedy to a century of violence in the area.

Israel's political left is today in disarray, and very few people mention the "land for peace" formula without feeling a tinge of

irony. For many, the formula is regarded with outright derision. That is because a series of territorial concessions made by Israel under the Oslo framework since the early 1990s did the opposite of achieving peace.

Horrorific sequences of suicide bombings, and mass Hezbollah katyusha rocket attacks against a million Israeli citizens—Jews and Arabs—in Israel's north are just some of the catastrophes that have ensued since the land for peace formula was validated by the Oslo process.

That returns us to our starting point: the vast majority of Israelis, from the political right, center, and left, were appalled by the images and rhetoric connected to the recent Gaza blockade and



*Smuggling Tunnel in the Gaza Strip to circumvent the Gaza Blockade, 2009. (Source: Marius Arnesen, CC BY-2.0, wikipedia.org)*





*Tower of David, Jerusalem. (Source: Gilbrand, CC BY 2.5, wikipedia.org)*

flotilla controversy because they view the past generation of international diplomacy conducted under the land for peace formula as a betrayal, or even a semi-deliberate trick.

On the Gaza Strip, Israel did, in fact, sanction the "land for peace" policy. It dismantled all Jewish settlements, and withdrew its armed forces. Thereafter, it was bombed systematically by Hamas.

When it belatedly launched the Cast Lead military operation in winter 2008-09 to end Hamas bombardments, Israel was accused of possible war crimes by the United Nations.

Currently, "Free Gaza" peace activists from Turkey and Europe are attempting to cast themselves in the role of pro-Palestinian counterparts to the Holocaust survivors who tried to run the British blockade in 1947, aboard the famous "Exodus" ship and other vessels, and make a home for themselves in the new Jewish state.

Such comparisons are, to Israelis, invidious, and they completely undermine faith in "land-for-peace" diplomacy. As they see it, their country conceded land, and then received not peace, but rather missile attacks, insulting Holocaust analogies, and shrill war crime accusations.

### **Jerusalem: Starting Point or Endgame?**

Where does this leave the present and near future of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute?

The most immediate, and extremely serious, obstacle impeding hopes for any Obama administration initiative on the Israeli-Palestinian issue derives from tactical mistakes made both by American and Israeli leaders in recent months, particularly on the issue of Jerusalem.

Contrary to much rhetoric and breast-beating around the world, the Jerusalem issue is not insoluble (and the Jewish nationalist movement, Zionism, has displayed rather more flexibility on the issue than many groups around the world, including American Jews, seem to believe).

However, the Obama administration badly miscalculated when it focused earlier this year on Jerusalem as a fulcrum to re-start talks between the sides, and pressure Israel.

Similarly, Israel's government under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took a number of missteps in past months, providing ammunition to forces around the world that insist on branding various Jerusalem neighborhoods as Israeli "settlements" (like any other "settlement" in the occupied West Bank), a perception that is not shared by the vast majority of Jews who live in Israel.

Neither the most complicated nor least resolvable issue in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Jerusalem is, without doubt, the topic that ought to be addressed at the end of a viable peace process. Emotions stirred by the holy city are powerful, and clearly complicate relations between the sides when they are aroused, in the absence of shared commitments to peacemaking.

Jews, of course, regard the city as the sole, unique center of their religious-national tradition, and as the capital of Israel. The right to expand and develop Israel's capital is, for virtually every Jew who lives in the country, assumed to be fundamental and inviolable. This being the perception, very few Israelis would regard the building of a Jerusalem neighborhood on the other side of the 1967 lines as "settlement" activity.

More generally, Israel's settlement movement on the West Bank is an outgrowth of one particular branch of the Jewish nationalist movement, religious Zionism. The religious Zionists conceptualize Israel's right to exist, and (more to the point) its right to various

parts of the country, in Biblical terms that are not shared by all Israelis.

In contrast, many Israelis consider themselves heirs to a secular national tradition that conceptualizes the Jewish state in cultural and political terms. These secular Zionist terms do not include a claim of divine right to land. For them, and for many observers both within and outside Israel, the religious Zionist settlement movement remains controversial.

Jerusalem, however, is a consensus issue for all streams of Zionism, whether religious or secular.

Looked at from the Palestinian point of view, Jerusalem is home to hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who see no reason to accept Jewish sensibilities and claims regarding the city. Israelis (and others) sometimes deride Islam's stake in the city, regarding it as "only" the third most important site to Muslims, following Mecca and Medina, but this is hardly a compelling interpretation.

It is unduly dismissive both to the show of devotion which can be seen in Friday prayers on Haram al-Sharif (the Temple Mount), the site of Muhammad's night journey, and also to the enormously powerful role Jerusalem has played as a rallying point of



*Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. (Source: Lawrence Jackson, wikimedia.org)*

Palestinian national emotion in many turning points of the conflict, from the 1929 uprising to the start of the Second Intifada in 2000.

However one wants to sort out religious sensibilities regarding Jerusalem, it is undeniable that in sections popularly known as the "Eastern" part of the city, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians dwell as a religious-national enclave disconnected in obvious ways from the rest of the city, notwithstanding all of Israel's post-1967 discussion about Jerusalem's unification.

For these Palestinian Jerusalemites, new Jewish neighborhood initiatives sponsored by Israel's government have the same character as settlement construction on the West Bank, since they propose erecting small Jewish enclaves in the middle of a populated Arab area.

In objective fact, some Western reporting about Israeli plans to "plant a Jewish neighborhood in a crowded Palestinian neighborhood" can be misleading and over-stated.

Yet, the important parameter in the dispute is the way the antagonists feel, rather than "plain facts." And it is also the case that ultra-nationalist Jewish groups in Israel would, in the absence of government restraints, pursue aggressive construction plans in ways that would furnish empirical justification of this particular Palestinian concern.

## **Going Forward toward Peace?**

So does all of this history mean that the Israeli-Arab dispute is preordained to flounder because of the Jerusalem (or some other) issue, and the mass of monotheistic tension it can arouse?

One does not have to blindly endorse every move Israel has made in its capital since 1967 to realize that there have been restraints and continuing displays of respect to Muslim and Christian sacred sites—beginning with Defense Minister Moshe Dayan's immediate order to remove Israeli flags from the golden Dome of the Rock, in the climactic moment of the 1967 war.

Apart from security dimensions (that become important on Fridays, during periods of violence), access to the holy sites on Haram al-Sharif is controlled by the Waqf Islamic trust.

Much more important than these daily arrangements (which, I admit, many Palestinians might not consider particularly liberal) is the fact that there is ample historical precedent supporting the possibility that Israel, under the right conditions, could accept some sort of negotiated arrangement on the Jerusalem issue in a peace deal.

As we have seen, before Israel's establishment, a two-state solution was twice proffered under organized international circumstances to the two sides. Under each plan, the 1937 partition proposal offered by the British, and the 1947 UN partition proposal, Israel's presence in Jerusalem was extremely limited—and yet the Zionists accepted both plans.



*Israeli soldiers examining a downed Arab Aircraft during the Six Day War. (Source: public domain, CC BY-SA 2.0, wikipedia.org)*

I bring up these historical examples not as a suggestion that Israelis in 2010 would be willing to surrender sovereignty in their capital—and return to the internationalization schemes for Jerusalem broached by the British and the United Nations before 1948—but rather as a hint that Israeli pragmatic realism can extend to Jerusalem, as it can to any other issue, when circumstances are propitious.

The Obama administration's error in winter-spring 2010 was to expect such pragmatism at a time when years of Hamas terror, Iranian nuclear posturing, and a general lack of political cohesion in the Palestinian Authority have left far too many Israelis scratching their heads in doubt about the viability of diplomatic peacemaking.

The Obama administration has acted like an architecture professor who expects students in a first year class to present designs for a complicated city project whose consummation actually would require years of confidence-building and apprenticeship.

Jerusalem is the endgame issue.

Do all of these considerations point to a bleak, or even apocalyptic, future? Certainly not. While we have in this article focused on stumbling blocks to peace, it is also important to realize that realities in the dispute have changed dramatically in the past two decades, not uniformly in one "bad" or "good" direction.



*Israel-West Bank barrier near Ramallah. (Source: W.Hagens, public domain, wikimedia.org)*



*U.S. President Barack Obama meeting with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas at the White House, May 2009. (Source: Pete Souza, public domain, wikipedia.org)*

Less than 20 years ago, Israel viewed the PLO as a terror organization, and punished some of its citizens for initiating talks with PLO members. Today, the most promising discussion route to be pursued by American mediators such as George Mitchell and Hillary Clinton features the Fatah (PLO) regime on the West Bank, controlled by Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen).

In other words, the PLO has transformed from the ultimate enemy of Israel to its most viable possible discussion partner.

Palestinians have experimented with self-rule in the territories for fifteen years, more or less. Those experiments have, admittedly, spawned Hamas militants who are inimically opposed to Israel

and to any possible peace process. But it has also entrenched figures like Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad, who has impressed many Western commentators as a promising player for any future two-state framework.

To my mind, these and many other developments are causes for caution when prognosticating about a dark future for Israeli-Palestinian relations. After all, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is now about as old as the Cold War was when the Berlin Wall came down, and no one predicted that event. ♦

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## Suggested Reading

Benny Morris, *Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1947-1949*

Benny Morris, *A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*

Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*

Leslie Stein, *The Making of Modern Israel, 1948-1967*

Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism*

Yoav Gelber, *Palestine 1948: War, Escape and the Emergence of the Palestinian Refugee Problem*

Baruch Kimmerling, Joel Migdal, *The Palestinian People: A History*

Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*

Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace: The Inside Story of the Fight for Middle East Peace*

Peter Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East: U.S. Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict*

Michael Oren, *Six Days of War*

# The Long, Long Struggle for Women's Rights in Afghanistan

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

*In April of this year, a group of some 300 women protesters demanded that the government in Kabul repeal a repressive new law that went so far as to permit marital rape. They were publicly harassed and labeled "whores". Around the world, many observers were outraged. The law seemed to signal a return to the kinds of policies that the Taliban had instituted when it ruled Afghanistan—when the burqa stood as a haunting symbol of the regime's subjugation of women. While visitors to the country commonly report encountering a land somehow "lost in time" where women are almost completely absent from the public world, this month historian Scott Levi examines the century-long efforts to improve women's lives in Afghanistan.*

*(Published September 2009)*

## By **SCOTT LEVI**

Let me begin with two stories.  
Afghanistan, 2009:

In April of this year, Afghan President Hamid Karzai threw his support behind an astonishing and repressive law that would make it illegal for women of the Shi'i minority (approximately 10 percent of the population) to refuse their husbands' sexual advances and would require, among other things, that women get their husbands' permission even to step outside of their homes.

In response, a group of some 300 Afghan women gathered to protest this law and demand that the government repeal it. As one protester lamented to a New York Times reporter: "Whenever a man wants sex, we cannot refuse. It means a woman is a kind of property, to be used by the man in any way that he wants."



*Two Afghan women dressed in bright blue burqas. Today the burqa stands as a symbol of the status of women in Afghanistan, but for much of the twentieth century the history of women in this war-torn country led also toward greater rights and public presence. (Source: public domain, wikiwand.com)*

They encountered a much larger group of mostly male counter-protestors who responded violently and branded these women "whores." Forcibly chased away by the men, they exclaimed "We want our rights! We want equality!"

One is left to wonder how a protest against a law that recognizes a form of rape as legal could evoke such a visceral response.

### **Afghanistan, 1996:**

In 1996, while living in the former Soviet Republic of Uzbekistan, three friends and I were fortunate enough to be granted permission to visit northern Afghanistan. We were an unlikely group to be traveling in Afghanistan at that time: four young

Americans, one a woman with light blonde hair, and the country was in the midst of a civil war.

Just two months before we crossed the "Bridge of Friendship" over the Amu Darya River and entered Afghanistan, the Taliban had advanced northward and taken the capital city of Kabul. We were in the territory of General Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek who had very recently joined forces with the celebrated Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud to establish the "Northern Alliance" against the advancing Taliban.

Crossing the bridge, we had passed from a relatively peaceful post-Soviet republic into a war-torn wasteland. Sand dunes were left unchecked to take over entire stretches of the road, which in many places seemed to be more pothole than pavement. Young boys from nearby refugee camps shoveled dirt into some of the potholes, hoping to earn a bit of money from the few Iranian truck drivers brave (or foolish) enough to transport merchandise to Uzbekistan.

We passed by a number of bombed-out Soviet tanks rusting in the desert, monuments to the Soviet invasion and occupation of the country that lasted from 1979 into 1989. After a couple of hours my friends and I arrived in Mazar-i Sharif, the largest city in the region, and excitedly began to explore the city, meet people, and collect nervous reports of Taliban activities in the south.

With few exceptions, what we did not see were women in public. The majority of those that we did encounter were destitute victims of the war, forced to spend their days begging to feed their families. These were the only women with whom we



*The author (crouching, middle) with a military commandant (crouching to his right, mustache and billed hat) in Mazar-i Sharif, 1996.*





*A Bazaar in Mazar-i Sharif, 1996*

interacted, and even then it was only to place a few bills in their calloused, outstretched hands—no conversation, and no eye contact.

Even though this was not Taliban territory yet, these women wore the full chadri, or burqa, a long shapeless gown that hangs from a hat to completely cover everything from head to toe. To our eyes, they moved about the city as powder-blue ghosts—there, but not really there.

One evening, my friends and I went out for dinner to a little neighborhood restaurant near our hotel. The four of us were the only obvious foreigners in the place, and our companion the only woman, in a room otherwise filled with men sitting in chairs at old tables in the front and on woolen rugs on an elevated platform in the back.

For a few moments we stood quietly at the entrance, unsure where to go from there, as conversation halted and all heads turned silently toward us. After a long, uncomfortable pause the hum of conversations resumed and we found seats at a table not far from the door.

I was struck by the hospitality of our hosts. They treated us with a deliberate respect, referring to our female companion as our "sister" and addressing her indirectly, through one of the men present. Before we could ask, a young boy arrived with a pot of tea and bread, and after the novelty of our arrival wore off a bit the mood lightened and we had dinner and conversations with some of the men seated near us.



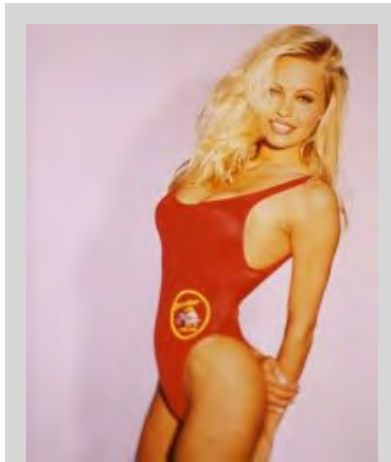
*A clothing bazaar with female shoppers in Mazar-i Sharif, 1996*

At precisely 8:00, the already dim lights of the restaurant shut off completely, except for a single bulb over the kitchen area in a distant corner of the large open room. I assumed that the electricity had been shut off to conserve energy for the following day, and that the restaurant was now closing. As a hush quickly spread across the room, I sat quietly and waited to see what everyone else would do, but nobody moved.

Then an old man slowly exited the kitchen, walked across the room toward a dinosaur of a television attached high up on a wall, reached up, and turned a knob. The vacuum tubes in this remarkable piece of electronic history gradually warmed up and the picture slowly began to take shape.

There before me was the American actress Pamela Anderson in a skin-tight bathing suit bouncing her way across a sandy California beach, signaling the beginning of the show "Baywatch."

I was stunned. Here, in war-torn Mazar-i Sharif, this restaurant had somehow acquired a satellite dish and the men (only a



*Actress Pamela Anderson as Baywatch lifeguard CJ Parker. Symbol internationally of American women, with the red swimsuit as an opposite extreme to the burqa. (Source: It is believed that use of this image constitutes fair use under U.S. copyright law--no public domain image of this fictional character exists, and it is used for identification and commentary purposes by Origins, a non profit institution hosted on servers in the United States)*

handful of whom could understand the dubbing into Hindi) were eager to watch "Baywatch." Before I knew what I was doing I loudly announced to our new friends, "Hey, that's our country!" and received a roar of laughter and applause.

## Women and Men in Afghanistan

These two anecdotes illustrate that for westerners and for Afghans alike, the status of women serves as a barometer by which to measure Afghan society.

For many westerners, nothing demonstrates the essentially "backward" or "medieval" nature of Afghan society more than its treatment of women. For many Afghans, nothing represents the perils of encroaching westernization more than the movement for women's rights.

For Afghans like the diners in Mazar-i Sharif, Pamela Anderson running around in a bathing suit is a symbol for all of American culture and society—scantily clad western women flaunting their bodies and their open sexuality are seen as a foundational (and perverse) value of western culture.

For some this is entertainment, for others it is distasteful, and for still others it is akin to pornography. The men sitting at the restaurant in Mazar-i Sharif that November evening were eager to watch it on the screen, but they would have been horrified at the thought of their wives and daughters presenting themselves to the public in the same way.



*Abdur Rahman Khan, Emir of Afghanistan 1880-1901. (Source: British India, public domain, wikipedia.org)*

And it doesn't take much to imagine that the men in Kabul, who violently berated the 300 women who had gathered to protest a regressive law, saw those women as advocates for a way of life that they believe to be repugnant. The protestors weren't dressed like Pamela Anderson, but in these men's eyes their demands for rights are pushing Afghanistan toward westernization, which they fear to be a dangerously slippery slope.

The debate surrounding the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan is clearly influenced by popular perceptions of westernization—images that are often generated by the global entertainment industry—and what it would mean for Afghan society. But that is only a single feature of a complex debate. In order to better appreciate the nuances of the various tensions involved, it is useful to place this issue in its historical context and

turn to the long history of Afghans' own efforts to improve women's rights within Afghanistan.

## **Women's Rights Before the Taliban**

The struggle for women's rights in Afghanistan has a history that goes back into the nineteenth century—long before the rise of the Taliban in the early 1990s. It involves sustained tensions between different ethnic groups, between urban and rural populations, and between the people of Afghanistan and the outside world.

On the one hand, today's activists can point to a long tradition of successful Afghan reformers, including such figures as Mahmud Beg Tarzi (1865–1933), who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs and was the father-in-law to the ruler of Afghanistan, Amanullah Khan (r. 1919–29).

On the other hand, the movement has been in conflict with a proud cultural heritage that deeply values female modesty and chastity as a part of a family's honor. In Afghanistan, as in much of the world, one's family is the most important part of an individual's identity in larger society, and a family's honor is a critical element in how other families assess its social position. For these reasons, many Afghans, even those who vehemently oppose the Taliban, find westernization to be an offensive and extremely dangerous cultural trend.

In some important ways, the women's rights movement in Afghanistan began during the reign of Amir Abdur Rahman Khan (r. 1880–1901), a brutal military dictator renowned as the "Iron Amir" for his tyrannical method of rule.



*Mahmud Tarzi, influential poet and leader of Afghanistan near the turn of the 20th century, with his wife, Asma Rasmiya. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*

In his autobiography, Abdur Rahman Khan described the despotic measures he used to subjugate his many rivals and put down numerous rebellions. In the process, he brought the whole of Afghanistan under his singular rule—all the while holding at bay the expansionist imperial interests of the Russians in Central Asia and the British in India.

He exiled or executed many of the local nobility, forcibly relocated many tribes across the country, and defeated the last "Hindu" Afghans of Kafiristan ("Land of the

Infidels") and had them converted to Islam (after which their province was renamed "Nuristan," "Land of Light").

Many suffered during his reign, but at the same time Abdur Rahman Khan was interested in modernizing his young state. His methods included embracing new technologies that he considered to be advantageous and implementing certain social reforms, including improving the position of women in Afghan society. Specifically, Abdur Rahman Khan granted Afghan women the right to divorce, he raised the legal age of marriage, and he gave women the right to own property.

The path to change was charted during the late nineteenth century, and it was advanced significantly during the reign of Abdur Rahman Khan's eldest son and successor, Amir Habibullah (r. 1901–19), who followed his father's military achievements with an impressive agenda for social reform.

At that time, some intellectuals in the Islamic world were engaged in a vibrant discussion regarding the relationship between



*Queen Soraya Tarzi with her husband King Amanullah Khan at the Berlin airport, 1928. Soraya was an active champion of women's rights in Afghanistan, evidenced in her style of clothing. (Source: Bundesarchiv, wikipedia.org)*



*Schoolgirls in Afghanistan, 2002.  
(Source: public domain, US AID)*

"traditional" Islam and modernity. Far to the west, in the territory of the Ottoman Sultan, the reform-minded Young Turk nationalist movement gained in popularity and influence.

It was there, in the Ottoman Empire, that Mahmud Tarzi, the most important figure in Afghan reform in this period, drew his inspiration. Tarzi's father had been a member of the ruling family of Qandahar (Kandahar), until he was exiled by Abdur Rahman

Khan and fled Afghanistan in 1882. Mahmud Tarzi was then seventeen, and he spent some twenty years in Ottoman territory, moving between Damascus and Istanbul. During that time, he encountered the Young Turk movement and he soon became convinced that the future of the Islamic world in general, and Afghanistan in particular, demanded a reformist and progressive approach to modernity.

Early in his reign, Amir Habibullah permitted the return of those who had been exiled under his father and, in 1905, Mahmud Tarzi brought his family back to Afghanistan. Tarzi began disseminating his ideas through an aggressive publishing campaign, and he became the center of the "Young Afghan" nationalist movement.



*Mohammad Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan until 1973, with his wife the Queen Humaria Begum and the President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy (1962). (Source: public domain)*

Central among his initiatives was the advancement of education as an engine for social reform. Afghanistan's first girls' schools were opened during Amir Habibullah's reign.

The position of women in Afghan society improved further during the reign of Amanullah (r. 1919–29), Amir Habibullah's son and successor. Since his youth, Amanullah had been an ardent follower of Mahmud Tarzi. Indeed, he was much more than that: he later married Tarzi's daughter, Queen Soraya.

Following the example set by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk in Turkey, Amanullah crafted a new constitution for Afghanistan that endeavored to guarantee civil rights for all, both men and women. He outlawed strict traditional dress codes, and Queen Soraya set the example by removing her own veil in a very dramatic and public display.

New schools were opened for both boys and girls, even in rural areas; the legal age for a woman to marry was raised; forced marriages were outlawed; and Amanullah endeavored to end the practice of polygamy. Queen Soraya even began Afghanistan's first women's journal, Ershad-e Niswan("Guidance for Women"), which advocated gender equality. Other women's journals followed.

These achievements earned Amanullah international acclaim as a forward-thinking reformer – he and Soraya were both granted honorary degrees from Oxford University—but they also provoked a backlash at home.

Tarzi had advised his son-in-law to proceed cautiously, but Amanallah was impatient and his aggressive agenda provided fodder for a traditionalist revolt. He was overthrown in 1929 and forced into exile. Before long, Muhammad Nadir Shah (r. 1929–33) and his traditionalist supporters saw to it that the schools for girls were closed, women were once again veiled, and many other reforms were repealed.

The backlash did not last long. Muhammad Nadir Shah was assassinated in 1933, and many of Amanullah's initiatives were gradually implemented during the long reign of Muhammad Nadir Shah's son and successor, Muhammad Zahir Shah (r. 1933–73). Once he managed to wrench the authority to govern from his uncles, King Zahir Shah and his cousin Muhammad Daoud Khan set a reformist course for the country.

The Afghan government enlisted foreign advisors, they again established girls schools, funded a new university, and later

instituted a new constitution that introduced a democratic framework and granted Afghan women the right to vote. In urban areas women attended college, took jobs outside of the home, ran businesses, and some even ventured into politics. Kabul became cosmopolitan.

## **From a Modernizing State to the Taliban**

It was in the late 1970s, as the women's movement gained ground in the West, that the era of progress for Afghan women came to an abrupt halt.

When Afghan communists took over in a 1978 coup, Afghanistan became caught up in the Cold War politics of the time. At first, the communists advanced an even more dramatic campaign for social reforms, which included making education for girls compulsory and (again) implementing a minimum age for girls to marry.

But it did not take long before efforts to impose communist ideology provoked a widespread rebellion. Then, on December 24, 1979, the Soviet Union launched a full-scale invasion of Afghanistan in support of the faltering communist government. Within a few months the country was flooded with more than 100,000 Soviet troops.

The events that followed are relatively well known. The Afghan resistance, known as the Mujahidin, retreated to the mountains and for several years fought a fierce guerrilla war against a substantially more powerful Soviet army. In the mid-1980s, the United States (and others) began to supply the Mujahidin with

financial support and military equipment. Then, in 1989, after nearly a decade of constant war, the defeated Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan.

Instead of peace and the establishment of a new, stable government in Kabul, Afghan society sank into a long, protracted and bloody civil war. Political authority retreated to the hands of regional and ethnic powers: the same groups that had united to fight against the Soviets had now separated and fought against each other.

For Afghan women, this was the beginning of the worst period. The populist warlords used any measure available to appeal to the majority of their soldiers, and the treatment of Afghan women was placed in the hands of poorly educated, rural traditionalists. During the Afghan civil war there was little in terms of the rule of law: men died in large numbers, widows were reduced to begging, rape was commonplace, and suicide among despondent women became ever more frequent.

It was in this chaotic environment in the early 1990s that the Taliban managed to extend their authority across the country. They achieved this through a combination of bribery and force of arms. They promised an alternative that, while distasteful to many Afghans, at least appeared better and more stable than civil war. But this brought little or no reprieve for Afghan women.

Drawing upon notions derived from pashtunwali, the traditional social code of the Pashtun people, many policies that the Taliban advanced (and continue to advance) are more restrictive than even the most rigid interpretations of the Shariah (Islamic law)

require. This is partly because, although the Taliban is by no means a "Pashtun" movement, many of the young men who have joined the Taliban are ethnically Pashtun.

As the Taliban became emboldened with their military victories, the plight of Afghan women grew even greater in the territory under their control. Before long, the Taliban had taken the most misogynistic elements of their society and, claiming that they are based in the Qur'an, institutionalized them as law.



*Hamid Karzai reviews troops of the first graduating class, for the 1st Battalion, Afghan National Army (ANA), during a ceremony held at the Kabul Military Training Center in Kabul, Afghanistan, 2002. (Source: SRA Bethann Hunt, wikimedia.org)*

Girls' access to education after the age of eight was outlawed; women were forbidden from working; women were forced to cover their entire bodies when in public, including their faces;

they were forbidden from seeking treatment from a male doctor unless accompanied by a male family member; they were forbidden from speaking loudly in public; their voices were banned from the radio; and it was made illegal to display any images of women, either in public or in the home.

Untold numbers of educated women, who had previously worked as productive members of the society, were concealed behind burqas and removed from public life. Others were reduced to begging or prostitution in order to provide for their families.

## Steps Forward Again?

In the years since the Taliban were defeated in late 2001, there has been a measurable improvement in Afghan women's rights, and their position in Afghan society.

In urban areas, women have better access to education, they have returned to the work force, and some Afghan women have been politically outspoken and active in their nation's governance. There now exists a Ministry of Women's Affairs, women have been appointed to high government posts, they have the right to vote, and women have been elected as representatives to the Loya Jirga, Afghanistan's Grand Council.

These are only small steps in recovering from the damage of the past thirty years, and efforts to move forward continue to encounter vehement resistance. This opposition is partly due to the influence of the traditionalists and partly due to a widespread desire to resist westernization—even among those who consider themselves to be moderates and reformers.

But in thinking about the future of Afghan women, it is important to recognize that there is an established historical precedent for reform within Afghanistan—indeed, for most of the twentieth century the story is one of gradual progress and improvement in women's lives.

In the end, the lesson of the twentieth century may be that, in a country that has suffered thirty years of war, war itself is the greatest enemy to women's rights.

## Epilogue

On August 16, as this essay went to press, BBC News reported: "An Afghan bill allowing a husband to starve his wife if she refuses to have sex has been published in the official gazette and become law." The law applies to Afghanistan's Shi'i minority. President Hamid Karzai faced intense pressure to reject this legislation from the international community and from women's rights activists in Afghanistan, who argue that the constitution of Afghanistan ensures equal rights for all citizens, regardless of gender. Nevertheless, with the national elections on hand, Karzai permitted the bill to pass into law in an apparent bid to win the votes of the "fundamentalists and hardliners."

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## Important Groups

The Pashtun are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan, comprising between 40 percent and half of the total population. The current president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, is ethnically



Pashtun, as was the ruling nobility dating back, with only very brief exceptions, to 1747. The Pashtun are the dominant population in the eastern and southeastern portions of Afghanistan and the western stretches of Pakistan. Their language, Pashto, is a member of the eastern Iranian language group.

The Young Turks were a group of progressive Turkish nationalists who rose to prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They advocated a modernist approach to Turkish government and society, and worked to establish a constitutional monarchy that limited the powers of the Ottoman sultan. ♦

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## Suggested Reading

Abd al-Rahman Khan, *The Life of Abdur Rahman, Amir of Afghanistan*, edited by Mir Munshi Sultan Mahomed Khan, 2 vols (London, 1900).

"Afghan Women Protest New Law on Home Life," by Dexter Filkins, *New York Times*, 16 April 2009.

Sarah Chayes, *The Punishment of Virtue: Inside Afghanistan after the Taliban* (New York, 2007).

Robert Crews and Amin Tarzi, eds, *The Taliban and the Crisis of Afghanistan* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

Louis Dupree, *Afghanistan* (Princeton, 1980).

Encyclopaedia Iranica

Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of its People and Politics* (New York, 2002).

Vartan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan* (Palo Alto, 1969).

Willem Vogelsang, *The Afghans* (Chichester, West Sussex, 2008).

## Egypt Once Again Bans the Muslim Brotherhood

By **PATRICK SCHARFE**

On October 26, 1954, a young Muslim Brother by the name of Mahmoud Abdel-Latif attempted to assassinate Gamal Abdel-Nasser, the prime minister of Egypt. That attempt prompted a massive crackdown against the powerful Muslim Brotherhood. Now, six decades later, there is a sense of *déjà vu*, because the current Egyptian government is again determined to eliminate the Brotherhood as an organization, even after one of its members had been elected president, Mohamed Morsi. Morsi was overthrown in July of last year by the military amidst protests and calls for Morsi to step down.

When an assassin fired at him in 1954, Nasser was speaking at Manshiya Square in the Mediterranean city of Alexandria to celebrate the signing of a new treaty with Britain, one which he said would usher in a new era of independence and national sovereignty for his country. The British occupation of Egypt, which had begun in 1882, had still not ended, since British troops continued to occupy the Suez Canal zone.

Nasser, who did not become Egypt's official head of state until 1956, came to power in 1952 as part of a military junta known as the "Free Officers." The Free Officers staked their credibility



almost entirely on their ability to assert Egypt's national aspirations, so a changed relationship with Britain was essential to the survival of the regime. After long negotiations, Nasser was only able to extract a promise of phased troop withdrawal according to a seven year timetable, not an immediate withdrawal.



*Brotherhood Member Sayyid Qutb in Prison (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*

Founded in 1928, the Muslim Brotherhood is an organization that fuses religion and politics, but it also has had a long history of nationalism and anti-colonial activism. In early 1950's, the group was locked in a protracted political struggle with Egypt's military government, which was seeking to eliminate its political opponents one by one. From the perspective of many in the Brotherhood, Nasser's concessions to the British provided an opportunity to move against him.

Nasser's speech during the failed assassination attempt was soon broadcast by radio throughout the Arab world. In the recording, a

series of shots are heard, but Nasser hardly pauses, and his speech becomes ever more impassioned: "O free men, let them kill me where I stand!" Nasser's response to this attempt on his life displayed his charisma to the public for the first time. This charismatic style of leadership later became a signature of his presidency.

#### [Audio of the Assassination Attempt of October 1954 \(in Arabic\)](#)

It is not clear who actually ordered the assassination attempt, but the vengeance taken upon the Brotherhood was swift and harsh.



*Tahrir Square Protests in 2011 (Source: public domain)*

The Muslim Brotherhood was banned, and over 1,000 members were arrested. A small number of these were executed. The Brotherhood was portrayed as a conspiratorial group working on behalf of a range of mutually incompatible interests: the British, the Zionists, the deposed Egyptian king, and even the communists. The movement went underground and re-built itself over the course of many decades.

Even in the years prior to the Arab Spring, the Brotherhood had re-emerged as a major political player, even though it was not officially legalized. Candidates connected to the group won 20% of the vote in 2005, despite widespread fraud. The Ikhwan – to use their Arabic name meaning "Brothers" – began to trumpet their acceptance of democratic norms and were involved in the

Arab Spring protests at Tahrir Square in 2011 that brought down the presidency of Hosni Mubarak.

The Brotherhood did not spark these protest movements, but the group did benefit from the open atmosphere that prevailed after the overthrow of the Mubarak regime. They founded a new party, the “Freedom and Justice Party,” which won the parliamentary elections of 2011-2012. Mohamed Morsi, a US-educated engineer and longstanding Muslim Brother, narrowly won the 2012 presidential election, but disappointed many by his apparent unwillingness to build a broad coalition with other political forces. He declared his decisions immune to judicial review, viewing the judiciary as a remnant of the old regime.



*Defense Minister Gen. Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi. (Source: Kremlin.ru, CC BY 4.0, wikipedia.org)*

Morsi was removed from power on July 3, 2013 by Defense Minister Gen. Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi ([below](#)) in the face of massive protests against President Morsi. With Morsi’s overthrow, [the Muslim Brotherhood was again declared illegal](#). Even the implicit toleration of the Mubarak era is a distant memory, as Sisi has

labelled the Brotherhood a terrorist group for its opposition to Morsi’s overthrow. Morsi himself is now standing trial, accusing of killing protesters.

Sisi is viewed by many of his supporters as a charismatic figure whose personal leadership is a necessity. In this sense, Sisi, who was elected president this May in a disputed election, is an heir of Nasser. While there are political figures who directly claim the mantle of Nasser’s ideology, Nasserism itself was a shifting ideology based mainly on Egyptian nationalism and Nasser’s own charisma. It remains to be seen whether Sisi’s charisma will be equally potent and durable.

From the perspective of the Ikhwan, current repression is as traumatic as any in the past. The forcible break-up of pro-Morsi protests in Rabi’a al-‘Adawiyya Square, which resulted in many casualties, will be hard to forget for the Brotherhood and partisans of Morsi. Just as in 1954, both sides have accused the other of cooperating with unsavory foreign powers.

As Nasser’s crackdown demonstrates, the group has long been accustomed to operating in the shadows. Even though Sisi seeks to fully dismantle the Brotherhood, it seems unlikely that he will succeed where Nasser did not. ♦

## Understanding the Middle East (*podcast*)



In a recent, much publicized lecture — “It Takes a Historian to Understand the Middle East...Doesn’t It?” — [Jane Hathaway](#) of Ohio State's History Department offered a challenge to pundits and policymakers who seem unable to offer sound strategies for the Mideast. In this episode, hosts [Leticia Wiggins](#) and Patrick Potyondy ask three historians — [Ayse Baltacioglu-Brammer](#), [Patrick Scharfe](#), and [Jane Hathaway](#) — to lay out what you really need to know to understand this troubled region. (August 2015)

[\(Play from web site.\)](#)



*(Source: eutrophication&hypoxia, Flickr.com, cc by 2.0)*

## Afghanistan: Past and Prospects (*Podcast*)

NATO “officially” ended its combat operations in Afghanistan in late December 2014, but the country remains fractured by ethnic and geographical fissures, with local warlords controlling their own fiefdoms and the government in Kabul only nominally in control. And the Taliban — that American forces went in to banish in 2001 — remains a force to be reckoned with. On today's History Talk, hosts Patrick Potyondy and Leticia Wiggins talk with scholars Robert Crews, Scott Levi, and Alam Payind about Afghanistan’s complex history to ask what the past of these peoples and this country tell us about prospects for the future. (April 2015)

(Play from web site.)

The Future of Afghanistan



*Bamiyan Valley, Afghanistan. (Source: Sgt Ken Scar, public domain, wikimedia.org)*

## Ataturk: An Intellectual Biography

### Book Review By

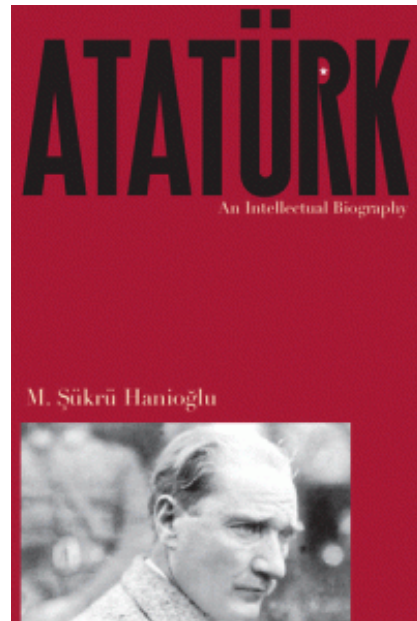
**AYSE BALTACIOGLU**

(Published September 2011)

by M. Sukru Hanioglu (Princeton.  
Princeton University Press. 2011)

As the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938) holds a unique place in twentieth century-European history as a political leader, who is still revered both nationally and internationally. The policies of transformation that he introduced carried Turkey into a secular republic from the ashes of the six-hundred-year-long Islamic Ottoman Empire. In fact the legacy that he and his supporters have remains strong in the quasi-religious political affiliation known as Kemalism.

Professor M. Sukru Hanioglu, who is the Garrett Professor in Foreign Affairs in the Department of Near Eastern Studies at



Princeton University, offers a unique and in-depth study that attempts to "demythologize" Ataturk by showing he did not originate "novel ideas" but "sided with avant-garde approaches that had previously received only limited support in Ottoman and Turkish societies" (6).

The book begins with Mustafa Kemal's youth as a Muslim boy in modern-day Greece, a European province of the Ottoman Empire, continues with his military career, and ends with his project of creating a nation. Hanioglu focuses on Ataturk's intellectual and ideological evolution at every stage of his life, cogently analyzing how new ideas circulating in the late Ottoman and early Turkish societies shaped his way of thinking. While doing so, he identifies a continuity between the late Ottoman imperial era and the modern Turkish nation state as opposed to the classical Kemalist perspective that depicts him as the sole creator of unique ideas and policies (6-7).

Hanioglu first develops his argument by looking at Mustafa Kemal's birthplace, Salonika which first introduced him to the intellectual and technological advances of the time. Salonika was a great example of Ottoman cosmopolitanism (more than any other city except Constantinople) with three major religious groups: the Jews, the Muslims, and the Greek Orthodox. The

city's trade increased throughout the eighteenth century, ultimately creating the largest seaport for exports in the Balkans and the fourth largest in the whole Empire (14). According to Hanioglu, being a financial hub in the region brought Salonika urbanization and intellectual movements earlier than other parts of the Empire resulting in a vivid city life with multilingual printing houses, and daily journals, Western-style cafes, literary clubs, theaters created a fertile ground for different ideologies such as nationalism and socialism (13-15, 25). Ataturk also benefited from the new ideas and institutions of learning introduced by the Tanzimat Era, which was a period of reformation beginning in 1839 and ending with the First Constitutional Era in 1876 (11).

In his formative years, Ataturk was heavily influenced by prominent intellectuals heavily influenced by Enlightenment thought, creating a clear connection to his actions while forming the Turkish Republic. One ideologue Hanioglu looks at is Colmar von der Goltz, a firm believer in Social Darwinism, who shaped Ataturk's ideas about the role of soldiers and military leaders in a society. Goltz famously said "born rulers are also great soldiers; and it is easy to conceive that the greatest military leaders must be looked for among the occupants of thrones" (34). Goltz also envisioned Germany as an ethnic based nation-state, a model difficult to apply to the multi-ethnic Ottoman Empire. Ataturk, however, embraced Goetz's nation-state ideology arguing that the Ottoman Empire should voluntarily dissolve itself and exchange different ethnic populations that would give rise to a Turkish state (37).

According to Hanioglu, scientific materialism (vulgarmaterialismus) deeply influenced Ataturk's intellectual development, as well. He saw a rigid interpretation of science as the only solution for the problems of the empire and the only way to create a prosperous and national modern society (49-51). Religion, according to Ataturk, was "the science of the masses, whereas science is the religion of the elite" (152). Both were "manufactured phenomena, created by their respective prophets in concrete historical circumstances" (53-54).

Hanioglu, however, sees Ataturk's approach to religion as pragmatist. He argues that Ataturk was actually in favor of the Turkified version of Islam, since he believed that it could serve as a useful vehicle to advance Turkish nationalism. Therefore, Ataturk used religion by referencing the Qur'an in his speeches and opening the National Grand Assembly with prayers on Friday in an attempt to unify the people (62-63). At this point, Hanioglu persuasively labels Ataturk a social engineer in the early years of the Turkish Republic, incorporating detailed tables explaining how Ataturk's religious discourse diminished as religion became less relevant in the creation of the nation-state (110-115).

Hanioglu argues that Ataturk rigidly controlled every aspect of political and social life during the westernization process of the newly established nation-state. Machiavelli, who once stated that "a true republic should pursue national strength even at the expense of individual freedom," was the source of inspiration for Ataturk's intolerant policies toward opposition movements (134, 159). "A chamber with an effective opposition," according to Ataturk, "was not an asset but an obstacle." (116-117) As a result,



two opposition parties established during his rule were abolished shortly after they were formed. According to Hanioglu, Ataturk hoped to create a new type of Turkish nationalism, similar to Emile Durkheim's moralite civique, by emphasizing science, history, and language (181).

Hanioglu cogently places Ataturk in a historical context which views him as an intellectual who was a product of the society in which he lived. In order to do so, he uses Ataturk's personal works written in Ottoman Turkish, an important contribution of the book.<sup>1</sup> Hanioglu's book is indispensable for historians interested in examining the roots of modern Turkey as well as anyone seeking to understand a nation state formation from the early twentieth century Middle East. ♦

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<sup>1</sup> Not all Ottoman Turkish sources were available when the book was written. For instance, Presidential Archives at Cankaya are not open to the scholars without special permission and only nine of twelve volumes of Ataturk's notebooks ranging from 1904 to 1933 have been published so far. His divorced wife's personal papers are also still under lock, even though they had been classified for 25 years after her death in 1975 (5-7).

*Ataturk: An Intellectual Biography* by M. Sukru Hanioglu  
(Princeton. Princeton University Press. 2011)

Reviewed by Ayse Baltacioglu.

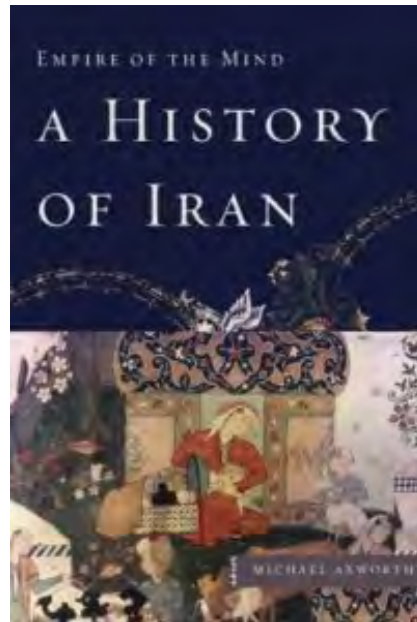
## A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind

### Book Review By

**AYSE BALTACIOGLU**

(Published May 2010)

For several years, Iran has been at the center of international attention because of its suppression of individual rights, strict censorship policies, continuous attempts to enrich uranium, and 2009 elections resulting in mass protests, arrests, and even the murder of several protesters. This current Iranian reality, however, overshadows the glorious Iranian civilization whose origins date back almost three millennia. A History of Iran, one of several recent books that aim to draw back the gloomy curtain of recent events, aims to increase the general reader's awareness of the richness and uniqueness of the Iranian heritage. Michael Axworthy, a former British Foreign Service officer and a lecturer in Arabic and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, covers an enormous span of time, from the



earliest times up to the present day, in a clear, easy-to-read, and detailed but not cluttered narrative. In doing so, he also emphasizes the role of Iran as a source of influence in the Middle East, Asia, and even Europe. The book's subtitle, Empire of the Mind, refers to the fact that even though Iran has endured multiple invasions by either men or ideas, and was thus never a tightly unified or a culturally or religiously homogeneous society, these invaders have somehow been assimilated without destroying Iran's cultural and political continuity.

Axworthy begins his book with general information, including Iran's geographical position, its demographic structure, its weather, and the origin of the word "Persian," which comes from Fars province in southwestern Iran, home to Iran's most ancient archaeological sites, Persepolis and Pasargadae. (He also mentions that the word "Iran" or "Iranian" derives from the word "Aryan," Sanskrit for "noble").

After this section, Axworthy discusses the first Persian Empire, the Achaemenids (550BC-330BC), founded by Cyrus, extended by his conquering descendants, and brought to an end by Alexander the Great. The author, at this point, argues that Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire did not result in the empire's "hellenization;" on the contrary, Persian culture and

traditions, including religion, profoundly shaped Rome's and later Byzantium's imperial conduct. In the following chapters, Axworthy discusses the succeeding Persian dynasties, the Parthians (247BC-224AD) and the Sassanids (224AD-651AD). Pre-Islamic empires, however, take up only one-fifth of the book; Axworthy's coverage of them feels like a rapid run-through. Instead of discussing what made these empires powerful or weak, Axworthy prefers to mention little more than names and dates.

The bulk of the book deals with the Islamic era in Iran. The Islamization of Persia, the Arab, Turkmen, and Mongol invasions, and the consequences of all of these are the main topics of the following two chapters. Here, even though author traces the stories of the various rulers of Iran down the centuries, he also pays close attention to other aspects of Iranian society, focusing especially on poetry as a defining trait. A relatively long chapter on Persian poetry gives insights into Iranian attitudes and spiritual leanings. Axworthy meticulously describes the stories behind selected Iranian poems and the symbolic use of words.

Succeeding chapters swiftly summarize the Safavid Empire (1501-1722) and its fall at the hands of Afghan invaders, the chaotic years between 1720 and 1794, and the Qajar dynasty (1794-1925). Axworthy devotes attention to the wealth, productivity, and commercial potential of Iran, which enabled great rulers such as the Safavid shah Abbas I (1588 -1629) to develop and rule a culturally and materially rich empire. He also underlines the fact that Persia's wealth attracted Ottoman, Afghan, British, and Russian attacks throughout these decades.

Axworthy offers an evenhanded discussion of the British and Russian competition for geopolitical influence in Iran, beginning in the late 18th century.

Axworthy's final chapters cover the 1906 constitutional revolution, attempts to create a constitutional monarchy, the beginning of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925, the influence of oil in Iran's foreign and domestic policies, British and Russian interests in the country, invasions of Persian territory during World War II, and the United States' growing role after World War II.

The Islamic revolution of 1979 looms large in this discussion. Axworthy's coverage of Iran just before the revolution is fair but pointed; he emphasizes the last shah's undemocratic policies, SAVAK's (National Intelligence and Security Organization) routine use of torture, and an opposition movement against the regime that included different groups such as liberals, socialists, students, and religious scholars.

Axworthy also stresses religious exceptionalism and continuity in Iran over the centuries. Between Zoroastrianism, one of the earliest forms of monotheism accepted by the Iranians as a state religion, and Islam, he finds several parallels, such as the concepts of hell and heaven and the belief in the human being's ability to choose between good and evil. After Zoroastrianism, the author discusses Shia Islam as another sign of Iran's religious exceptionalism. For the reader who is not familiar with the division between Sunni and Shia Islam, Axworthy points out similarities between Islamic and Christian sectarian divisions, such as the resemblances between the Ashura commemorations in Iran and traditional Good Friday processions in many Catholic countries.

The position of women is another issue that Axworthy explores in his book. He highlights the fact that in classical Persian culture, women were well-respected and had the same rights as men, such as owning property, operating businesses, and choosing spouses. He convincingly argues that women's position in modern Iran is "more egalitarian or less suppressed" than in many other Islamic countries. He cites the attention-grabbing statistic that sixty-six percent of university students in Iran today are female.

In his last chapter, Axworthy casts off the mantle of the historian and writes like a political columnist, touching upon recent social and political issues concerning Iran and underlining the possibility of a rapprochement between the West and Iran. He stresses the wrong-headedness of using military force to solve the Iranian "problem." He notes the negative and positive aspects of Iranian and Western policies and lectures the American and Israeli governments on the importance of understanding Iran and having good relationships with it. He thinks that the West (mainly the United States) has been unfair towards Iran over the last several decades: "The present government of Iran is far from perfect, but there are other governments in the Middle East that are as bad or worse -on democracy or human rights- whom we have few scruples about describing as close allies" (289).

Axworthy also conveys some of the under appreciated or misunderstood aspects of Iranian society that have contributed to Westerners' negative opinion of Iran. For instance, Iran expressed its sorrow after the September 11 attacks, and many Iranians sympathized with America. Axworthy also mentions that the

Iranian government supported the military operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan led by the United States. In this context, the author openly criticizes the Bush administration for neglecting these facts.

Even though Axworthy's book offers a compelling overview of Iranian history, it does not go into much depth. This is understandable considering the lengthy period that the author covers in only 300 pages. For instance, the U.S. hostage crisis of 1979-80, the Iran-Contra Affair during Ronald Reagan's presidency, and the roles of the Council of Experts and Council of Guardians are either not mentioned or glossed over. In his comprehensive book, Axworthy uses simple, personalized language, rather than a scholarly tone, to deal with a three thousand-year-old, very complex civilization. This feature will make his survey accessible to a general audience with little or no prior knowledge of Iran.

*A History of Iran: Empire of the Mind* by Michael Axworthy (New York. Basic Books. 2008) ♦

Chapter 2

# Water and the Middle East

Image: Agriculture in Saudi Arabia. (Source: public domain, internet)



## Baptized in the Jordan: Restoring a Holy River

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*As the site of the baptism of Jesus Christ, the Jordan River is the source of all holy water in Christianity and has for centuries attracted pilgrims from across the world. Over the last 60 years, however, the river has fallen victim to the ongoing regional conflict and been reduced to a polluted muddy stream. Francesca de Châtel travels to the banks of the most holy and contested transboundary river in the Middle East and looks at the causes of the Jordan River's demise and what is being done to restore it.*

*(Published September 2014)*

### By **FRANCESCA DE CHÂTEL**

Dressed in white gowns, the group of Russian pilgrims gathered silently by the steps that led into the river. The priest, a tall figure with shoulder-length hair and a beard, intoned a hymn and the pilgrims joined in, bowing their heads in prayer. Barely five meters away on the opposite shore, two Jordanian soldiers looked on from the shelter of a reed-covered platform – no visitors had come to visit their side of the river yet that day.

As the pilgrims sang, the priest slowly descended into the muddy water, which reached only to his thighs, so that he almost had to lie down to immerse himself fully. He emerged with closed eyes, gasping for breath. The women, their heads covered, lined up on the steps, some holding young children by the hand.

One by one, they descended into the water, knelt in front of the priest and crossed themselves before he placed his hand on their head and immersed them in the water. Three



*Baptism at Qasr al Yehud, West Bank. Source: Francesca de Châtel, 2013.*

times – in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

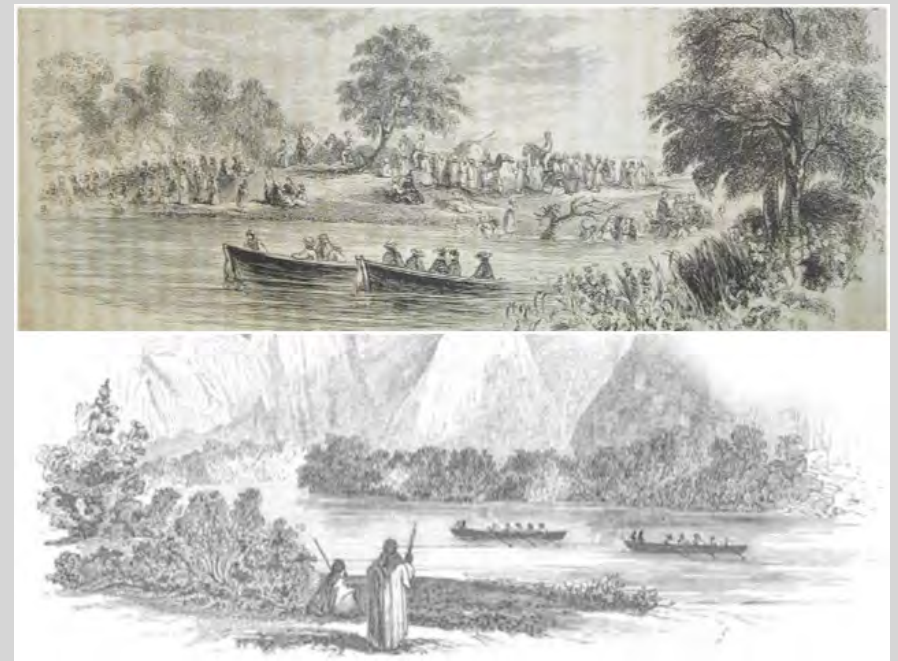
Meanwhile, a group of young Americans sat in the shade of some palm trees on the bank and listened to their guide, an American woman wearing a safari hat and khaki desert trousers, who explained the significance of the holy Jordan River.

“You can see that the river is quite muddy,” she said as she pointed to the timid murky flow, “but it’s actually not dirty, because there’s so many bends in the river.” Her audience nodded and one girl complained it was too hot.

The Russian baptism ritual completed, the pilgrims emerged from the water and took photos of one another by the river, while three young boys started a water fight in a corner of the baptismal pool. Their mothers scolded them loudly and dragged them off to the showers. Half an hour later, after a visit to the gift shop, both groups were getting back on the Israeli tourist buses, off to the next stop on their day tour of biblical sites.

As the boundary of the Holy Land and the site of the baptism of Jesus Christ, the Jordan River is the source of all holy water in [Christianity](#). For centuries, pilgrims have travelled long distances to immerse themselves in the river and even today nearly a million visitors annually flock to the three baptism sites in Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian West Bank to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

Over the past century, however, the Jordan River has been drawn deep into [the Arab-Israeli conflict](#).



*Top: Pilgrims bathing in the Jordan River. Bottom: Scene on the Jordan River. (Source: Lynch, 1853)*

Once a meandering river full of rapids and cascades, the Jordan has been extensively developed since the 1950s, with dams, diversion canals, and large-scale irrigation projects on the river itself, its tributaries, and its headwaters. As a result, flow has been reduced to about a tenth of its historic level. And water quality has sharply deteriorated, with raw sewage and agricultural runoff polluting the remaining water.

The Jordan River is both a cause of conflict and tension as well as a potential source of regional cooperation. It became one of the most contested [transboundary rivers](#) in the Middle East with

the creation of Israel in 1948, and, since 1967, a heavily militarized political border.

In the face of this highly complex situation, the regional NGO [Friends of the Earth Middle East](#) (FoEME) is nonetheless working to revive the Jordan River, restoring the basin as a single interconnected ecosystem and a shared cultural heritage site that transcends political boundaries.

The Jordan River has since biblical times been imbued with powerful symbolic meanings: it is a boundary and a crossing point, a metaphor for spiritual rebirth and salvation, and a source of holy water.

But the river's symbolic significance became even more layered in the 20th century. As the physical river and its tributaries underwent far-reaching infrastructural changes, the Jordan River took up new meanings as a geopolitical border, a contested transboundary watercourse, a threatened ecosystem, and a tightly regulated water resource system.

The strength of these different geopolitical, hydrological, environmental, and religious narratives is sharply crystallized on the Lower Jordan River where holiness, pollution, hydropolitics, and national boundaries collide.



## Source of Holy Water and Pilgrimage Site

The Jordan River plays an important role in the Old Testament as the border of the land that God gives to the Israelites. In the New Testament, John's baptism of Jesus forms a seminal moment in the life of Christ and marks a defining event in the Christian Church.



The baptism also altered the spiritual status of the water of the Jordan River.

Early Christian writers asserted that Christ's immersion in the Jordan sanctified the river's water, which in turn made all water holy. The Jordan was seen as the prototypical "river of life," but also the site of a divine manifestation of God, for just as water had been the primeval element that witnessed God's creation, the Jordan had witnessed the beginning of the Gospels.

The site where John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River became an important pilgrimage site from the 4th century CE.

Several writers recorded their visits here, including the 6th-century geographer Theodosius who described a marble column topped by an iron cross that had been erected at the place where Jesus was thought to have been baptized. He also wrote about the Church of St. John the Baptist, built by the Emperor Anastasius, which "stands on great vaults which are high enough for the times when the Jordan is in flood."

The sick and disabled also came to the Jordan for healing, as Jacinthus the Presbyter related in the late 11th century: "On the feast of the Epiphany cripples and sick people come and, using the rope to steady themselves, go down to dip themselves in the water: women who are barren also come here."

For those who were too sick to make the journey, water could also be drawn from the river and brought to them.

Thus the Russian Princess Euphrosine of Polatsk, who had come to Jerusalem to die in the 12th century, was unable to travel to the Jordan but was given a bottle of holy water by an acquaintance, "which she received with joy and gratitude, drinking it and spreading it over her body to wash away the sins of the past."

By the late Middle Ages, the Jordan was venerated almost exclusively as a relic of Jesus Christ, possessing powerful spiritual forces. A late-13th-century guidebook gave just one reason for immersion in the river: "these are the waters which came into contact with the body of Christ, our Redeemer."



*Russian pilgrims at the Jordan. (Source: Catalogue of photographs made by the American Colony (1898-1914).)*

Writing in 1483, Felix Faber described how several knights of his party had jumped into the Jordan fully clothed, convinced that their clothes would become impenetrable to enemy weapons. Others dipped bells in the river and believed that ringing them would stave off lightning and thunder.

The 17th-century English cleric Henry Maundrell described how pilgrims also cut branches off the reeds on the riverbanks, while later accounts by 19th-century Russian travelers described pilgrims taking bottles of holy water and burial shrouds dipped in the river home with them.

## **A Divided River and How We Think about It**

From its sources on the slopes of Mount Hermon, the Jordan River winds its way through the Jordan River Valley over a distance of about 225 km to discharge into the Dead Sea, the lowest point on earth at  $-422$  m.

The river's headwaters, the Dan, Hasbani, and Baniyas, originate in Israel, Lebanon, and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights respectively, and meet inside Israel to form the Upper Jordan River, which flows into Lake Tiberias (also known as Lake Kinneret or the Sea of Galilee), Israel's largest freshwater reservoir that supplies approximately one third of the country's annual water requirements.

South of Lake Tiberias, the Lower Jordan River covers a distance of 143 km to the Dead Sea. Historically, this part of the river was fed by water from Lake Tiberias, the Yarmouk River (the Jordan River's largest tributary) and several seasonal [wadis](#). Today, water

levels in this part of the river have been sharply reduced due to large-scale regulation and diversion works in Israel, Jordan, and Syria.

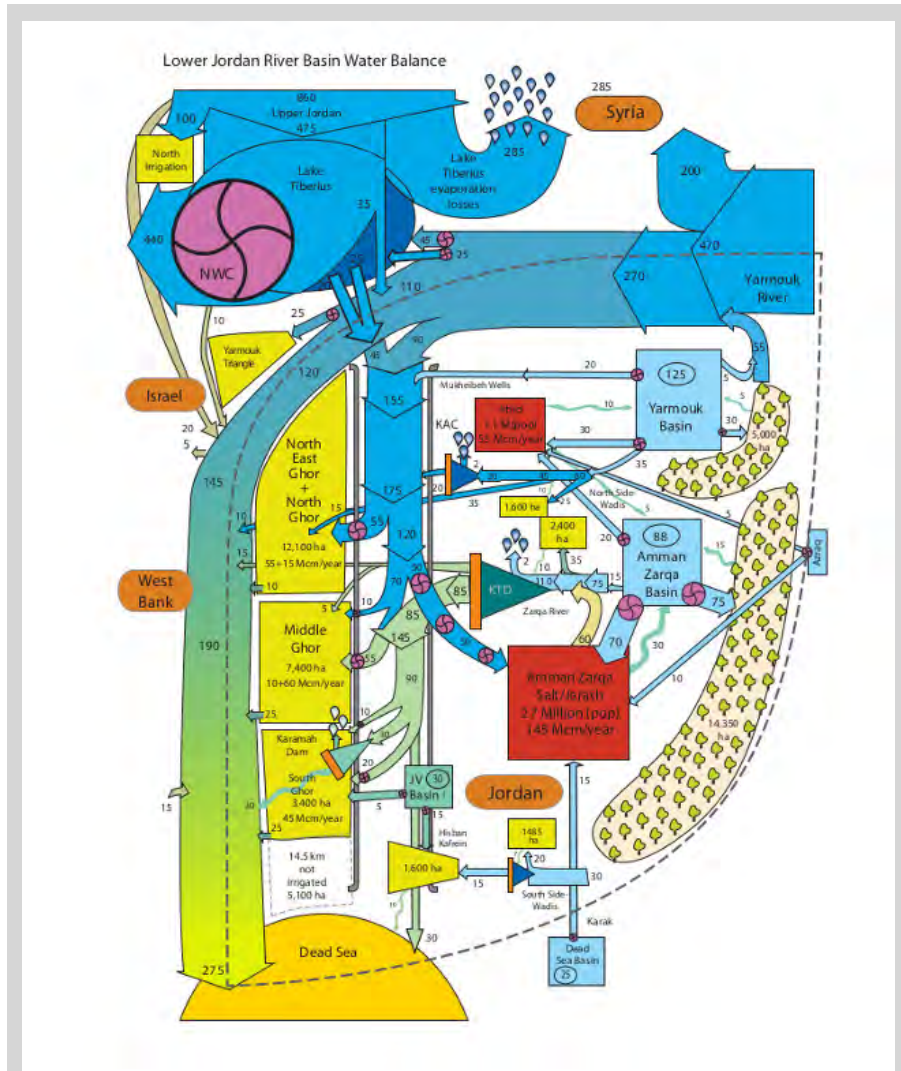
By 2009, the Lower Jordan River's historic annual flow of 1,300 million cubic meters (MCM) had been reduced to an estimated 20-30 MCM. Moreover, most of the fresh water in this part of the river has been replaced with saline flows, water from fishponds, sewage, and agricultural runoff.

The 20th-century transformation of the Jordan River has been extensively analyzed from the perspective of international relations, international law, politics, geography, history, hydrology, ecology, and social studies. It has been used as a textbook example of *the* disputed transboundary watercourse in a water-scarce region par excellence, caught in the middle of a protracted political conflict and subject to multilateral power struggles.

This extensive body of research and analysis has further fragmented and abstracted perceptions of the Jordan.

Thus the river is now commonly described and analyzed as a composite of separate units: the Upper Jordan River, Lake Tiberias/Lake Kinneret, the Yarmouk River and the Lower Jordan River. The drastic infrastructural interventions along the river, which have fundamentally altered water flow, water quality and local ecosystems, are schematically represented in conceptual flow diagrams.

Historically described as “the most crooked river in the world,” “sometimes dashing along in rapids by the base of a mountain,



Lower Jordan River Water Balance 1950-1975. (Source: Courcier et al., 2005)

sometimes flowing between low banks,” the river is now a system that has been transformed into a series of contiguous and artificially controlled water bodies.

Even the water itself has been dissected, quantified, and qualified: separating the saline from the fresh; diverting drinking water away from the valley and pumping raw sewage back into the river; extracting irrigation water from side wadis, tributaries, and dam reservoirs; and releasing contaminated return flows back into the river.

### A Geopolitical and Religious Border

Despite the extensive infrastructural developments that have led to a dramatic drop in water levels and deterioration in water quality, public awareness of the slow demise of the Lower Jordan remains low. The main reason for this void is that the river itself has been largely inaccessible and thus invisible since 1967.

As the geopolitical border between Jordan to the east and Israel and the Palestinian West Bank to the west, the Lower Jordan River remains a largely closed – and in many places mined – military zone that can only be reached at a few points along its course.

The only place where Jordanians can visit the river is at the Al Maghtas Baptism Site just north of the Dead Sea, a location that has only been accessible since Jordan signed the Peace Treaty with Israel in 1994.

Israelis have no access south of the Yarmouk River, while Palestinians can only access the river at the Israeli-controlled baptism site in the West Bank, Qasr al Yehud.

The fact that the physical river has been largely out of sight since 1967 further strengthens its conceptual representations and increases the disconnect between the physical river and its mythical image.

This same disconnect exists in the religious realm.

The reality of a diminished, polluted river does not appear to affect the spiritual value of the water. The three baptism locations – the Baptism Site/Al Maghtas in Jordan, Qasr al Yehud in the West Bank, and the Yardenit Baptismal Site in Israel – present themselves as religious places focused on biblical history and archaeological remains, and gloss over the many other narratives that play out along the river.

Yet the region’s recent history flows just beneath the surface, cluttering the mythical narrative of the Jordan River as a source of spiritual cleansing and renewal with the starkly utilitarian and political narratives of modernity that materialize in the form of dams, sewage flows, landmines, and security checkpoints.

Just north of the Dead Sea, the [Al Maghtas/Baptism Site](#) in Jordan and the Israeli-operated [Qasr al Yehud site](#) in the West Bank lie just a few meters apart on the two banks of the river with an invisible border running between them. Both sites argue that theirs is the “authentic” site of Jesus’ baptism, presenting biblical, archaeological and historical evidence to corroborate their claim.



*The Lower Jordan River from Al Maghtas/The Baptism Site in Jordan looking at Qasr al Yehud in the West Bank. Source: Francesca de Châtel, 2013.*

As one of the earliest Christian pilgrimage sites, the Jordanian Al Maghtas/Baptism Site was largely abandoned after World War I and became part of an inaccessible military zone after the 1967 Six-Day War.

After Israel and Jordan signed a peace treaty in 1994, the area was demined and “rediscovered.”

Extensive archaeological work uncovered a series of churches, monasteries and other remains, including the cave where John the Baptist retreated in the desert, and the church described by Theodosius in the 6th century. Together with further textual



*The remnants of a Byzantine chapel built on the Jordan River, on the site where Jesus is said to have been baptized, Al Maghtas/The Baptism Site, Jordan. (Source: Francesca de Châtel, 2013.)*

references, these archaeological finds have led the Jordanian authorities to declare this to be the authentic baptism site.

The Jordanian claim has been further strengthened by a series of “letters of authentication” from world religious leaders, and visits by [three popes](#) and numerous monarchs, heads of state, and other dignitaries.

Moreover, the Jordanian government’s move to donate national land for the establishment of 12 churches of different denominations on the site adds a layer of modern mythology to the layers of biblical, archaeological, and historical mythology.

Just like its transboundary neighbor, the Qasr al Yehud site in the Israeli-occupied West Bank uses archaeological remains and historic accounts to prove it is the authentic site of Jesus’ baptism. It refers to the 6th-century Madaba Map, which places “Bethabara” (Bethany Beyond the Jordan) and the church of John the Baptist west of the Jordan River.

While the site at Qasr al Yehud could in the future become a Palestinian site as part of a peace settlement, for the time being it remains firmly under Israeli control, as it has been since 1967. Like Al Maghtas in Jordan, the area around Qasr al Yehud was



*The Madaba Map, Madaba, Jordan. (Source: Soon Kim, 2013 Creative Commons).*

affected by the regional conflict and became an inaccessible military zone after 1967, cordoned off by a security fence and surrounded by minefields.

After 1980, limited access was granted to local church communities who came to celebrate Epiphany and Easter. During the rest of the year, pilgrims could only visit the site by appointment with a military escort.

However, after the papal visit in 2000, Israel decided to refurbish the site, a project which was jointly implemented by the Israeli Nature and Parks Authority and the Civil Administration, the Israeli body that governs the West Bank. Funding for the project came from the Israeli Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry for Regional

Cooperation, a controversial move since part of the \$2 million budget was effectively drawn from funds reserved for West Bank development.

In addition to being a biblical site, Qasr al Yehud also makes a number of political statements, as it competes for authenticity with its Jordanian neighbor, but also reiterates and reinforces the Israeli presence in the West Bank.

## The Politics of Developing and Transforming the Jordan

The river that runs between the two sites has also become a more complex and layered space since the 1950s. Its image as a holy river has been overshadowed by infrastructural development, which approached the river as a utilitarian water resource system harnessed to meet the demands of a growing population in the region.

After the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, it was drawn into the regional conflict as a contested resource. Israel forcefully imposed the construction and operation of its National Water Carrier – a 200-kilometer conduit that conveys more than 300 MCM of water annually from Lake Tiberias to cities along the Israeli coast and further south to the Negev – prevented Jordanian, Lebanese, and Syrian attempts to develop the river, and entirely barred Palestinians from accessing it.

Meanwhile [Syria](#), which lost access to the Upper Jordan River and Lake Tiberias with Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights in



*Pilgrims at Qasr al Yehud, West Bank. (Source: Francesca de Châtel, 2013.)*

1967, turned to the development of the Yarmouk River and its tributaries, where it built 38 dams in the following decades.

Jordan also started diverting water from the Yarmouk and Zarqa Rivers into the King Abdullah Canal. Unsurprisingly, the first victim of these unilateral development strategies was the Lower Jordan River itself, which has been reduced to around 2% of its historic flow.



*Raw sewage being released in the Lower Jordan River at the Alumot Dam, Israel. (Source: Francesca de Châtel, 2013.)*

In addition, water quality in this part of the river south of the Alumot Dam has been severely impaired, with saline flows, agricultural runoff, water from fishponds, and poorly treated sewage being released by all communities along the river so that its water is unsuitable for use in any sector. The degradation of the Jordan River has also caused a 50% reduction in biodiversity.



*The Lower Jordan River below the Alumot Dam. (Source: Francesca de Châtel, 2013.)*

FoEME has drawn attention to the severe degradation of the Lower Jordan River through several detailed studies and a wide-reaching international campaign to rehabilitate it.

In 2010, the organization also warned that organic pollution posed a serious public health threat at the southern baptism sites, which led to a flurry of media coverage over whether the river was safe for immersion at the baptism site in the West Bank.

The Israeli authorities subsequently issued statements declaring that the water was regularly monitored and safe for immersion. But as neither the Israelis nor the Jordanians make comprehensive long-term data publicly available, it is easy to

speculate about the degree of pollution and whether it poses a public health threat.

The Yardenit Baptismal Site in Israel is far removed from such unsettling reports of polluted holy water and the history of conflict and shifting borderlines. Situated just south of Lake Tiberias before the Alumot Dam, Yardenit gives a bucolic impression of the Jordan River as a free-flowing, tree-lined river.

According to the [Yardenit website](#), this is one of the only places along the Jordan River where the river still flows naturally. In fact, from a hydraulic point of view, the river here is an artificial reservoir, regulated by the upstream Degania Dam that controls inflow from Lake Tiberias, and the Alumot Dam, 1.5 km



*The Yardenit Baptismal Site, Israel. (Source: Francesca de Châtel, 2013.)*

downstream. The water at Yardenit is essentially the same as that in Lake Tiberias and therefore close to drinking-water quality.

In this “pristine” setting, the site presents a bright and uncomplicated story that merges spirituality, tourism and consumerism into a seamless modern-day religious-retail experience. The visitors’ center, designed in the shape of a church’s nave, includes a large gift shop selling everything from bibles and olivewood crucifixes to holy water (125 ml, \$6) and “I Was Baptized in the Jordan River” T-shirts.

Across from the gift shop, the Manna Restaurant serves “biblical food,” including St. Peter’s Fish and dates produced at the nearby Kibbutz Kinneret. Outside near the baptismal pools,



*The Lower Jordan River flowing south seen from the Degania Dam and above the Alumot Dam, Israel. (Source: Francesca de Châtel, 2013.)*



visitors can pick up a video recording of their own baptism ceremony and buy empty plastic bottles and jerry cans to fill up with water from the Jordan River.

As Yardenit is more than 100 kilometers from the two southern sites, there is less need to legitimize it as the authentic site of Jesus' baptism – tourists who visit as part of a day tour may not even be aware that there are any other sites.

Yet, by omitting any biblical references to Bethany Beyond the Jordan and emphasizing the “scenic landscapes [described in the Bible...] that have been preserved to this day,” the site's tourist brochure implicitly suggests that this is the authentic site of baptism, or at least the place where it can be relived most authentically.



*Holy water in the Yardenit gift shop, Israel. (Source: Francesca de Châtel, 2013.)*

Billed as “the perfect combination of the [sic] Christian heritage, the exciting sights of the Holy Land and the history of civilization,” the Yardenit Site – like the two southern sites – also weaves in subtle political narratives, firmly rooting the story of baptism into ancient – and, implicitly, more recent – Jewish history in the Holy Land.

The site's location on the grounds of Kibbutz Kinneret, the second kibbutz founded in Mandate Palestine, ties the biblical event of the baptism of Jesus into Zionist narratives.

Thus while the three baptism sites present themselves as religious sites that focus on biblical history and offer a space for spiritual reflection, each also represents particular political, nationalist, and economic interests, while at the same time glossing over the profound changes to the holy river itself.

Pilgrims who visit these sites appear unconcerned by or unaware of the physical changes to the river, which in their view do not affect its spiritual qualities.

Msgr. Maroun Lahham, the Latin Patriarch Vicar General of Jordan, appeared indifferent to the state of the river, considering its physicality to be almost irrelevant. “From a religious perspective it does not matter whether the water is dense or light, clear or cloudy, polluted or not polluted,” he said. “This does not touch upon the aspect of faith. Pollution is a Western concern, it is Cartesian. Descartes' influence stopped on the northern shores of the Mediterranean.”

The physical and spiritual realms continue to exist separately, allowing the image of the holy Jordan River to persist independently of the altered physical river. An official at Al Maghtas in Jordan said that the river's holy qualities are unchangeable. "We don't like the word 'pollution,'" he said.

"The water quality has been impaired by return flow of fertilizer, pesticides, saline water and treated and untreated sewage water along the whole river course. All this does not affect the spiritual quality of the river though: the Jordan is the Jordan. It is a holy river."

## Reviving the Jordan River

Despite the continued zero-sum struggle for the river's water, efforts are being made to revive the Jordan River. FoEME has developed a comprehensive rehabilitation plan for the Lower Jordan River based on extensive research in Israel, Jordan, and Palestine.

The plan outlines concrete steps to remove pollutants from the river, return fresh water flow to it, and ensure Palestinian rights to a share of the river's water are honored. It highlights the crucial importance of cross-border cooperation and of treating the river basin as a single interconnected ecosystem that transcends political boundaries and disputes.

Partly as a result of FoEME's advocacy efforts, Israel started releasing 1,000 m<sup>3</sup>/hour of fresh water from the Alumot Dam into the Lower Jordan River in May 2013, with a commitment to increase this amount to an annual 30 MCM.



*Israel started releasing fresh water into the Lower Jordan River in May 2013. (Source: Francesca de Châtel, 2013.)*

The Israeli Ministry of Environment has also outlined a master plan for the upper part of the Lower Jordan River up to the Bezeq Stream, the border with the Palestinian West Bank.

In addition, the operation of a new sewage treatment plant near the Alumot Dam by 2015 will remove sewage from the river. If Jordanian and Palestinian plans to build wastewater treatments plants in their part of the watershed are realized, half a century of using the Jordan as a sewage canal could be put to an end, according to FoEME.

However, the removal of the various effluents discharged by Israel, Jordan and Palestine could cause the drying up of the river. FoEME therefore recommends that 400-600 MCM/year of fresh

water be returned to the river and that the river be allowed to flood once a year in order to maintain a healthy ecosystem.

While critics argue that none of the riparians are willing or able to give up their acquired share of the river, FoEME says it has identified over 1 billion cubic meters of water that can be saved in Israel, Jordan, and Syria.

The organization is advocating for the establishment of an international commission to manage the Lower Jordan River basin and is currently developing a cross-border master plan. It is also working towards the creation of a transboundary ecological peace park on the border between Israel and Jordan.

FoEME's broad-ranging Jordan River Rehabilitation Project also seeks to engage and involve Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious leaders both in the region and internationally in an effort to raise awareness of the importance of preserving the Jordan River Valley as a site of shared religious and cultural-historical heritage.

In November 2013, the organization published a series of Faith-Based Toolkits (Christian, Jewish, Muslim), which religious leaders are encouraged to use in their sermons and activities to engage faith communities in the region and beyond.

Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious leaders from Israel, Jordan, and Palestine also gathered at a regional conference on the Dead Sea in Jordan in November 2013 where they endorsed the Covenant for the Jordan River drawn up by FoEME. The document calls upon regional governments to work towards the

rehabilitation of the Lower Jordan Valley, which "must be counted as part of the heritage of humankind."

Thus, against all odds, the first steps towards reviving the Lower Jordan River have been taken. And while the Jordan River will never return to its natural state, it could again becoming a living river and a carrier of holy water that is not only worshipped in a religious context but also revered and respected as the key to life and livelihood in this arid region. ♦

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## Suggested Reading

A series reports, concept documents and other publications issued by Friends of the Earth Middle East between 2010 and 2014 are available at [www.foeme.org](http://www.foeme.org).

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# Who Owns the Nile? Egypt, Sudan, and Ethiopia's History-Changing Dam

## EDITOR'S NOTE:

*Egypt and Sudan are utterly dependent on the waters of the Nile River. Over the past century both of these desert countries have built several dams and reservoirs, hoping to limit the ravages of droughts and floods which have so defined their histories. Now Ethiopia, one of eight upriver states and the source of most of the Nile waters, is building the largest dam in Africa. Located on the Blue Nile twenty five miles from the Ethiopian border with Sudan, the Grand Renaissance Dam begins a new chapter in the long, bellicose history of debate on the ownership of the Nile waters, and its effects for the entire region could be profound.*

*(Published March 2013)*

By **ANDREW CARLSON**

In the fall of 2012 newspapers around the world reported on a [Wikileaks](#) document, surreptitiously acquired from Stratfor, the Texas security company, revealing Egyptian and Sudanese plans to build an airstrip for bombing a dam in the Blue Nile River Gorge in Ethiopia. The Egyptian and Sudanese governments denied the reports.

Whether or not there were such plans in 2012, there is a long history of threats and conflicts in the Nile River Basin. Downriver Egypt and Sudan argue that they have historic rights to the water upon which they absolutely depend—and in 1979 Egyptian President Anwar Sadat threatened war on violators of what he saw as his country's rights to Nile waters. Upriver Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania argue that they too need the water that originates on their lands.



*A rendering of the Grand Renaissance Dam under construction in Ethiopia on the Blue Nile. Its completion is expected to profoundly change the allocation of water resources in Africa.*

Since the twelfth century C.E. Christian Ethiopian kings have warned Muslim Egyptian sultans of their power to divert waters of the Nile, often in response to religious conflicts. But these were hypothetical threats.

Today, however, Ethiopia is building the Grand Renaissance Dam and, with it, Ethiopia will physically control the Blue Nile Gorge—the primary source of most of the Nile waters.

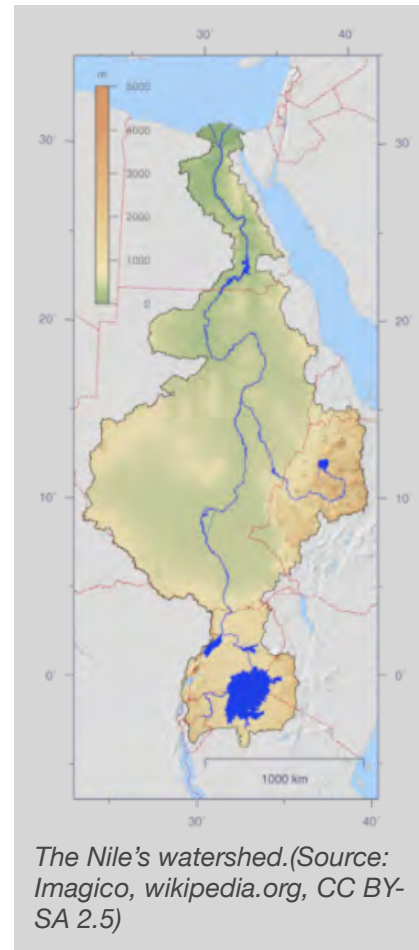
The stakes could not be higher for the new leaders in Egypt and Ethiopia, President Mohamed Morsi and Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, as well as Sudan’s long-time President, Omar El Bashir. The stakes are perhaps even higher for the millions of people who owe their livelihood and very existence to the Nile’s waters.

## Egypt and the Nile

The Nile has been essential for civilization in Egypt and Sudan. Without that water, there would have been no food, no people, no state, and no monuments. As Herodotus famously wrote in the 5th century B.C.E., “Egypt is the gift of the Nile.”

For millennia peoples have travelled along the banks of the Nile and its tributaries. Scores of ethnic groups in Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan share architecture and engineering, ideas and traditions of religion and political organization, languages and alphabets, food and agricultural practices.

In 3000 B.C.E., when the first Egyptian dynasty unified the lower and upper parts of the Nile River, there were no states in Eastern



or Central Africa to challenge Egypt’s access to Nile waters.

The Nile was a mysterious god: sometimes beneficent, sometimes vengeful. Floods between June and September, the months of peak flow, could wipe out entire villages, drowning thousands of people. Floods also brought the brown silt that nourished the delta, one of the world’s most productive agricultural regions, feeding not only Egypt but many of its neighbors.

The river’s central importance to Egyptian life is captured in *A Hymn to the Nile*, recorded in Papyrus Sallier II:

Hail to thee, O Nile, that issues from the earth and comes to keep Egypt alive! ...

He that waters the meadows which He created ...

He that makes to drink the desert ...

He who makes barley and brings emmer into being ...

He who brings grass into being for the cattle ...

He who makes every beloved tree to grow ...  
O, Nile, verdant art thou, who makes man and cattle to live.

The Nile's seasonal flooding is a central theme in Egyptian history. The river flow follows regular patterns, increasing between May 17 and July 6, peaking in September, and then receding until the next year. But the river volume is very unpredictable, as documented by nilometers (multi-storied structures built in the river to measure water heights). Successive empires of Pharaohs, Greeks, Romans, Christian Copts, and Muslims celebrated the rising waters of the Nile and dreaded floods or droughts.

Five millennia of Nile history show how years with high water have produced ample food, population growth, and magnificent monuments, as during the first five dynasties from 3050 B.C.E. to 2480 B.C.E. Periods with low water have brought famine and disorder. The Book of *Genesis* describes seven years of famine that historians associate with the drought of 1740 B.C.E.

From the time of the Pharaohs until 1800 C.E., Egypt's population rose and fell between 2 to 5 million, due to food availability and epidemics. The irrigation projects of the 19th century Ottoman ruler Mohammad Ali allowed year-around cultivation, causing population growth from 4 to 10 million. Since the opening of the Aswan High Dam in 1971, Egypt's population has increased from about 30 to 83 million.

## The Sources of the Nile

Despite the extraordinary importance of the Nile to people downstream, the origin of the great river was a mystery until the



*A map showing the White Nile and the Blue Nile in East Africa. (Source: Nile-en.svg., CC BY-SA 2.5-2.0-1.0, wikipedia.org)*

middle twentieth century. Herodotus speculated that the Nile arose between the peaks of Crophi and Mophi, south of the first cataract. In 140 C.E. Ptolemy suggested the source was the Mountains of the Moon, in what are now called the Ruwenzori Mountains in Uganda.

The 11th century Arab geographer al-Bakri postulated West African origins, confusing the Niger

River, which empties into the Atlantic Ocean, with the Nile River. In 1770 the Scottish explorer James Bruce claimed his discovery of the source in Ethiopia, while in 1862 John Hanning Speke thought he found it in Lake Victoria and the equatorial lakes.

The river's limited navigability only increased its mystery. The Blue Nile River descends 4501 feet in 560 miles from Lake Tana in the Ethiopian highlands through a deep gorge with crocodiles, hippopotamuses, and bandits to the Sudan border and the savannah. Despite the efforts of scores of intrepid adventurers,

the Blue Nile in Ethiopia was not successfully navigated until 1968 by a team of British and Ethiopian soldiers and civilians equipped by the Royal Military College of Science.

Further south up the White Nile in the lakes and rivers of Burundi, Rwanda, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, the Egyptian cultural influence is less pronounced, due to the Sudd, a gigantic and impassable swamp which absorbs waters from the equatorial lake tributaries. The Nile River historian Robert O. Collins reports that “no one passed through this primordial bog” until 1841.

Not until the 20th century did it become clear that the Nile is part of a vast river system with dozens of tributaries, streams, and lakes, stretching from the Mediterranean Sea to the remote mountains of Burundi, in tropical central Africa, and to the highlands of Ethiopia, in the Horn of Africa.

Spanning more than 4,200 miles, it is the longest river in the world. It has also become clear that the volume of water which flows through the Nile is relatively small—a mere two percent in volume of the Amazon’s and fifteen percent of the Mississippi—and mostly (86%) from Ethiopia.

## **Ethiopia, Egypt, and the Historical Struggle for the Nile’s Waters**

Ethiopia and Egypt have had a long relationship of both harmony and discord, the latter the result of religious issues and access to Nile water, among other factors.

Ethiopia’s first well documented government was in Aksum, a city-state that controlled a large empire from the Ethiopian highlands across the Red Sea to Yemen. From 100 until 800 C.E. Aksumites participated in Mediterranean and Indian Ocean trade.

The cultural relationship between Egypt and Ethiopia was institutionalized when the Aksumite King Ezana converted to Christianity in 330 C.E. For 16 centuries (until 1959) the Egyptian bishop of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was appointed by the Egyptian patriarch in Alexandria, often under the influence of the Egyptian government.

Ethiopians were profoundly influenced by the Middle East, even writing their state and geography into Bible stories. The source of the Blue Nile became the Gihon, one of the four rivers that flowed from the Garden of Eden. The 14th century C.E. myth of national origins connected Ethiopia’s rulers to the Old Testament. In this legend the Queen of Sheba (*Mekedda*), journeyed north from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to meet King Solomon in 900 B.C.E. A romantic relationship produced a child, Menelik I, the first in Ethiopia’s Solomonic Dynasty.

When Menelik became an adult, despite his father’s wish that he become the next King of Israel, he escaped to Ethiopia with the Ark of the Covenant—the cabinet which contained the tablets of the ten commandments given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Menelik stored the Ark on an island in Lake Tana—into which the Gihon flows—before it was moved to Aksum, where many Ethiopians believe the Ark remains to this day. Another Ethiopian legend is that Mary and Jesus stayed a night on that same island (Tana Cherquos) during their flight from the Holy Land to Egypt.



The Muslim conquest of Egypt in 640 C.E. put Christian Ethiopia in a defensive position. Because the Ethiopian Orthodox Church remained subordinate to the Orthodox Church in Alexandria, and Egypt had become a Muslim country, Ethiopians became suspicious and resentful of the control Egypt had on the appointment of their Christian bishop (*abun*). Muslim Egyptians also controlled Jerusalem and had the power to expel Ethiopian pilgrims to their holiest of cities.

So Ethiopians began to claim power over Egypt through control of the Nile. During the Crusades the Ethiopian emperor Lalibela (1190-1225)—who built a new Jerusalem in Ethiopia, safe from Muslim occupation in magnificent, underground rock-hewn churches—threatened retribution by diverting the Tekeze River from its pathway north into Sudan (where it becomes the Atbara and then joins the Nile).

The first Egyptian to write about the potential for an Ethiopian diversion of the Nile was the 13th century Coptic scholar Jurjis al-Makin (d. 1273).

Stories about Ethiopia's power over the Nile inspired the 14th century European legend of Prester John, a wealthy Christian Ethiopian priest king. In 1510 the legend returned to Ethiopia with Portuguese explorer Alfonso d' Albuquerque, who considered the possibility of destroying Egypt by diverting the Nile to the Red Sea. In 1513 d'Albuquerque even asked the Portuguese king for workers skilled in digging tunnels. Nothing came of the plan.

But conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia continued, often as proxy wars between Christians and Muslims on Ethiopia's

northern or southeastern borderlands. The sixteenth century invasion of Ethiopia by Ahmad Gragn, the Muslim imam from the Adal Sultante, was seen as an Egyptian conflict.

In the nineteenth century Egypt and Ethiopia fought over control of the Red Sea and upper Nile Basin. The climax came in 1876 at the Battle of Gura in present day Eritrea where the Ethiopians delivered a humiliating defeat to the Egyptian army.

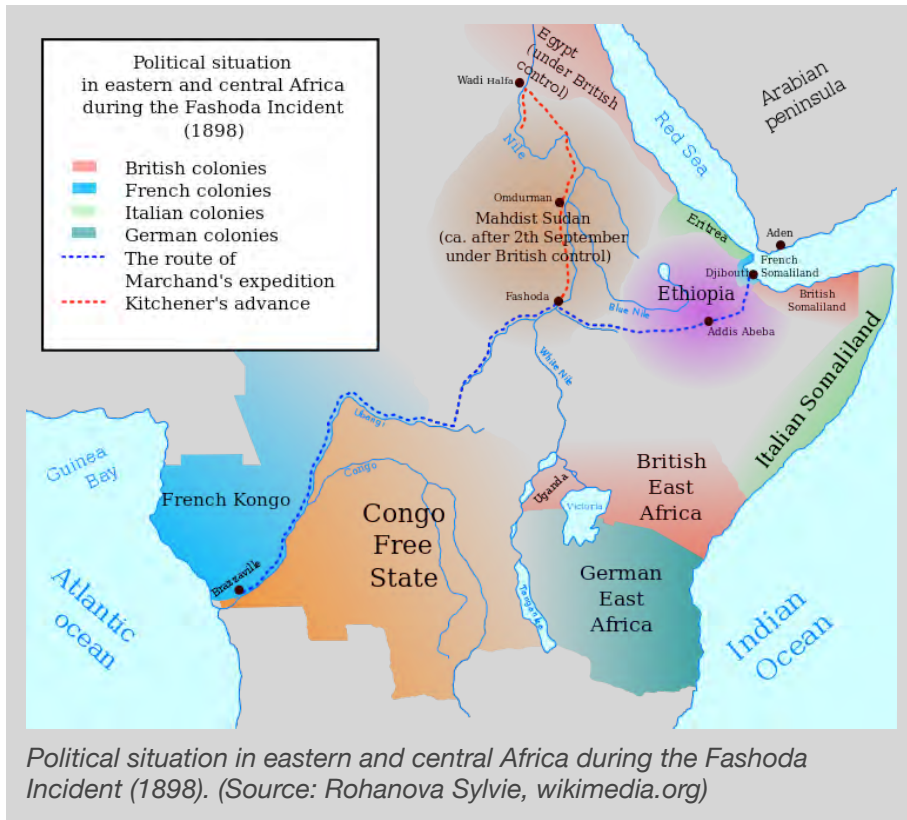
## Colonial-Era Conflicts over the Nile

The European partition of Africa in the 1880s added huge complexity to this conflict.

Egypt was colonized by England in 1882. Ethiopia defeated the Italians at the [Battle of Adwain](#) 1896 becoming the only African country to retain its independence during the “scramble for Africa.” But colonization created many new states in the Nile Basin (Eritrea, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya, and Tanganika) and set off new competition for resources and territory.

Egypt was prized for the Nile Delta, a region of unsurpassed agricultural productivity. After the completion of the Suez Canal in 1869, Egypt also offered access to the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean. For the British control of Egypt meant more profitable trade with India, its richest colony. For the French, the canal offered quicker access to Indochina, its most lucrative colony.

In the late nineteenth century, since controlling Egypt was the key to Asian wealth, and since Egypt depended on the Nile, controlling the source of the Nile became a major colonial goal.



The French-English competition for control of the Nile Basin climaxed in 1898 at Fashoda.

The French conceived of the idea of building a dam on the White Nile, so as to undermine British influence further downriver and establish east-west control of the continent. They organized a stupendous pincer movement with one group of soldiers traveling from East Africa across Ethiopia and the other from West Africa across the Congo.

The British heard of the French expedition, and, having just captured Khartoum ordered a fleet of gun boats and steamers with soldiers under the leadership of General Horatio Herbert Kitchener upriver to Fashoda, the site of the proposed dam. With fewer than 200 men, the French were embarrassed. In 1899 the two colonial powers reached an agreement which designated to France the frontiers of the Congo River and to England the frontiers of the White Nile.

The Fashoda Incident revealed how little Europeans understood about the Nile River. Thinking that most of the Nile waters came from the equatorial lakes (Victoria, Albert, Kyoga, and Edward), the English spent enormous energy on plans to increase White Nile water flows.

First called the Garstin Cut and later the Jonglei Canal, the British intended to create a channel that would maximize water transfer through the great swamp (where half of it evaporated).

One of the most expensive engineering projects in Africa, it was terminated in 1984 by the Sudan People's Liberation Army, because of the severe disruption it brought to the lives of the indigenous upper Nile peoples. If the 300 mile-long Jonglei Canal had been completed, it would have increased water flows by nearly 4 billion cubic meters into the White Nile.

## Negotiating the Nile: Treaties and Agreements over the Nile Waters

Treaty negotiations about Nile waters started during the colonial era as England tried to maximize agricultural productivity in the delta.

In 1902 the British secured from the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II an agreement to consult with them on any Blue Nile water projects, especially on Lake Tana. As the controlling imperial power in East Africa, agreements with Kenya, Tanganika, Sudan, and Uganda were *pro forma*, internal colonial matters.

After achieving its independence in 1922, Egypt negotiated the Nile Waters Agreement of 1929 with the East African British colonies. This accord established Egypt's right to 48 billion cubic meters of water flow, all dry season waters, and veto-power over any upriver water management projects; newly independent Sudan (1956) was accorded rights to 4 billion cubic meters of water. The Ethiopian monarch was not consulted—at least in part because no one understood how much Nile water actually came from Ethiopia.

The 1959 Nile Waters Agreement between Egypt and Sudan was completed before all the upriver states achieved independence: Tanganika (1961), Uganda (1962), Rwanda (1962), Burundi (1962), and Kenya (1963).

The signatories of the 1959 Agreement allocated Egypt 55.5 billion cubic meters of water annually while Sudan was allowed

18.5 billion cubic meters. These 79 billion cubic meters represented 99% of the calculated average annual river flow.

The treaty also allowed for the construction of the Aswan High Dam (completed in 1971), the Roseires Dam (completed 1966 on the Blue Nile in Sudan), and the Khashm al-Girba Dam (completed in 1964 on the Atbara River in Sudan).

The treaty so negatively affected the upriver states that it provided the inspiration for the Nyerere Doctrine, named after independent Tanzania's first president, which asserted that former colonies had no obligation to abide by treaties signed for them by Great Britain.

Emperor Haile Selassie was offended by President Nasser's exclusion of Ethiopia in the Nile Waters Agreement and in planning for building the Aswan Dam. He negotiated the 1959 divorce of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church from the Orthodox Church in Alexandria, ending 1600 years of institutional marriage.

He also began planning for several dams on the Blue Nile and its tributaries, contributing \$10 million dollars from the Ethiopian treasury towards a study by the U.S. Department of Reclamation resulting in a seventeen volume report completed in 1964 and titled *Land and Water Resources of the Blue Nile Basin: Ethiopia*.

Nasser responded by encouraging Muslims in Eritrea (reunified with Ethiopia after World War II) to secede from Ethiopia. He also encouraged Muslim Somalis to fight for the liberation of Ethiopia's Ogaden region.

Ethiopia won the war with [Somalia](#) in 1977-78 and retained the Ogaden. Its 30 year war with Eritrea, an Egyptian ally, came at a tremendous cost. Haile Selassie was overthrown in 1974, and after 1993 Eritrea won independence and Ethiopia became a landlocked country—although it still possessed the headwaters of the Blue Nile.

In the middle of the 1980s, rains failed in the Ethiopian highlands, causing a serious water crisis upriver and downriver. One million Ethiopians died as a result of drought and famine—made worse by Civil War with Eritrea. Egypt averted disaster but Aswan’s turbines were nearly shut down, creating an electric power nightmare; and crops failed in the delta, bringing the real prospect of famine.

As a result, Egyptians came to understand that their great Aswan Dam had not solved their historic dependency on upriver Nile water. In 1987, after years of hostile rhetoric, the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the Ethiopian President Haile Mariam Mengistu replaced the language of threat and confrontation with words of conciliation and cooperation.

Then in the 1990s the Ethiopian rains returned and, remarkably, Hosni Mubarak redoubled efforts begun during the Sadat administration to build the Toshka Canal, one of the world’s most expensive and ambitious irrigation projects. This plan would take 10% of waters in Lake Nasser to irrigate Egypt’s sandy Western Desert, increasing Egypt’s need for Nile water even if they maintained their 1959 treaty share of 55 billion cubic meters.

In anger and disbelief, the Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi protested: “While Egypt is taking the Nile water to transform the Sahara Desert into something green, we in Ethiopia—who are the source of 85% of that water—are denied the possibility of using it to feed ourselves.”

He then began plans for the Grand Renaissance Dam.

International water law has not resolved differences about ownership of Nile Waters. The Helsinki Agreement of 1966 proposed the idea of “equitable shares”—and the idea was taken up again in the 1997 United Nations Convention on the Law of Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses.

A proposal for “equitable shares” was again put forward in the 1999 Nile Basin Initiative, which included all the affected countries. Unfortunately the initiative did not resolve the conflict between Egypt and Sudan’s claims of historic rights and the upper river states’ claims for equitable shares.

In 2010, six upstream countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania) signed a Cooperative Framework Agreement seeking more water shares. Egypt and Sudan rejected the agreement because it challenged their historic water rights.

## **Ethiopia and the Lessons of Dam Building**

One lesson from the last century of mega-dam building is that upriver countries have the most power when negotiating water rights. The first of the mega-dams, the Hoover Dam on the

Colorado River in the United States, cost Mexico water. The Ataturk Dam in Turkey has had a devastating impact on downriver Syria and Iraq. China and Tibet control waters on multiple rivers flowing downstream to India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Vietnam.



*Map of the Blue Nile. (Source: Nicolas Perez, CC BY 2.5, Wikipedia.org)*

Another lesson is that mega-dams have enormous and unanticipated environmental impacts. The Aswan High Dam has disrupted the ecosystems of the river, the delta, and the Mediterranean with results of reduced agricultural productivity and fish stocks. It also caused a series of seismic events due to the extreme weight of the water in Lake Nasser, one of the world's largest reservoirs.

Although late to mega-dam building, Ethiopia is now making up for lost time. One of the tallest dams in the world was completed in 2009 on the Tekeze River in northern Ethiopia. Three major dams on the Omo and Gibe Rivers in southern Ethiopia are either completed or nearly so.

The biggest of Ethiopia's water projects, the Grand Renaissance Dam, will have a reservoir holding 67 billion cubic meters of water—twice the water held in Lake Tana, Ethiopia's largest lake—and is expected to generate 6000 megawatts of electricity.

Ethiopians hope these water projects—which extend to 2035 with other Nile tributaries and river systems—will lift their country out of poverty. Similar large dams have produced economic miracles in the United States, Canada, China, Turkey, India, Brazil, and, of course, Egypt.

Ethiopia's options for economic development are limited. With nearly 90 million people it is the most populous landlocked country in the world. It is also one of the world's poorest countries—174 on the list of 187 countries in the United Nations Human Development Index for 2012. (Sudan is 169 and Egypt 113.) This index rates countries based on life expectancy, education, and income, among other criteria.

Part of Ethiopia's challenge is that 85 percent of the workforce is in agricultural commodities that bring low profits. Ethiopia is already leasing land in its southern regions to Saudi Arabia, India, and China for large irrigated water projects—despite severe land shortage in its northern regions—because it does not have the funds to develop this land on its own.

If Ethiopia cannot use its elevation and seasonal rains for hydro-electric power and irrigation, what is it to do?

## **The Grand Renaissance Dam**

The state-owned Ethiopian Electric Power Corporation optimistically reports that the Grand Renaissance Dam will be completed in 2015 at a cost of nearly 5 billion dollars. As of 2013, the project is 13% complete, suggesting that it may be many years and billions of dollars before the dam is finished. The

Tekeze dam was well over its predicted budget and years behind schedule.

The major obstacle to completion is financing.

The World Bank, the European Investment Bank, the Chinese Import-Export Bank, and the African Development Bank provided financing for some of the other dams; but concerns about the environmental and political impact of this latest dam have discouraged lenders.

The International Monetary Fund suggested that Ethiopia put the dam on a slow track, arguing that the project will absorb 10% of Ethiopia's Gross Domestic Product, thus displacing other necessary infrastructure development.

Nevertheless the Ethiopian government insists that it will stick with its schedule and finance the project domestically. It probably will secure more help from China, a loyal ally and the world's major developer of hydroelectric power.

The Ethiopians argue that the Grand Renaissance Dam could be good for everyone. They contend that storing water in the deep Blue Nile Gorge would reduce evaporation, increasing water flows downstream.

The Ethiopians also argue that the new dam will be a source of hydroelectric power for the entire region and will manage flood control at a critical juncture where the Nile Gorge descends from the Ethiopian highlands to the Sahel, thus reducing risk of

flooding and siltation, extending the life of the dams below stream.

Egypt and Sudan are understandably concerned about Ethiopia's power over Nile waters. What happens while the reservoir behind the Grand Renaissance Dam is filling up, when water flow may be reduced 25 % for three years or more? After the reservoir is filled what will happen when rains fail in the Ethiopian highlands? Who will get the water first?

If the question of Nile waters was sensitive in the centuries before 1900, when Ethiopia and Egypt each had populations of 10 million or less, what will happen over the next twenty years, as their populations each surpass 100 million and the collective population of the Nile River Basin countries reaches 600 million?

The Grand Renaissance Dam poses a question as basic as water itself: Who owns the Nile? When the Grand Renaissance Dam closes its gates on the Blue Nile River, whether it is in 2015 or 2025, the time for a final reckoning will have arrived.

Ethiopia will then have the power to claim its water shares, with the backing of all the upriver states. Egypt and Sudan's claims to historic water rights will have become merely hypothetical. In the context of a difficult history, violence is a possibility, but good solutions for all can be achieved through diplomacy and leadership. ♦

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## Outdoing Panama: Turkey's 'Crazy' Plan to Build an Istanbul Canal

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

Turkey's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, recently unveiled a plan so ambitious that even he calls it the 'Crazy Project.' The project aims to build a massive canal that will bypass the Bosphorus waterway that bisects Istanbul—a rival to the Panama and Suez Canals in time for the Turkish Republic's centennial celebrations in 2023. The new canal, Erdogan hopes, will overcome centuries of international intrigue over the Bosphorus, facilitate trade, and reduce the possibility of shipping accidents through the heart of Istanbul. This month Origins Managing Editor James Helicke examines the international history surrounding the strategic waterway that has confounded sultans and statesmen. He asks if the 'Crazy Project' will solve the Bosphorus dilemma once and for all, or if it is just plain folly.

(Published August 2011)

### By JAMES HELICKE

Turkey's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had a secret.

Months into his governing party's third successful election campaign in 2011, the populist premier gave the Turkish public a few hints about a major project that his government had imagined for Istanbul, the largest city in Turkey—and Europe.

It would be ambitious. Massive. It would be a "crazy project," as Erdogan and the public coined it.

Turks **imagined**: Could it be a cultural center and mosque replicating the Selimiye, the sixteenth-century masterpiece of the great Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan?



*A ship moves along the Bosphorus through Istanbul, part of the only sea route from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's 'Crazy Project'—a plan to build a canal to bypass the treacherous waterway—was a centerpiece of his successful 2011 reelection campaign. But it remains to be seen if the Canal will overcome dangerous bottlenecks on the busy Bosphorus and a long history of international intrigues over the Straits. (Photo: Caiuscarmargarus)*



Maybe a mammoth "park of civilizations" suspended high over the Bosphorus, the rough waterway that bisects the city and marks the geographic boundary between Europe and Asia?

Perhaps, in a nod to crowding in this city of 15 million people, [Dubai-like man-made islands](#) shaped like the star and crescent on the Turkish flag?



Turkey's Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. (Source: [newsphere.jp](#))

Or, a solution once and for all to Istanbul's troubles on the Bosphorus—a strait crowded not only with urban commuters and pleasure craft, but Russian oil tankers protected by international agreements as they carry crude on the only

sea route from the Black Sea to world markets?

Erdogan did not disappoint.

In an April 27, 2011 [multimedia blitz](#), he unveiled the eagerly-awaited project to a conference hall crowded with journalists, mustached businessmen, and pious housewives with colorful, silk headscarves.

"We give to Istanbul, Canal Istanbul!" Erdogan told the jubilant crowd. "Today we roll up our sleeves on one of the biggest

projects of the century, with which the Panama Canal, the Suez and the Corinth Canal in Greece cannot even compete!"

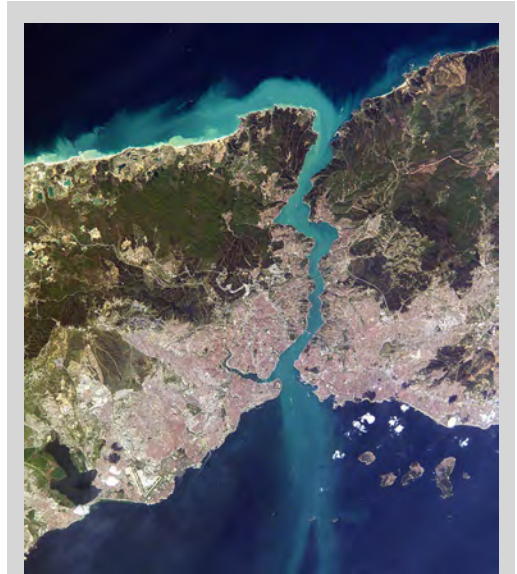
The project outlined by Erdogan calls for a 45-50 kilometer (28-31 mile) canal, some 25 meters (27 yards) in depth and up to 150 meters (164 yards) in width, to be dug west of Istanbul.

The canal would bypass the [Bosphorus](#), the site of multiple shipping

accidents, and link the Black Sea to the Marmara Sea. The canal would be a "second Bosphorus" as many news outlets called it.

After passing through the canal from the Black Sea, ships would then continue on their normal route through the Marmara Sea and Turkey's less treacherous [Dardanelles](#) on their way to the Aegean, the Mediterranean and ultimately to world markets.

"With Canal Istanbul, we will bring an end to freight traffic on the Bosphorus. And we will give back the Bosphorus to Istanbul and Turkey," Erdogan said.



A Satellite image of the Bosphorus. (Source: Astronaut photograph ISS008-E-21752-NASA, [wikipedia.org](#))

Erdogan's Bosphorus dream is the culmination of centuries of imagination and intrigues over Istanbul and the Straits.

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, European powers vied over who should—and should not—be given access to the waterways as statesmen sought to maintain the balance of power in Europe and the region.

Although sovereignty now belongs to Turkey, international conventions have long restricted Turkey's ability to limit steadily increasing ship traffic. Much of the Bosphorus traffic now includes hazardous materials and oil, leaving thousands—or even millions—vulnerable.

But there is more to Erdogan's plans for the straits than environmental woes or Bismarckian *realpolitik*.

The project speaks to a long tradition of political imagination, ambitious state-planning and—perhaps most of all—Erdogan's own political designs for the country.

The canal and related "crazy projects" for other cities in Turkey—major transportation and housing projects—were the centerpiece of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party's third straight electoral victory since 2002.

In elections on June 12, 2011, Erdogan's party won nearly 50 percent of the vote, picking up 325 of 550 seats in parliament.

Secular critics have accused Erdogan, a practicing Muslim and former member of a banned pro-Islamic party, of plotting to move

Turkey away from its official secular ideology toward a more Islamic path. He also has been accused of slowly, but surely inching toward greater absolutist rule.

Erdogan, who calls himself a conservative along the lines of European-style Christian democrats, has consistently denied any Islamic agenda and says his goal is to strengthen the country's democracy.

Under Erdogan's leadership, this overwhelmingly Muslim country of 75 million has also moved closer to its goal of membership in the European Union than under any of his more secular predecessors. Yet, by all accounts, achieving that goal remains only remotely possible or, at best, years away.

Nonetheless, the party's electoral slogan was boundlessly optimistic. "Target 2023," simultaneously looked to history—Turkey's founding as a nation-state in 1923—and its future centennial celebrations in the next decade.

Said Erdogan: "Turkey more than deserves to embark on such a great, crazy, and magnificent project for 2023!"

## **Istanbul and Dreams of Turkish Greatness**

Erdogan laced his hour-long speech announcing the project with stories of triumph and disaster, poetry, and references to Ottoman and Turkish historical grandeur.

According to Erdogan, Turks share a dream of Turkish national success that he traced back to Osman, the eponym for the

Ottoman Empire whose life and reign spanned the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

According to legend, Osman dreamt of a colossal tree sprouting from within himself and spreading across the region—a story Turks have interpreted as an allegory for the founding and growth of the Ottoman Empire.



A map showing the Straits, with the Bosphorus in red and the Dardanelles in yellow. (Source: Thomas Steiner, CC BY-SA 2.5, wikipedia.org)

"At the foundation of a great civilization, there is, foremost, a dream. We too have established a dream for our country," Erdogan said.

In many ways, Erdogan is but the latest ruler over the centuries to transform the city on the Bosphorus.

At a time that the Roman Empire was under siege, Constantine moved his capital from Rome and transformed the town of Byzantium into Constantinople in the fourth century. The city became the largest in Christendom, boasting the sixth-century Hagia Sophia, once the largest church in the world.

By the fifteenth century, when the Byzantine Empire was just a shadow of its former self, the imperial capital—guarded by walls, a massive chain across the Bosphorus, and fortuitous geography—was the last Byzantine city to succumb to Ottoman forces.

According to Erdogan's account, Fatih Sultan Mehmet II ("Mehmet the Conqueror") shared a dream similar to his own when Ottoman forces built fortifications to gain control of the Bosphorus and even carried some warships overland to conquer Constantinople in 1453.

For Mehmet II and Ottoman forces, "the city"—as it was often called with affection—had stood like a dagger at the heart of the Ottoman Empire that now surrounded it on all sides, inhibiting Ottoman expansion to Europe and the Middle East.

At the apex of Ottoman rule, Suleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566) again transformed the city on the Bosphorus by ordering the construction of new mosques, schools, and other monuments—making it the worthy capital of a ruler who claimed legitimacy as both a Muslim ruler and as "Caesar of Rome."

## Canals and the Transformation of Nature

The massive nature of Erdogan's project, which includes not only the Canal itself, but the launch of two new major settlements along the Canal Zone connected by a new, third bridge over the Bosphorus, speaks to a longer tradition in Turkey of ambitious nation-building and infrastructure projects in the twentieth century.

Of course, Turkey is hardly alone in such promethean ventures, and Canal Istanbul will join a long list of grandiose construction projects that cram the volumes of human history.

Canals throughout history have long been connected to broader patterns of political, economic and military expansion and integration.

The peoples of ancient Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley used canals for irrigation, encouraging the growth of life in towns and civilization more broadly.

Canals featured prominently in the development of ancient China by helping to bring unity to formerly disparate states. The Grand Canal of China, completed in the seventh century CE, remains by far the longest canal in the world at nearly 1,800 kilometers (nearly 1,120 miles)—far surpassing the canals of Suez (193 kilometers or 120 miles), Panama (77 kilometers or 48 miles) and Erdogan (45-50 kilometers or 28-31 miles).

The Greeks pioneered canal locks and probably completed the first canal to connect the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. Roman

canals, moreover, not only served irrigation and transportation, but more broadly helped to integrate a far-flung empire.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, major canals in England and the United States accelerated British industrial development and American westward expansion.

The Suez Canal (opened in 1869), sometimes nicknamed the "highway to India," reduced travel to Britain's prized colony by connecting the Mediterranean to the Red Sea. It also helped to unleash a new wave of imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century.

One of the greatest engineering feats of all time, the Panama Canal opened in 1914 only by propping up Panamanian secessionists, overcoming disease, and opting for an elevated canal with locks and dams rather than one at sea level. (Frustrated, Ferdinand de Lesseps, who led the construction of the Suez Canal, abandoned Panama in disgrace). In the end, the Panama Canal not only connected the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, but contributed to a new American form of empire.

What is perhaps unique about Erdogan's canal—which will bypass the Bosphorus and provide duplicate access from the Black Sea to the Marmara—is that it is likely among the few to replicate that which already has been given by nature.

## The Eastern Question

It remains to be seen, however, if this replacement of a natural waterway with a human engineered one will bring a definitive end

to one of Turkey's most difficult military and diplomatic challenges: the so-called "Eastern Question." This nineteenth-century Eurocentric "Question"—what to do with a weakening Ottoman Empire seen as past its heyday—may now be over, but the issues it raised about Turkey's place in the international community linger today.

The Straits of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles have long defined the geopolitical relationship of Turkey (and the Ottoman Empire before it) and the rest of the world.

But it was arguably the turn of the nineteenth century that marked the transition of the Bosphorus and Straits from a blessing to a curse for the Ottoman Empire.

Although Ottoman historians now vehemently reject the term "decline," there can be little debate that the Ottoman Empire witnessed a series of struggles after the eighteenth century.

Russia's growth, its aspirations for access to the sea, and increasing assertion of imperial might often came at Ottoman expense.

Many scholars see Ottoman defeat in the Russian-Ottoman War of 1768-74 as a major turning point in Turkey's relations with European powers.

The humiliating Treaty of Kucuk Kaynarca (1774) gave the Crimean Peninsula to Russia, along with passage rights through the Dardanelles, and disputed political rights over Ottoman Orthodox Christians.

Russia's new status as a Black Sea power not only raised questions about Russian access to the Mediterranean through the Straits, its challenge to the Ottoman Empire raised questions about how to maintain the balance of power in Europe—that tacit understanding among European statesmen that no state should become too strong to dominate the others.

At the heart of this "Eastern Question" was the future of the Ottoman Empire and the question of the Straits.

The Treaty of Hunkar Iskelesi (Unkiar Skelessi, 1833) stipulated that the Ottoman Empire be required to close the Straits to foreign powers at Russia's request. Fears that these provisions disrupted the balance of power by giving Russia too much privilege led to the Straits Convention of 1841, which closed the Straits to all but the Ottomans in peacetime. This kept Britain and France out of the Black Sea and Russia out of the Mediterranean.

Subsequent agreements sought to maintain the balance of power by stipulating who had right to the Straits and when.

The Treaty of Paris (1856) and the Treaty of London (1871) returned to the "ancient rule" of the Ottoman Empire that warships should not use the Straits except by the special permission of the Sultan during times of peace.

Yet, maintaining balance in the international arena became increasingly challenging as indigenous nationalism and European powers continued to chip away at Ottoman territory. Amid these struggles, Europeans sometimes called the Ottoman Empire the

"Sick Man of Europe" —to the consternation of Ottoman statesmen and contemporary historians.

Some Turks continue to see similarities in Turkey's limited ability to control international shipping traffic through the Bosphorus and nineteenth-century European designs on Ottoman territory.

And with its bid for EU membership at a standstill, at least one component of the old Eastern Question—what should Europe do with Turkey?—remains unresolved.

## The Struggle for Control of the Straits

The question of the Straits also lay at the very heart of many of the twentieth century's most difficult military and diplomatic questions.

Although the Ottoman Empire initially professed neutrality in the First World War, its decision to grant harbor to two German warships, the *Goeben and Breslau*, ultimately tipped the Ottomans toward an alliance with Germany.

The German vessels had avoided British naval pursuit and, in August 1914, passed into the Turkish Straits, challenging British and French domination of the Mediterranean and Russian domination of the Black Sea.

The American ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Henry Morgenthau, wrote: "I am convinced that, when the judicious historian reviews this war and its consequences, he will say that the passage of the Strait by these German ships made it

inevitable that Turkey should join Germany ... and that it likewise sealed the doom of the Turkish Empire."

Winston Churchill proclaimed that, by drawing the Ottomans into the fighting and extending the war, the passage of the two vessels brought "more slaughter, more misery and more ruin than has ever before been borne within the compass of a ship."

Gaining control of the Straits was the goal of the Gallipoli Campaign, which from April 1915 to January 1916 unsuccessfully sought to take the waterways and Ottoman capital.

With involvement by such colorful figures as Churchill, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and the [Anzacs](#) (the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps), Gallipoli helped to forge a sense of nationhood not only for the besieged Turks, but also New Zealanders and Australians. Turks won the battle, but lost the war.

The Treaty of Sèvres (1920)—one of six treaties prepared at the Paris Peace Conference that brought an end to World War I—established an occupation over much of today's Turkey. It established a Zone of the Straits, comprised of Istanbul and other territory along the Straits, and placed it under the control of an international commission.

It also declared that the Straits "shall in future be open, both in peace and war, to every vessel of commerce or of war and to military and commercial aircraft, without distinction of flag."

For the Turks, the foreign occupation in the heart of their territory —with division of much of the Anatolian heartland among



Bundesarchiv, Bild 134-B0024  
Foto: o. Ang. | 1914/1916 ca.

*The German warship Goeben in the Bosphorus before 1917. (Source: Bundesarchiv, Bild 134-B0024, tr.wikipedia.org, CC-BY-SA 3.0)*

neighbors, European powers, and minority groups—became a symbol for Turkey's national resistance. Even today, Turks associate the term "Sèvres" with betrayal and selling out to foreign powers.

From 1919 to 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk rallied Turkish nationalists to gain sovereignty over Turkish territory and the Straits.

Although the new Treaty of Lausanne (1923) gave Turkish nationalists most of the territory they sought, the treaty retained an international commission for the Straits, which remained demilitarized.

Over the next decade and a half, Atatürk—the name that he adopted in 1934—introduced sweeping reforms aimed at strengthening the new nation-state and consolidating his control.

Westernization reforms limited Islam's influence over politics, switched from the Arabic to Latin script for the Turkish language, and even mandated that men must no longer wear the fez, but European-style hats.

Atatürk moved the capital from Istanbul to Ankara, transforming the latter from a sleepy, provincial town to the capital of the new nation-state—with broad boulevards, government buildings, schools, and his own pet project: an experimental farm.

As Turkey grew in strength and turmoil grew in Europe, Turkey pulled off one of its greatest foreign policy triumphs: revision to the regime governing the Straits.

The Montreux Convention, which remains in effect today, abolished the Straits Commission and once again returned authority over the Straits to Turkey. In addition to allowing remilitarization, Turkey could restrict the passage of ships during wartime. It was obligated, however, to allow the passage of merchant vessels during times of peace.

Atatürk's legacy of ambitious state planning has not only left a profound mark on the seven decades of Turkish politics since his death, but Turkey's approach to foreign policy and the Straits have been profoundly shaped by the treaties—Lausanne and Montreux—that he helped broker.

## The Bosphorus in the Vice of the Cold War

After the Second World War, the Straits, especially the Bosphorus, remained an issue of contention and a symbol of Turkey's place in the world. Turkey resisted any revision to the Straits regime that might limit its control over the waterways.

Eager to avoid the disastrous consequences of picking the wrong side like they did in the First World War, Turkish leaders pursued a precarious policy of neutrality aimed at averting direct involvement in World War II.

Turkey's wavering policy instead drew the ire of an increasingly powerful Soviet Union and the Straits became integral to Cold War strategic equations.

In 1945-1946, the Soviet Union insisted on a [revision to the Straits regime](#) that would allow it to maintain forces there and also pressed for claims to other Turkish territory. An eminent Turkish journalist proclaimed that "the old Eastern Question has risen from its grave."

In 1946, the U.S. Ambassador to Turkey observed that "control of the Straits ... obviously is of much more importance" than any other Soviet demands.

The defense of Turkey and Greece from communism provided the public justification for the 1947 [Truman Doctrine](#). The speech by U.S. President Harry S. Truman was then the clearest public enunciation of the U.S. policy of the containment of communism, which dominated U.S. strategy throughout the Cold War.

By the 1950s, the United States considered the use of [mines](#) on the Straits to deter Soviet submarines from entering the Mediterranean. Turkey's alliance with the West solidified with its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952.

## Bridges

As Turkey has deepened its alliance with the West, the Straits—and the Bosphorus in particular—have become associated with new symbolism of Turkey as a bridge between cultures, civilizations, and continents.

Yet, the idea of a bridge over the Bosphorus also has a literal meaning that reflected a long legacy of large-scale state planning in Turkey.

In 1957, Prime Minister Adnan Menderes announced plans to build the longest suspension bridge outside the United States—over the Bosphorus.

The bridge was part of an ambitious urban revitalization project to raze "slums" (including historic structures) and build "modern" new housing, parks, roads, and highways in Istanbul. The government claimed it was "carrying out the dream of Kemal (Ataturk) to make Istanbul ... 'most beautiful and modern,'" according to a 1960 *New York Times* article.

The bridge project was interrupted by a 1960 military coup—the first of several military interventions.





A map of Turkey. (Source: Tu-map, public domain, wikipedia.org)

In 1963, Turkey became an associate member of the European Common Market. In 1967, the bridge project was finally revived.

Chancellor Willy Brandt—the architect of West Germany's own outreach to the Soviet Union, *Ostpolitik*—declared: "This bridge signifies Turkey's wish to join Europe."

In October 1973, two years after Turkey's second coup d'état, the Bosphorus Bridge—with a total span of around 5,000 feet (1,500 meters)—was finally complete. Its status as the first bridge across two continents filled world newspapers along with clichés of Turkey as a bridge between civilizations.

## Bosphorus Bottleneck

The Bosphorus Bridge did not solve Turkey's Bosphorus dilemma, nor did improved relations with its eastern neighbors.

As thousands and thousands of migrants from across Turkey continued to flock to Istanbul each year, it was clear that a single bridge would not adequately address Istanbul's growing population and deadlocked traffic.

In 1987, Prime Minister Turgut Ozal, who led Turkey after a nasty 1980 military coup and promoted political and economic liberalization, opened a second bridge over the Bosphorus: the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge, named after the Ottoman sultan who conquered Istanbul.

Since the 1990s, governments from across the political divide have been pushing for a third one, which has been held up by legal challenges from property owners.

Erdogan has also backed a \$2.5-\$3.0 billion rail tunnel project under the Bosphorus, known as Marmaray, which has been under construction since 2004. He has sometimes chided archaeological excavations along the route for holding the project up.

Yet, solutions from beneath and above will not solve Turkey's biggest Bosphorus problem.

The waterway is harrowing, with sharp curves, blind spots, and shifting currents. Ferryboats and private boats zigzag across the strait, which they share with giant oil tankers and the occasional cruise ship.

Traffic within the treacherous waterway has steadily increased over the years. Turkish authorities say that in 1936 around 4,400

vessels passed through the waterway. Today, that number is around 50,000 annually—a more than ten-fold increase.

Unsurprisingly, around 460 [accidents](#) occurred between 1953 and 2002, most collisions. These have included multiple spills.

In 1960, Yugoslav and Greek tankers collided, killing 20 and leaving a fire that burned for weeks. In 1966, two Soviet tankers collided.

Ferryboats have struck other vessels. Significant spills of crude, gasoline, and other chemicals occurred in 1964, 1966, 1979, 1990, 1994, 1999, 2002 and 2003.

In his speech, Erdogan referred to the 1979 collision of the Romanian-flagged *Independenta* with a Greek ship that killed more than 40 people and left a pile of wreckage that burned for weeks.

While Erdogan was mayor of Istanbul, a 1994 collision killed 29 and brought passage in the Straits to a halt.

As oil from countries of the former Soviet Union has increasingly made its way to world markets since the collapse of the U.S.S.R., pressure on the Bosphorus has only increased.

In response, Turkish governments have encouraged pipeline projects, such as [the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline](#) from Azerbaijan to a Mediterranean port in southern Turkey. Another oil pipeline, scheduled for operation in 2012, will bring crude from the Black Sea to the same port.

According to Erdogan, more than 358 million tons of freight is carried on the Bosphorus every year, including 4 million tons of liquefied petroleum gas, 3 million tons of chemicals, and 139 million tons of petrol.

These "dangerous materials threaten our Istanbul, the beauty of our Istanbul, and the people of our Istanbul every day and every hour," Erdogan proclaimed as he announced Canal Istanbul.

"From now on, the Istanbul Bosphorus will return to its former days—a wonder of the world where the past and future live side by side ..."

## **Ataturk's Dream, Erdogan's Dream**

There are many reasons to doubt that Canal Istanbul will solve all of Turkey's Bosphorus problems.

For one, Turkey has limited say over the passage of merchant ships as guaranteed by the Montreux Convention, which on other occasions Turkey has so vigorously upheld.

"If passage is free through the Bosphorus, then why would anyone use this canal?" Russia's ambassador to Turkey asked frankly in an interview with the *Hurriyet* newspaper.

Moreover, critics complain that the canal—which Erdogan says will accommodate 130-160 ships daily compared to around 150 on the Bosphorus—could simply double the number of ships that can pass through the Bosphorus chokepoint by offering an additional route.

Yet for all these obstacles, Erdogan—like Turkish politicians across the political divide—continues to press for ambitious, large-scale projects.

At a time that many Europeans are faced with stark austerity measures and American political rhetoric stresses spending cuts and limited government, Canal Istanbul is but one such project funded by state coffers.

Erdogan paid customary political lip service to Ataturk in announcing the project. But Erdogan's Bosphorus project is deeply personal—and political.

The former mayor of Istanbul was once banned from politics even as his Justice and Development Party swept into single party rule in 2002.

Only through legal changes approved by a parliament dominated by his party and a special backwater election could Erdogan finally secure a seat in parliament and become premier.

Tactics such as those, his promulgation of [conspiracy theories](#) involving Turkey's military and political rivals, and heightened crackdowns on journalists—perhaps making Turkey the lead jailer of journalists in the world—have raised concerns about Erdogan's intent as a political leader.

Many critics have also expressed alarm at some of Erdogan's reforms, including proposals to replace Turkey's constitution, drafted under military direction following a 1980 coup, with a new

constitution giving greater authority to the president—a position in which Erdogan has expressed interest.

Although critics and supporters differ on the nature of Erdogan's vision, it is clear that he envisions Turkey as a major world political and economic power.

Under Erdogan, Turkey enacted ambitious reforms and opened formal membership negotiations with the European Union in 2005, although those talks have since stalled.

Yet, there is little question that the country has prospered economically under Erdogan. With 6.8 percent growth in 2010, Turkey boasts the fastest growing major economy after China and India.

In his speech, Erdogan rattled off figure after figure aimed at impressing the Turkish electorate: Per capita income had nearly quadrupled over the past decade—from \$2,300 to over \$10,000—and Turkey strives to become one of the world's ten largest economies by 2023.

Canal Istanbul is but one part of that broader economic agenda.

Erdogan emphasized that the project for Istanbul—the economic heart of Turkey that holds 40 percent of the country's wealth—would benefit all of Turkey.

"Canal Istanbul will also provide for a new place to live with centers for conferences, festivals and fairs, hotels, and sports facilities. Istanbul's urban transformation will continue along with

the projects we will carry out around the Canal. We will build Istanbul's biggest airport here," he said. "The Third (Bosporus) Bridge will also go over this canal."

Ironically, the construction of the Canal will transform the European section of Istanbul into an island surrounded by the Bosporus on one side and the canal on the other—perhaps further isolating it from the rest of Turkey.

Erdogan, meanwhile, has been hush about where exactly the Canal will be, its cost, and construction, saying such disclosure might lead to unjustified criticism. ♦

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Chapter 3

# Islam, Christianity, and Culture in the Middle East

Image: Hagia Sophia Museum, Istanbul. (Source: [ayasofyamuzesi.gov.tr](http://ayasofyamuzesi.gov.tr))



## Two Popes and a Primate: The Changing Face of Global Christianity

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

While the election of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio to head the Roman Catholic Church as Pope Francis received widespread international attention, in fact the last six months have seen the elevation of three Christian clerics to fill the top position in their respective churches. This month historian David Brakke examines the different processes involved in electing these figures and explains how the Christian world came to have two popes and a primate in the first place. He also looks ahead to the challenges the new Church leaders will face in the coming years as they confront globalization, the communications revolution, and the growing popularity of charismatic Christianity.

(Published June 2013)

### By **DAVID BRAKKE**

The unexpected and nearly unprecedented resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, the election of the first pope from the Americas, and new Pope Francis's dramatic displays of humility captured the attention of Christians and non-Christians all over the world during the late winter and early spring of 2013.

Thanks to the explosion of electronic forms of communication, even since the election of Benedict in 2005, more people followed the speculation and politics surrounding a papal conclave than ever before.

Then Francis rapidly emerged as an international media star. His down-to-earth style, which included his washing the feet of two female juvenile inmates in a traditional Maundy Thursday ritual, contrasted vividly with the traditionally regal manner of Benedict. The dizzying combination of medieval ritual and pageantry with flashing cell phones and papal tweets provided the backdrop for Francis's



*As three Christian Churches recently elected new leaders, they confront a world in which global Christianity may be poised for the third major reorganization of its history. Here, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio becomes Pope Francis in March 2013. (Source: Fczarnowski, commons.wikimedia.org)*

initial efforts to reconnect an ancient but troubled institution with its understandably wary modern flock.

But the Roman Catholic Church was not the only Christian Church to choose a new spiritual leader in 2012 and 2013; it was just the largest.

On November 4, 2012, the Coptic Orthodox Church (based in Cairo, Egypt) elected its new pope, Tawadros (Theodoros) II, to succeed Shenouda III, who had died seven months earlier.



*Pope Tawadros II and Pope Francis.  
(Source: russiancouncil.org, public domain)*

And only five days later in the United Kingdom, on November 9, a press release announced that Queen Elizabeth II had approved the nomination of Justin Welby as Archbishop of Canterbury, succeeding Rowan Williams, who had announced his

retirement the previous March. The Archbishop of Canterbury serves as the spiritual leader of the global Anglican Communion, which includes the Episcopal Church in the United States.

These new leaders did not receive nearly as much international attention as Francis did, although the selection of Tawadros became a minor YouTube sensation.

Still, the remarkable confluence of the elections of two popes and a primate allows us to reflect on the past and future of these diverse church bodies. Why, we might ask, are there so many different Christian churches, each with its own worldwide leader? Why do they choose their leaders and handle transitions of authority so differently? And what challenges do they face as we move into the twenty-first century?

The existence of these three churches with their contrasting styles can be traced to the two great moments of separation and reorganization in the global history of Christianity—the controversy over the nature(s) of Christ in the fifth-century Mediterranean and the Protestant Reformations in sixteenth-century Europe.

The challenges that today confront Francis, Tawadros, and Justin Welby may be symptomatic of a third great moment of separation and reorganization. The forces of globalization, the communications revolution, and the growing popularity of charismatic Christianity have combined with a range of other institutional, political, and doctrinal instabilities to make the future highly uncertain for these three new leaders.

Now people can travel across the world easily, and they can communicate quickly through electronic means. These developments have enabled Christians to form new alliances that do not correspond to traditional theological denominations.

“Liberal” and “conservative” Christians can network with like-minded believers, whether or not they share the same official creeds or denominations. Agreement on matters like the role of

women and sexual ethics seems to many Christians more significant than the differences in doctrine or history that lie behind the current divisions of Christians into “Protestants,” “Catholics,” “Orthodox,” and the many other Christian denominations.

Similarly, enthusiasm for charismatic gifts like divine healing and speaking in tongues has spread across national and continental boundaries, thanks to television and international evangelism “campaigns.” And champions of charismatic forms of Christianity are also forging ties across the traditional boundaries of Christian churches.

The economic changes that come with global markets have fostered new aspirations and anxieties among workers. Some forms of [Pentecostal Christianity](#) not only promise salvation after death, but also offer the hope for increased well-being in the here and now, in the form of physical health, economic security, or both.

These trends are threatening the stability of current denominational patterns. For example, Roman Catholics in Brazil may find that a Pentecostal church speaks more persuasively to their spiritual needs and material goals than does the traditional Church. Or Anglicans in Nigeria may decide that they no longer share the same values as Anglicans in North America.

## The Coptic Orthodox Church and its Pope

Let’s start with the Coptic Orthodox Church, which today includes perhaps 18 million adherents in Egypt and around the world.



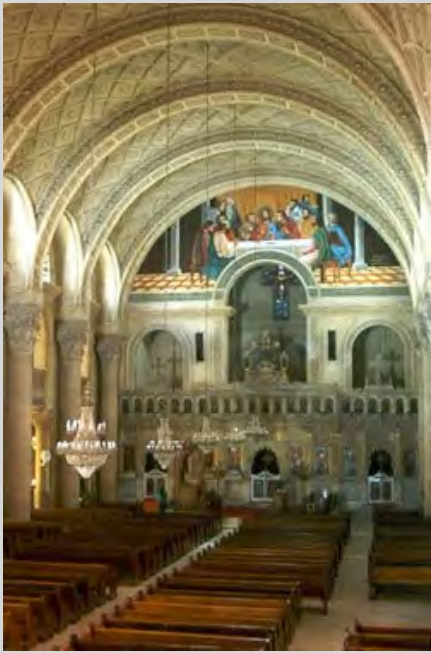
In 2012, following a mourning period for Pope Shenouda III in March, the Coptic community reflected on and discussed choosing a new leader. A nominating committee developed a slate of candidates and an electoral assembly of 2,400, which included lay people, then voted to select three finalists. The participation of a wide range of clergy and laymen is a remarkable and distinctive

feature of the Coptic selection process.

On November 4, in St. Mark’s Cathedral in Cairo, a blindfolded boy, dressed in white, chose one of the three names from a chalice. It was Tawadros (the Arabic form of Theodoros) who became the next “Pope of Alexandria” (although he is based in Cairo) and “Patriarch of All Egypt.” The huge congregation erupted in applause. [The striking video of a visibly nervous hooded boy choosing a new religious leader](#) in an ornate cathedral became popular viewing on YouTube and news sites on the web. For Copts, however, it was God who made the final selection.

Watching the pomp and ceremony of this very public selection of a pope through the lens of the internet leaves us to ask about the origins of the Coptic Orthodox Church, and why it’s separated





*Coptic cathedral. (Source: wikipedia.org, public domain)*

from the Roman Catholic Church and such Orthodox churches as the Greek and Russian Orthodox.

The answer lies in the Roman empire of the fifth century, as Latin- and Greek-speaking churches began to grow apart and Christian leaders engaged in prolonged and bitter conflicts over the nature(s) of Christ.

By the end of the fourth century, most Christians (although not all) had agreed that the Son of God should be understood to be the second

person in a Trinity—equal in divinity and honor to the Father and the Holy Spirit. There is one God in three persons.

The Roman emperor (or emperors, for sometimes there were two) enforced this official doctrine, as it was expressed in the so-called Nicene Creed. But, some people asked at the time, if the Son of God is fully God, just as divine as the Father, what does that make of the human being Jesus? How did the Son's incarnation as Jesus make sense?

In the eastern Roman Empire, Christian leaders developed two basic answers to these questions. One group, based primarily in

Syria, argued that Christ had two natures: a human nature (Jesus), who did such human things as be born, suffer, and die; and a divine nature (the Son of God), who did such divine things as heal people, walk on water, and rise from the dead. These two natures were “conjoined” in Christ, who was both fully divine and fully human.

Another group, led by the bishop of Alexandria in Egypt, opposed this “two natures” view because it seemed to make Christ two people, awkwardly inhabiting the same space. Instead, they claimed that the single divine nature of the Son of God united with humanity in Jesus and performed everything Christ did (be born, heal people, die, and so on).

These two views of Christ first came into conflict in the 420s over the question of whether the Virgin Mary could be called “the Mother of God.” The “two natures” group argued no: God cannot be born. Rather, Mary was the mother of the human Jesus, with whom the Son of God came into some kind of union.



*The Coptic Orthodox Hanging Church in Cairo dates from the 3rd or 4th Century. (Source: Berthold Werner, wikipedia.org, CC BY-SA 3.0)*

But this position offended even many ordinary Christians, who were used to honoring Mary as God's Mother and to thinking of even the baby Jesus as divine. The Council of Ephesus in 430 affirmed that Mary is the Mother of God, a victory for the "one nature" view, and the Roman Empire enforced this position.

A large number of dissenting "two-nature" Christians, however, persisted outside the empire, in Persia, and they became known as the Church of the East. The Church of the East became the major form of Christianity in Asia, spreading eventually to China, until the rise of Islam led to its gradual diminishment. A small but significant group of Christians survive today from this ancient branch of Christianity, most notably the Assyrian Church of the East.

Meanwhile, back in the Roman Empire, conflict between the "one-nature" and "two-nature" schools continued. Increasing numbers of leaders, including the bishop of Rome, worried that the "one-nature" view did not affirm strongly enough the humanity of Jesus.

Finally, after bitter debates, in 451 the Council of Chalcedon adopted a compromise statement: Christ is "one person in two natures" (divine and human); the two natures are clearly distinguished, but they are so closely united in one person that it is still right to say that God was born and the human Jesus walked on water.

This modified "two-natures" position became the official policy of the Roman and then Byzantine Empire, and it is the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek and Russian Orthodox

Churches (as well as churches that descended from these groups, like the Protestants).

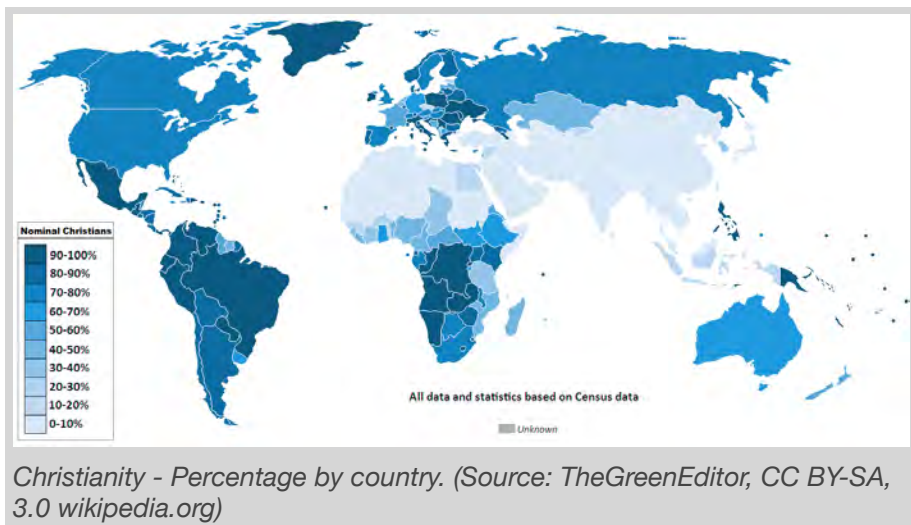
The vast majority of Christians in Egypt (and in other areas like Palestine), however, refused to accept the Council of Chalcedon and remained faithful to their traditional "one-nature" theology. They left fellowship with the pro-Chalcedon churches.

Through the fifth and sixth centuries, Coptic Christians ("Copt" comes from the word "Egypt") resisted the attempts of the Byzantine emperors to force them to adhere to Chalcedon. When the Muslims completed their conquest of Egypt in 641, the Copts became free from such Byzantine harassment, but during the following centuries, the number of Christians declined, to the point that today they are estimated to make up only about ten percent of Egypt's population.

For most of its existence, the Coptic Orthodox Church has represented a minority religious community, whether in contrast to the "two-natures" doctrine of the Byzantine Empire or to the Islam of the governments that followed.

Especially in recent years, the Church's Pope has represented the Coptic community in dealings with the government, which under former Egyptian presidents like Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak did not operate through democratic processes.

This minority identity has given the Church a strong sense of communal solidarity and reliance on divine protection and providence, both of which were seen in how they chose their new leader. On the one hand, a wide range of believers, both lay and



clergy, had a voice in choosing the three finalists. On the other hand, the ultimate choice remained in the hands of God.

As Pope Tawadros takes charge of his ancient Church, Coptic Christians face challenges both within Egypt and from worldwide changes in Christian and Muslim countries.

Since 2010, Egypt has been participating in the international movement called “the Arab spring,” which has overthrown authoritarian governments like that of Mubarak. Young Copts would prefer that Tawadros not act as their political spokesman, as Shenouda did, but instead limit his work to spiritual matters. They hope instead to express their views directly through the newly developing political process in Egypt.

However, the prospect that the Muslim Brotherhood may bring a more explicitly Islamist agenda to the governance of Egypt has increased feelings of alienation among some Copts. An attack on

the Coptic cathedral in Cairo in early April, during which government security forces seemed to side with a Muslim crowd, seemed to bode ill.

In recent years, the Coptic Orthodox Church has experienced huge growth in North America and Europe, thanks primarily to immigration from Egypt (which events in Egypt may accelerate). The election of Tawadros took place so long after Shenouda’s death in part because officials had to find some way to include the numerous Copts outside Egypt in the process, unnecessary when Shenouda was elected in 1971.

Like so many Christian communities, the Coptic Church (despite its close associations with Egypt) is becoming a transnational religious community, one that crosses the boundaries of nations and even continents.

Copts in Europe and North America are exposed to a greater variety of Christian believers than is found in Egypt and do not live in a predominately Muslim culture. The issues that they face differ significantly from those confronting their brothers and sisters in Egypt, and some Copts are actively encouraging non-Egyptians to join the Church.

In the twentieth century, the Coptic Church made its “Egyptian” character a strong component of its identity; unlike the Muslims, the Church argued, the Copts represented continuity with the Egypt of antiquity. The growing number of Coptic Christians outside Egypt and the changing political scene within Egypt are now forcing the Church to express its identity in new ways that will likely be less nationalistic.

## The Church of England, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and the Anglican Communion

The fifth-century debates over Christ led to the first great division of Christianity. The Church of the East held to a strong “two-natures” theology; the Coptic Orthodox (as well as Syrian and Ethiopian Orthodox) Church adhered to the “one-nature” teaching; and the followers of the Pope in Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople followed the modified “two-natures” creed of Chalcedon.

And already in the fifth century the Latin-speaking Christians affiliated with Rome and the Greek-speaking Christians loyal to Constantinople were drifting apart, a separation seemingly sealed by mutual excommunications in 1054.

The second period of dramatic division in Christianity began in October 1517, when the German monk Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses in Wittenberg.

During the following decades a series of reform movements resulted in new Christian communities in Europe, usually grouped together under the label “Protestant:” most prominently “evangelical” (Lutheran) churches in parts of Germany and Scandinavia and “reformed” (Calvinist) churches in Geneva, France, the Netherlands, and Scotland.

Among these “new” groups was the Church of England.

Of course, the Church of England was not really new, and in many ways not much about Christianity changed for English Christians.



*Canterbury Cathedral, home church of the Archbishop of Canterbury and one of the oldest Christian structures in England. (Source: Hans Musil, wikimedia.org)*

What did change was King Henry VIII’s declaration, ratified by Parliament, that he, not the Pope in Rome, was the Supreme Governor of the Church in England.

On the one hand, Henry’s assertion arose from very particular circumstances: he wanted his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, who had not given him a son and heir, declared invalid, and the Pope refused to do so. Also, after first defending the Church against the criticisms of Luther and other reformers, Henry began to find attractive certain Protestant teachings, especially on worship and salvation.

On the other hand, Henry’s break with Rome (like those of other rulers in Europe) represented the culmination of a long struggle

between the papacy and “secular” rulers over control of church offices and properties. Kings like Henry felt that they had their office from God and that they (not the Pope) were ultimately responsible for the salvation of their subjects.

In any event, after a period of turbulence, legislation under Elizabeth I institutionalized the subordination of the Church of England to the monarch, and the break with Rome became final. During Elizabeth’s reign and afterwards, distinctively Anglican (from the Latin for “English”) forms of theology, worship, and governance took shape.

As a colonizing power, England brought its version of Christianity to lands across the globe, including the Americas, Africa, Australia, and India. As these colonies became independent in the eighteenth and later centuries, their Anglican churches became independent of the Church of England, although they continued to share the basic elements of Anglican thought and practice.

As an association of such churches, the Anglican Communion is a Christian remnant, so to speak, of England’s past as a colonial power. Today it claims some 80 million Christians worldwide. Of these only about 30 percent live in the United Kingdom, while about half live in Africa.

Each member of the church of the Anglican Communion is independent and has its own leading bishop or primate. The Archbishop of Canterbury, as the primate of England, serves as the spiritual leader of the entire Communion, but he lacks the direct institutional authority of the Roman Catholic or Coptic

Popes. Still, Anglicans look to him to articulate and foster unity and harmony within the Communion.

Even if the Anglican Communion is a global Christian community, the selection of a new Archbishop reflects the Church of England’s status as a state church. The Prime Minister nominates someone from a short list prepared by a committee made up of prominent clergy and laypersons. And, ultimately, the Queen, as the Supreme Governor of the Church, approves the appointment.

When Justin Welby was chosen in November 2012, the public learned of his appointment through a press release, which was followed by a press conference with Welby. It would be difficult to imagine a greater contrast with the dramatic selection of Pope Tawadros in Cairo by the hand of an ordinary boy just days earlier.

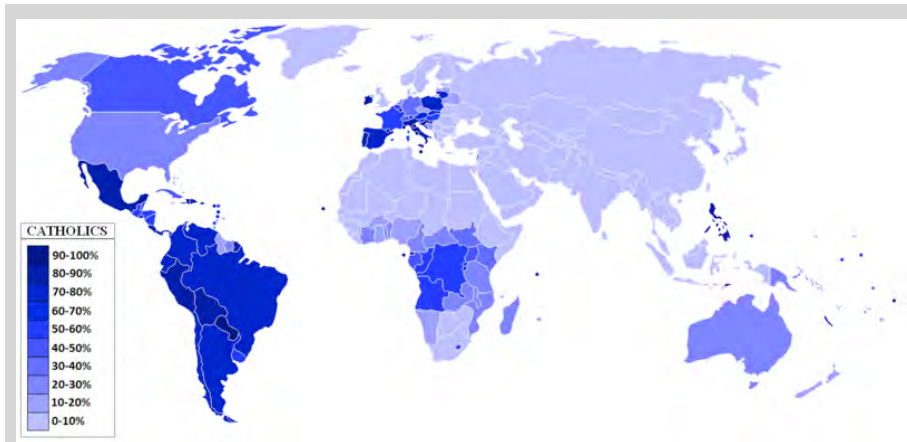
The relatively secretive process, under the auspices of the political leaders of the United Kingdom, appears at odds with the global character of the Anglican Communion, over 60 percent of whose adherents live in Africa, Oceania, and Asia.

Indeed, it is the diversity of global Anglicanism that poses the greatest challenge for Archbishop Welby.

While Anglican churches in the northern hemisphere (Britain, the United States) experience declining attendance and grow more liberal in matters of gender and sexuality, those in the southern hemisphere (especially Africa) evince great spiritual energy and remain committed to more conservative views.

In recent years homosexuality in particular has divided the Anglican Communion. The election of openly gay Gene Robinson as the Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire in 2004 shocked conservative Anglicans.

Bishops from Africa, led by Peter Akinola, the Archbishop of Nigeria (2002-2010), have boycotted official meetings of the Anglican Communion and organized alternative events for themselves and other disgruntled bishops from around the world. Some African bishops and their allies have ordained bishops in the United States to lead more conservative Anglicans here. U.S.



*Catholicism - percentage by country. (Source: Starfuncker226, CC BY-SA, 3.0 wikipedia.org)*

Episcopalians are chafing at what they see as interference from outsiders in their religious community.

Globalization has affected the Anglican Communion in complex ways. Electronic forms of communication, rapid travel, and Christian growth in the former “Third World” have diversified the

Communion and enabled closer relationships among Anglicans across the world.

At the same time, now the election of the bishop in a relatively small diocese in New England gets the attention of and provokes action by the Primate of Nigeria. It is uncertain whether and in what form the Anglican Communion can survive in the years ahead.

## **The Roman Catholic Church and its Pope**

The Roman Catholic Church remains by far the largest community of Christians in the world, with over one billion adherents. And much like the Anglicans, it owes its expansion in no small measure to the expansion of European colonial power from the 1500s on.

Globalization presents challenges for it as well. Europeans and North Americans may be more aware of the problems associated with clerical sexual abuse, but on a larger scale the Church faces some profound questions raised by its changing global demographics.

Only about 25 percent of Catholics today live in the Church’s traditional homeland of Europe, with most growth in Africa and Asia. How much should the Church in these areas remain loyal to European modes of worship and practice? When does adaptation to local culture become theologically problematic?

Meanwhile, the number of Catholics in the traditional stronghold of Latin America is declining as believers defect to Protestant

churches, especially Pentecostal or “charismatic” movements that emphasize dramatic manifestations of the Holy Spirit, such as divine healing, speaking in tongues, and exorcism.

The procedure for electing the bishop of Rome—that is, the Pope—may not have seemed the most promising way to find a leader who could confront all these problems. Its basic features reflect the nature of the papacy in the Middle Ages, when the Pope was not only a spiritual leader, but also the ruler of his own kingdom (the Papal States) with a vast fortune in land, buildings, art, and cash.

The electors are cardinals, known as “princes of the Church,” all appointed by the Pope. Today nearly all the cardinals are or have been bishops or archbishops (leaders of Catholics in a specific city or region), but this is not a requirement to be a cardinal. The renowned American theologian Avery Dulles is a recent example of a cardinal who was not a bishop.

Cardinals were originally clergy from Rome set aside to assist the Pope. During the Middle Ages, however, cardinals came to be seen as the equivalent of royal princes in hereditary monarchies. Indeed, the election of a monarch by a small group of “princes” resembles how the Holy Roman Emperor was chosen in the medieval and early modern periods.

Before the eleventh century the Pope, as bishop of Rome, was elected much as other bishops were, in a process that involved local clergy, influential lay people, and other bishops. However, the extraordinary power of the Roman bishop enticed dying popes, politicians (such as the Holy Roman Emperor), and

wealthy Italian families to manipulate the process in favor of their favorite candidates. Bribery and violence were common.

Pope Nicholas II (1059-1061) reduced the influence of politicians and lay people by restricting the process to certain clergy, with the cardinals as the final electors. Reforms in subsequent centuries eventually placed the power of election completely in the hands of the cardinals.



As the world just witnessed, the cardinals (now only those under the age of 80) meet in a conclave in the Sistine Chapel. They are shut off completely from the rest of humanity, without communication to or from outsiders—except for the black or white smoke that signals whether a Pope has been elected. This extreme secrecy reflects continued concern about the influence of political and secular people on the deliberations of the electors.

The seclusion of the conclave protects the cardinals from such external influence, and it encourages them not to take too long to reach the two-thirds majority required for election. A senior cardinal reveals the name of the elected candidate to the waiting

crowd outside the Basilica of St. Peter in Latin: “*Habemus Papam!*” (“We have a Pope!”)

The election of a Pope is overtly political, with relatively frank discussions of leading candidates before the conclave begins. At the same time, Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit guides the process. For believers there is no real contradiction between these two statements. To their minds, God works through human institutions like the Church and through fallen human beings.

The election of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, suggests that the cardinal electors were eager to meet the challenges of an ever more diverse and global Church. Even though more than half the cardinals in the conclave came from Europe, they chose the first Pope from the southern hemisphere and from the Americas.

The German Benedict XVI had made “re-evangelization” of an increasingly secular Europe his major theme, but the sexual abuse scandal and his failure to get firm control of the Vatican bureaucracy (the Curia) undermined this project. The cardinals may have reasoned that revitalization of the Church in areas like Europe may require a Pope who comes from the southern world, where the Church is growing despite competition, and who is experienced with the energy of both Pentecostalism and secularism (evident in his native Argentina).

Moreover, as an outsider to the often clubby world of the Vatican and European Christianity, he may be able to undertake the serious reform of the bureaucracy and the clerical ranks that Benedict did not achieve.

## The Global Future of Christianity

In late 2012 and early 2013 the world saw three major Christian communities choose their spiritual leaders in strikingly different ways. Each of these communities has a long history, and the differing ways that they select their leaders reflect that history and each church’s unique social and religious circumstances.

We have seen that two periods of intense debate and division (in the fifth and sixteenth centuries) resulted in these varied forms of Christianity. As different as they are, however, these churches and their new leaders all face the challenges that contemporary globalization poses to Christianity.

Christianity is now a religion primarily of the southern hemisphere, where political movements like the Arab Spring and religious movements like Pentecostalism are unsettling longstanding patterns of religious life.

It may be that we are in the midst of a third great period of realignment, in which Christians will divide and coalesce over social and political issues like gender and sexuality and over religious practices like spiritual healing and exorcism.

Since the sixteenth century Christians have seen themselves as grouped into three major traditions: Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Protestantism, with further divisions within these (“Coptic Orthodox,” “Russian Orthodox,” “Methodist,” “Presbyterian,” etc.).



But these identities, based on nationality and/or doctrinal commitments, seem today increasingly less significant than, say, shared commitments on matters like gay marriage and abortion or shared experiences of spiritual gifts. Moreover, Pentecostalism does not fit easily into any of these three broad categories and perhaps represents a new, fourth major Christian tradition.

Such longstanding Christian identities as the Roman Catholic Church or the Lutherans or the Greek Orthodox are not going away, even if some of them (like the Anglican Communion) are in danger of further division. They are, however, becoming less important to many Christians.

In today's global environment, shared political views, agreement on sexual ethics, and participation in charismatic revivals tie many believers together more strongly than ethnic origin or doctrines like the nature(s) of Christ.

Innovative Christian leaders are forming new networks—media groups, political advocacy organizations, charismatic healing movements, and the like—that cross geographical and denominational boundaries and that compete with older churches for the time, energy, and money of believers.

Pope Tawadros, Archbishop Justin Welby, and Pope Francis will have crucial roles to play in whether and how their traditional churches remain relevant in the emerging global Christianity. ♦

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## What's in a Name?: The Meaning of 'Muslim Fundamentalist'

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*This month, Origins presents a different kind of essay than we usually do. Professor David Watt asks us to look beyond recent events themselves and examine the language with which we talk about those events. In this case, he points out that Americans have grown accustomed to the language of "Islamic fundamentalism" to discuss our current struggle against terrorism. He argues that upon closer inspection that language may muddy matters more than it clarifies.*

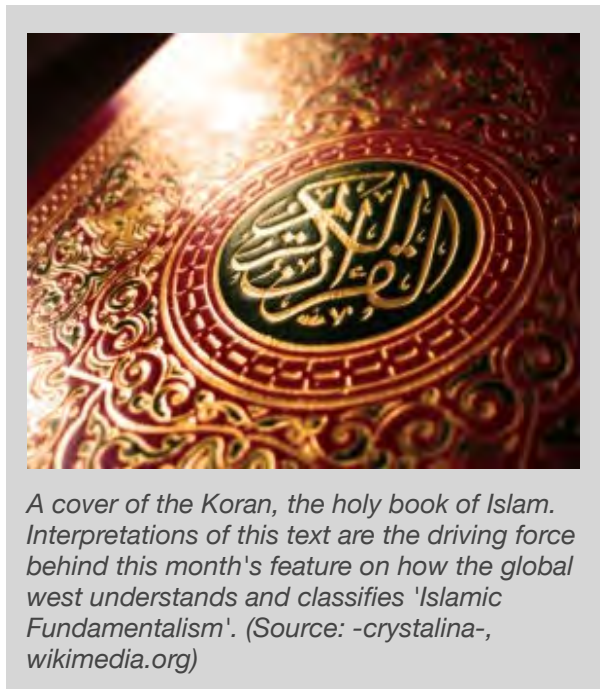
*(Published July 2008)*

By **DAVID WATT**

### Language and Politics

Is it a death tax or an estate tax? Are they dead civilians or collateral damage? Was he a member of the resistance or a terrorist? Is it a cult or an innovative branch of the Christian Church? These sorts of questions remind us of a point made long ago by George Orwell: modern political life is concerned, in very large part, with language. The words we use do not just reflect reality: they shape the way we perceive that reality. In so doing the words we use also become a part of the world we are trying to understand. One cannot understand contemporary American politics without understanding the keywords that define it and that shape the way the American public perceives reality.

Among the most potent of those keywords in our politics right now are "Muslim fundamentalism/ist" and "Islamofascism/ist." Take these examples:



*A cover of the Koran, the holy book of Islam. Interpretations of this text are the driving force behind this month's feature on how the global west understands and classifies 'Islamic Fundamentalism'. (Source: -crystalina-, wikimedia.org)*



Presidential Hopeful Barack Obama, common target of misdirected anti-Muslim criticism (Source: United States Senate, public domain, wikipedia.org)

In February 2008, the *Ottawa Herald*—a newspaper in eastern Kansas—published an opinion piece by one of its employees, Gary Sillett, about Barack Obama's rhetoric. Sillett's piece, titled "Don't Betray Your Heritage for Obama's 'Change'" made use of a keyword that is on many people's lips these days: fundamentalism. In his essay, Sillett argued that the junior senator from Illinois was not to be trusted: "Barack Hussein Obama hit the campaign from nowhere" and had gained an amazing amount of momentum by exploiting "generic

catchphrases" given to him by his handlers.

Sillett said that there was nothing wrong per se with words like "hope" or "change," and implied that he could sympathize with a desire to install a new person in the White House who was very different from George W. Bush. However, turning over the reins of government to a "Muslim fundamentalist" like Obama would be a tragic mistake. Electing him president would be like "spitting on the graves of the victims of 9/11." The Democratic Party, Sillett said, "intends to put a Muslim fundamentalist in the White House." Right-thinking Americans have a duty to thwart that plan. To allow the Democrats to hand over the government to a man

like Obama would be to betray America's heritage. Of course, Senator Obama is neither a Muslim fundamentalist, nor even a Muslim. Sillett clearly does not like Obama and calling him a "Muslim fundamentalist" was simply the easiest way to convey that.

During his unsuccessful bid for the Republican nomination for President, Fred Thompson spoke with great passion concerning the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism. "We have yet to come to terms fully with the threat that Islamic fundamentalism presents to this country," Thompson said. "The whole world is watching and waiting now, friends and foe alike, to see how we are going to react to the pressure they are going to put on us."

John McCain's pronouncements on this issue have been no less emphatic: "The struggle against Islamic fundamentalism is the most transcendent foreign policy challenge of our time." McCain has made it clear that he is fully committed "to winning this battle, enhancing the stature of the United States as a beacon of global hope, and to preserving the personal, economic, and political freedoms that are the proud legacy of the great sacrifices of our fathers."

These terms are so commonly used now we might assume that we all know what they mean. In fact, we do not; these phrases mean different things to different people and in different contexts. If we are going to understand and evaluate our current political debates, we ought to take some time to examine this language.

## The History of the Term

For starters, there is no universally agreed upon definition for the term "Islamic fundamentalism." In general, the phrase is applied to Muslims who are thought to adhere strictly to ancient doctrines, to literal readings of the Koran, and are determined to resist modernity and modernization. It is also used for Muslims who want to use the traditions of Islam as a blueprint to build a more just society through the application of Koranic law.

More generally, the words "fundamentalist," "fundamentalists," and "fundamentalism" were all created in the 1920s. In the years between 1920 and 1978, the category fundamentalist was almost never used except in reference to people who were Protestant Christians. It is very hard—though possible—to discover any examples of commentators using the concept to analyze Muslims in those years. Thus, as late as the mid-1970s, a writer who referred to a Muslim as a fundamentalist ran the risk of confusing his readers. Muslim fundamentalists were as rare and as oxymoronic as Muslim Presbyterians.

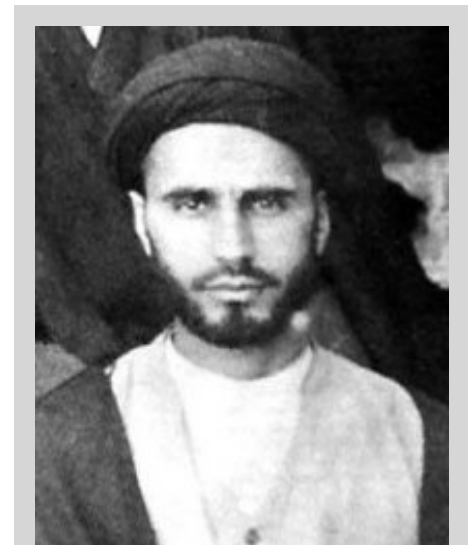
Already in the 1920s, fundamentalism and fundamentalists began to accumulate a set of extremely negative connotations. Under the tutelage of men such as Harry Emerson Fosdick, H. Richard Niebuhr, Talcott Parsons, Richard Hofstadter, and Martin Marty, Americans learned to think of fundamentalism as a dangerous byproduct of a "sociopsychological" fact: many people have trouble adjusting properly to "modernity and modernization." (Those phrases come from Martin Marty's article "Fundamentalism Reborn.") Americans thus came to associate fundamentalism with anti-intellectualism, backwardness, and

obscurantism. Fundamentalism was a label that was affixed almost exclusively to Protestant Christians who were thought to stand in the way of progress.

This began to change in 1979 when the Iranian revolution deposed the US-backed Shah. Starting with that event, Muslims have been and continue to be characterized as fundamentalists with great frequency. Indeed, it is quite possible that in contemporary English the term is now used more frequently to refer to Muslims than to Christians. When we hear the word today we are, I suspect, more likely to conjure up an image of a stern-faced Muslim cleric than one of William Jennings Bryan or Carl McIntire.

## The Appeal of this Language

The appeal of the category "Islamic Fundamentalism" is not at all mysterious. For one thing, it gives those of us who are not especially knowledgeable about the Muslim world a way of trying to make sense of people such as the Ayatollah Khomeini. Thus in 1979—when American newspapers were full of stories about Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson—the category



*The Ayatollah Khomeini. (Source: copyright expired in Iran, wikimedia.org)*



*Distribution of Islam by sect across Europe and Asia. (Source: geo-pickmeup.com)*

Islamic fundamentalism gave us a way of talking about the unfamiliar developments in Iran that made those developments seem less bizarre and less inexplicable.

Another appeal of the category Islamic fundamentalism is it that one can use it to resist the tendency to assert that all Muslims are dangerous. Writers can assert that many Muslims are peaceful and moderate and that we have no quarrel whatsoever with Muslims like that. Our only problem, they argue, is with the fundamentalists. The writers can hasten to observe that all religions can spawn fundamentalism. A Christian fundamentalist, they say, is just as wrong-headed and dangerous as a Muslim one.

Which brings us to a third reason the term is so appealing. It can be used to identify a dangerous "other" against which all men and

women of good will can unite. "We" can use it to say who we are not and to name what it is that we fear. In this respect, fundamentalism is simply one of a long line of labels—*anarchism*, *communism*, and *totalitarianism* are some others that come to mind—that Americans have used to mark the boundaries between themselves and those who are perceived to be threatening.

Thus when public intellectuals such as Daniel Pipes testify before congressional subcommittees, they can call on the United States government to do all in its power to limit Islamic fundamentalism's power. The less power fundamentalism has, Pipes could say, the less "mischief" it can make.

When senior government officials gave commencement addresses at the Naval Academy, they could make similar arguments to the midshipmen. They could assure the cadets that "radical Islamic fundamentalism" poses a great threat to the United States—a threat comparable to those posed by communism or Nazism—and that it was therefore imperative that United States possess enough military force to keep the dangerous fundamentalists in check. (When he was Vice President, Dan Quayle gave such a speech.)

The use of fundamentalism as a label to identify a dangerous other was quite common in the 1980s and 1990s. Moreover, the events of September 11, 2001 certainly did nothing to decrease Americans' fears concerning fundamentalism. Many Americans concluded that fundamentalism caused those events, assured that there are men who are plotting to take away American's freedoms are fundamentalists.



*Navy Sailors escorting a Muslim prisoner for medical treatment at Guantanamo Bay. (Source: Navy office Michael Billings, wikipedia.org, public domain)*

Accordingly, the term Islamic fundamentalism is often marshaled in arguments about human rights and the threats to them. It is applied, for instance, to Muslim organizations that do not recognize Israel's right to exist. It is also applied to Muslim movements that are thought to want to limit the religious freedom of non-Muslims and of Muslims who are not fundamentalists.

Of course, the term is also used to describe Muslim groups who are seen as hostile to the rights of women. Indeed, some observers have gone so far as to argue that in essence, Islamic fundamentalism is simply a movement to reassert old patriarchal norms. According to this view, Islamic fundamentalism has an

essence, and that essence is a determination to limit the rights of women. As one scholar has asserted, all fundamentalists seek to "control" women. All of them are committed, as another scholar has argued, to "radical patriarchalism." (The scholars I have in mind here are Lamia Shehadeh and Martin Riesebrodt.)

The term Islamic fundamentalism is often used to identify movements that stand in the way of progress. Consider, for example, an opinion piece by columnist David Brooks that appeared in the *New York Times* in February 2006, ostensibly addressed to wrong-headed Muslims throughout the world. The writer asserted "You fundamentalists have turned yourselves into a superpower of dysfunction." He claimed, "We in the West were born into a world that reflected the legacy of Socrates and the agora." You fundamentalists, he wrote, refuse to live in such a world. Instead, you retreat into "an exaggerated version of Muslim purity." The contrast (between "us" and "you") could not be any clearer: "Our mind-set is progressive, rational and rooted in the Enlightenment. Your mind-set is medieval."

At several levels, then, the phrase "Muslim fundamentalist" does a great deal of cultural work. At the same time, however, it is a shorthand that obscures at least as much as it clarifies.

## **Scholarly Skepticism**

On a cold Sunday morning in November 2006, a group of scholars assembled in Washington, D.C., to analyze the concept "Islamic fundamentalism" in a panel sponsored by the Study of Islam Section of the American Academy of Religion. (The American Academy of Religion—the AAR—is made up mostly of

professors who teach in religion departments or seminaries in North America. It is comparable in many respects to the Modern Language Association or the American Historical Association.)

Nearly two hundred scholars packed the session on Islamic fundamentalism. The panel included scholars from Concordia, Emory, University of Nebraska, Temple, and Yale. Each spoke briefly—twelve minutes or so—and then members of the audience asked questions and made comments. It quickly became apparent that the people who had given the talks and the members of the audience did not completely agree with one another. The two groups expressed differences of opinion, sometimes with a little passion, as the discussion gathered momentum.

That was, of course, to be expected. What was surprising was what did not happen. Almost no one in that rather large group of scholars from throughout the United States and Canada was willing to mount a sustained defense of the category "Islamic fundamentalism." To be sure, a couple of audience members made it clear that they did not think the term was *completely* useless. So did one panelist.

But the weight of opinion was clearly on the other side. Almost everyone seemed to be familiar with some of the standard arguments against the concept, and almost everyone seemed to have concluded that the category was not helpful. Some people critiqued it. It seemed to this observer that others thought it was too patently ridiculous to be worth serious critique. Therefore, while the phrase "Islamic fundamentalism" continues to be used

in politics and in the media, scholars of religion have largely rejected the term as analytically unhelpful. It is worth asking why.

For one thing, many scholars have concluded that "Islamic fundamentalism" is simply too polemical to be of much use in describing the world in which we live. Calling someone a fundamentalist is really not much different from classifying the person as extreme, fanatical, or radical. The term predisposes writers who use it to assume that the phenomenon they are studying is "a problem" or even "a danger."

Many scholars believe that because it seems to involve a moral as well as an analytical judgment, the term "Islamic fundamentalism" has very little utility when one is trying to do empirical research. Even an apparently straightforward question—such as: what is the number of Muslim fundamentalists in the world?—turns out to be unanswerable. Many definitions are framed in a way that makes it nearly impossible to tell the difference between a Muslim who is a fundamentalist from one who is not. The concept is, in the lexicon of social scientists, difficult—perhaps even impossible—to operationalize. According to some estimates, there are only 500,000 Muslim fundamentalists in the world today. According to other estimates, there are over five million.

Many scholars have also come to believe that there is something fishy about defining Islamic fundamentalism as a reaction against "modernity and modernization." Such scholars point out that there is, in principle, no reason scholars have to make modernity the key to understanding what Muslim traditionalists are struggling against. One might as easily say that such Muslims are



struggling against corrupt regimes that fail to meet the most basic needs of their citizens, or against neocolonialism or hypercapitalism. Such scholars also argue that in the world in which we live now, the terms modernity and modernization can seem somewhat anachronistic. They seem rooted in a place and time—perhaps the United States in the early 1960s—where it seemed natural to assume that the world was moving toward a single and quite predictable goal. People throughout the world were becoming less religious, more enlightened, and more progressive. We knew that history was somehow on our side.

By talking about modernity and modernization, scholars summon those assumptions, assumptions that seem less plausible now than they did, for example, during the years when John F. Kennedy occupied the White House.

## **Where Do We Go from Here?**

Thus far, I have made it sound as if the work scholars have done on the phenomena to which Islamic fundamentalism refers has been purely negative. That is not the case. Scholars have not simply been saying what will not work. They have also been creating new—and quite promising—ways of approaching those phenomena.

One promising line of inquiry has to do with rethinking the relationship between Western Christendom and the rest of the world. Rather than allowing ourselves to fall into the trap of using the history of "the West" as a yardstick that provides norms against which the rest of the world can be judged, we can remind ourselves that the history of Western Christendom, like the history

of India or Africa, simply illustrates one of a number of the different ways for societies to change over time.

Rather than assuming, for example, that it is somehow natural or inevitable for religious organizations to be separate from governmental ones, many scholars are now emphasizing how the degree to which the separation of church from state that took place in modern Europe is something of a historical anomaly. Separation of church and state is not, such scholars insist, natural. It is—depending on one's commitments—either an unfortunate experiment or a hard-won accomplishment.

A second line of inquiry is largely linguistic. Many scholars are experimenting with terms to describe so-called Muslim fundamentalist movements that are not as pejorative as is the term fundamentalist. Phrases such as very religious, revivalist, maximalist, and traditionalist are not perfect. But they have the great advantage of not censuring the class of human beings that they create. They are not normative to the core.

The third line of inquiry is both the most laborious and the most promising. Scholars are creating books and articles—a few of which are listed in the attached bibliography—that are based on careful empirical research about Islamic revivalism that give us a three-dimensional representation of Muslim movements. Such representations are, I think, far more useful than the cartoons and caricatures that so often result from talking about Muslim fundamentalists.

The descriptions of Muslim movements in these books and articles are not always comforting. They certainly do not make it

seem that Muslim revivalists have precisely the same values as those that prevail among American academics. However, these portraits are complex, nuanced, and subtle. Such portrayals can do more to help us understand the world in which we live than do cartoons that push us to regard Muslim revivalists as nothing more than dangerous others who must be subdued or eradicated.



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## Tradition vs Charisma: The Sunni-Shi'i Divide in the Muslim World

### EDITOR'S NOTE:

*As Americans try to figure out the quagmire in Iraq, we have heard a great deal about factional differences between Sunni Muslims and Shi'a Muslims. While most of us have some sense that these groups have profound differences that have erupted into violence, few of us understand the historical roots of those differences. In this essay, Professor Stephen Dale gives us an introduction into that history.*

*(Published November 2007)*

### By **STEPHEN DALE**

The degeneration of the Iraq conflict into a low level but nonetheless murderous civil war between Sunnis and Shi'is has highlighted the principal sectarian divide in the Islamic world. However, given the media's pathetic inability to explain the nature of Sunni and Shi' differences in the Islamic world and the reasons why they have become so explosive in Iraq, it is hardly surprising that Americans' understanding of the carnage is largely limited to a sense that most Arabic religious terms begin with the letter S. Yet the sectarian distinctions and violent conflict between these two Iraqi religious communities are recognizable as a typical catalytic reaction that occurs in societies where doctrinal differences interact explosively with socio-economic or political schisms.

A well known contemporary example is the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland, which have plagued that province for the last half-century. Protestants and Catholics there as elsewhere have fundamentally different beliefs about religious authority and other matters, but they have not bombed each other's pubs over the fine



*Arabic Plaque at the Great Mosque in Xi'an  
(Paul Louis, photographer)*

points of Christian theology. Northern Irish Christians have been at each other's throats because of the political and socio-economic history of the province. Nor, for all their theological differences, have Sunnis and Shi'is been murdering one another in Iraq because of disputes over how many angels fit on the head of a pin. In Iraq as in Northern Ireland political disputes are the underlying causes of the conflict. And just as the recent power-sharing agreement between the IRA's Jerry Adams and the not Very Reverend Ian Paisley that offers the best chance to bring "Troubles" to an end, so too in Iraq a political solution acceptable to all sides is essential to end the carnage.

All Sunnis and Shi'is accept the fundamental principles of the Islamic faith, beginning with the role of Muhammad, who is revered as the last or "seal" of the prophetic line that began with Moses and continued with Jesus Christ – but only as a prophet and not the son of God. All Muslims accept the Arabic Quran as the revealed word of God to Muhammad, a series of revelations known as *surahs* or chapters that begins with the verse "In the name of God, the beneficent, the merciful." All Muslims observe the Five Pillars of Islam: 1. The monotheistic profession of faith – "There is no God but God and Muhammad is the Prophet of God," 2. The five daily prayers, 3. Alms-giving, 4. Fasting, and, 5. Pilgrimage to Mecca. . " All Muslims also revere the Prophet's family, the *ahl al-bayt*, literally the "people of the house." Yet Sunni and Shi'i attitudes to Muhammad's family and descendants are fundamentally different, and these differences are the basis for the development of two Muslim confessional communities.

Sunnis believe that Muhammad (570-632 CE) was the last divinely inspired individual and that the *khalifas* or caliphs, literally the successors to the Prophet, were simply guardians of the political independence and religious integrity of the newly formed Muslim community. These men were not, Sunnis contend, divinely chosen nor did they possess any special religious insight. In Sunni eyes, these *caliphs* did not possess, as some Catholic Popes claimed, infallibility in interpreting religious doctrine. Sunnis view the first four caliphs, men who had known or were related to Muhammad, idealistically as the four "rightly-guided Caliphs," (632-661 CE) of an Islamic Golden Age, and most of them also accept the legitimacy of both the two later dynastic Caliphates: the Umayyads (661-750 CE) of Damascus and the 'Abbasids (750-1258 CE) of Baghdad and those who ruled individual Muslim countries afterwards.

Even after the Islamic world fragmented into numerous regional states ruled by autocratic sultans, a process well under way by the 10th century CE, Sunni Muslim political theorists justified the reality before them by arguing that stability trumped religiosity, a rationale not now accepted by al-Qaeda or many members of the Muslim Brotherhood, who believe that Saudi Arabia, Egypt and many other contemporary Muslim states are irretrievably corrupt, decadent un-Islamic autocracies that ought to be replaced by Islamic regimes, such as that of the first four Rightly Guided Caliphs.

Sunnis take their name from the Arabic word *sunna*, which means tradition. Originally Muslims used the term when they referred to the *hadith*, reports of the sayings or actions of the Prophet



The Califate in 750. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)

Muhammad or even, sometimes, those of his Companions. Over the course of the two succeeding centuries Muslim theologians came to identify *sunna* solely with Muhammad and gradually the *hadith* became accepted as a source of Islamic law that complemented the Quran, Muhammad's divinely inspired revelations.

By the tenth century CE Muslims increasingly used the Arabic term *ahl al-sunna* to refer to the members of the majority or, in theological terms, the orthodox community. These individuals accepted the authority of scripture as embodied in the Quran and

the *hadith*, and recognized the legitimacy of the caliphs and their successors. Most Sunnis accept only the Quran and the *hadith* as sources of religious truth and social guidance, and in the twenty-first century conservative or fundamentalist Muslims usually deny the validity of interpretation or philosophically inspired logical analysis of scripture. These Muslims take essentially the same attitude as fundamentalists in other religious traditions, ranging from Christians to Hindus.

Shi'i Muslims differ from Sunnis in that they not only revere Muhammad's family, but attribute unique religious insight to his relatives and descendants. They believe that these individuals possess spiritual charisma, and assert that they rank just below the prophets because they are divinely inspired, not to produce new prophecy, but to understand the true or esoteric meaning of the Quran. In their eyes, therefore, Muhammad's relatives and descendants were the proper leaders of the Muslim community and of the first four caliphs only the fourth, 'Ali, Muhammad's first-cousin and son-in-law, was legitimate. Early in Islamic history, some Shi'i Muslims began to publicly denounce the first three caliphs as illegitimate, an act that was and is deeply offensive to the Sunni community who regard these men as icons of the early Muslim community.

Shi'is also reject the legitimacy of the Umayyad and 'Abbasid caliphs, as well as the authority of all later Sunni rulers. Shi'is assert that 'Ali's descendants, known as Imams, should have been leaders of the entire Muslim community. They are divided in their belief in the number of authentic Imams, some known generally as Isma'ilis and led by the Aga Khan, assert there were



seven, others, the majority of Shi'is, identify twelve. However, both Shi'i sects assert that their last Imam did not die, but disappeared into a kind of spiritual concealment to return, in an idea borrowed from Christianity, as the *mahdi*, to restore justice on earth. The most important practical effect of this belief is that in Shi'i societies religious leaders often became political activists, for when, as in late nineteenth century Iran, Shi'is openly denounced the legitimacy of dynastic rulers, some members of

the clergy claimed they were the proper earthly representatives of the hidden Imams, a role that some of Ayatollah Khomeini's follower in Iran claimed for him after he returned to Iran in 1979 from exile in Paris and Iraq.

Shi'i Islam began as a dynastic dispute, although one that stemmed initially from the resentment of Muhammad's family, the Banu Hashim, after they lost the special status they had enjoyed during his life. Shi'i means "faction" or "party," and the original Shi'is were Muslims from Kufa in Iraq known as the Partisans of 'Ali, the *shi'at 'Ali*, who first began to agitate on behalf of 'Ali's claim to the Caliphate. When 'Ali himself became the fourth Caliph in 656 CE, he did not make theological claims to divine guidance – others made those long after his death. He did, however, assert that he had a superior claim to the Caliphate, based on his kinship with Muhammad and his service to Islam. 'Ali's assassination in 661 represented the continuation of a dynastic civil war, which pitted 'Ali's successors, the founders of the Umayyad Caliphate of Damascus, against 'Ali's sons and descendants.

The Umayyad attempt to eradicate the resistance of 'Ali's family climaxed in 680 at Karbala, Iraq, with the massacre of Husayn, 'Ali's son and Muhammad's grandson, and the slaughter of more than twenty other members of the Prophet's family. This event, more than any other, spurred the transformation of *shi'at 'Ali* from a group of dynastic loyalists to sectarian activists. In particular, the shocked reaction to Husayn's death came to be commemorated as the Passion of Shi'i Islam, celebrated during the month of Muharram, the month of the massacre, with public

mourning, ritual self-flagellation and passion plays, recounting the massacre. Many Shi'i Muslims experience a profound emotional catharsis during Muharram, one that has no equivalent in the Sunni world.

Throughout the history of the Muslim world Shi'i's were always a minority community, often attracting to themselves Muslims who were socially marginalized or dispossessed. One of the consequences of their minority status was peculiarly Shi'i theological ruling that it was justified for Shi'is to conceal their beliefs. In consequence, Shi'i political activism had a conspiratorial or revolutionary quality from a very early date. Occasionally before the Iranian revolution of 1979 Shi'is founded dynasties. The Fatimids of Yemen, North Africa, Egypt and Syria (r. 909-1171 CE) were the most important of these. Shi'is of the Ismai'li sect, the Fatimids took their name from Muhammad's daughter Fatima. The dynasty's founder, the Fatimid Imam, proclaimed himself caliph and al-Mahdi, the Shi'i messiah, and aggressively sponsored the missionary activity that brought them to power.

The Fatimid Imam, who consistent with Shi'i doctrine, presented himself as the divinely guided leader of all Muslims, established a state-financed mission that dispatched agents to convert the Sunni world to Shi'i Islam. The most notorious of these missions was led by Hasan-i Sabbah in Iran, who organized assassinations of Sunni Muslim leaders. The English word assassin is thought to derive from Hasan-i Sabbah's supposed practice of giving his agents hashish before their missions, who then became known as *hashishiyyin*.



*Distribution of Ethno-religious Groups and Major Tribes (Iraq 2003). (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*

The Fatimids, however, were exceptional, and for most of Islamic history Shi'i Muslims have lived as minority members of Sunni states or communities. This was true, for example, of the Shi'is' principal shrine and pilgrimage centers of Kufa and Karbala, Najaf and Samarra, which for most of their history were included in

provinces of Sunni Muslim states. Prior to the British occupation of 1918, these Iraqi cities had been part of the Sunni Ottoman Empire (1300-1919 CE) for most of the previous 400 years. During most of that period they had been a neglected backwater, a frontier zone between the Ottomans and the Safavids of Iran (1501-1722 CE), a militantly Shi'i state that conquered the Iranian plateau between 1500 and 1510, forcibly imposing the Shi'i faith in the process.

In the nineteenth century Iranian and Indian Shi'i pilgrims and Indian money flowed into the shrine cities, dramatically increasing their prosperity and religious influence throughout the region, and during this era Iranian clerics came to dominate Shi'i affairs in Karbala and elsewhere. In the late nineteenth century the Ottomans founded a Sunni *madrassa* or seminary in Samarra to try to counteract growing Shi'i prosperity and power in southern Iraq, but these attempts of a disintegrating empire had little effect, and by the time the Ottoman state collapsed in 1919, Shi'is had become the majority in the southern Iraqi region. Many of the tribes who are now part of the Shi'i majority population converted from Sunni to Shi'i Islam only during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Shi'i clerical leaders known as *mujtahids*, who had dramatically increased their influence in southern Iraq during the nineteenth century, were stimulated to political activism by events in the Ottoman Empire and Iran in the early twentieth century. The Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution between the years 1905-1911 exposed Shi'i clerics in Iraq to political activism and modernist ideas, and, one might say,

represented the first appearance there of what observers now commonly call "political Islam." Iraqi Shi'is were stimulated by the appearance of books and periodicals from Istanbul and the example of Iranian Shi'i clerics actively participating in the Iranian revolution. Then in 1919 a British supervised plebiscite stimulated Shi'i clerics, most of them still Iranians, to press for an Islamic constitutional monarchy in Iraq, and in the following year they instigated a revolt to establish such a state. However, by late 1920 British authorities suppressed the revolt, and in the following year arranged for the enthronement of King Faysal, the son of Sharif Husayn of Mecca, as King of Iraq. Not until 2003 did Iraqi Shi'i religious leaders have another opportunity to take control of the Iraqi state.

The basis of the sectarian conflicts in twenty-first century Iraq can be directly traced to the British creation of a nation state in Iraq. Both the Sunni dominated constitutional monarchy and its successor, the Sunni dominated Arab-Socialist regime brought by a bloody coup in 1958, regarded the Shi'i clerics as threats to the integrity of the Iraqi nation state. Intensifying these regimes' hostility was the dominance of Iranian Shi'is as leaders of the shrine cities in the south. The expulsion of many Iranian Shi'is to Iran decreased their influence, but did not lessen the goal of either the monarchical or republican governments to isolate Shi'i clerics – from the local tribal shaykhs and Shi'is in Iran. Both governments were successful in undermining the influence of Shi'i clerics in the shrine cities.

As Baghdad grew in power and economic influence many Shi'is migrated to the capital and considerable numbers of them who



had professional or technical educations and became the nucleus of a new middle class, intermarried with Sunnis. However, in the bulk of the Shi'i population remained concentrated in southern Iraq, and the goal of Shi'i *mujtahids* in the late twentieth century was not separatism, but political parity with Sunnis in Baghdad. The Shi'i uprising there following the 1991 Gulf War was an inchoate, unplanned revolt, stimulated by Western powers and the Iranians. Saddam Husayn's brutal suppression of the revolt laid the groundwork for the current situation, in which the Shi'is dominate the Iraqi government and are on the verge of achieving what the British denied to them in 1920 – not parity but dominance. ♦

## The Dangers of Being a Humorist: Charlie Hebdo Is Not Alone

By **ELIZABETH PEREGO**

(Published January 2015)

The juxtaposition of laughter and tragedy in the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings earlier this month has sparked a feverish search for answers to how the gunmen came to be so angered by the cartoonists' drawings that they decided to take up arms to stop the satire.

What many analysts have missed, however, is that the January 7th attack was by no means the first time that extremists have murdered humorists for their art.

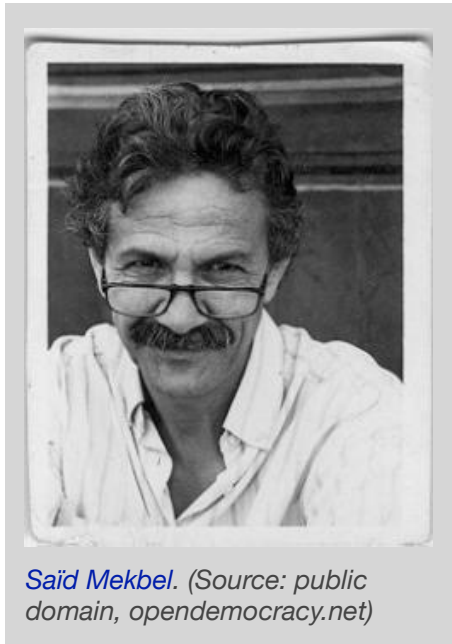
Instead, for the last few decades in Algeria and elsewhere, radical organizations spurred on by political goals and a zealous reading of religious texts have been levelling their ire with deadly consequences at comedians whose work they have deemed to be blasphemous or opposed to their objectives.

During Algeria's dark decade of civil war in the 1990s—which took more than 200,000 lives—militants from various armed groups claiming to represent a truer form of Islam killed three humorists—Saïd Mekbel, a satirical editorialist, Brahim Guerroui,



a cartoonist, and Mohamed Dorbane, a columnist and caricaturist—and threatened numerous others comedians.

Perhaps the most well-known and beloved was the editorial writer Saïd Mekbel. His rapier sharp wit spared no one as he doled it out daily in the popular newspapers *Alger Républicain* and *Le Matin*. The “ghoul” and “J’ha’s nail,” as Mekbel signed, used his pen to pinpoint and exploit the absurdity of the country’s problems, especially its political system.



Saïd Mekbel. (Source: public domain, opendemocracy.net)

Islamists served as the butts of several of his jokes. Mekbel also made fun of the terrorist organizations claiming to represent the Islamic Salvation Front, the country's largest then-defunct Islamist group that the military had kept from taking power in January 1992. He underscored as well what he viewed to be the rapacious and self-serving motivations of the Islamic Salvation Front's leader, Abassi Madani. Mekbel joked that he had come to save Algeria as Zorro had rescued

Mexico only that, unlike the cowled hero, Abassi put himself front and center at public events to garner more attention.

Mekbel even used his comicality to ridicule the violence against himself and his colleagues, depicting journalists as having to act like common criminals, scaling the walls of their own homes due to the threats that the rebels had made against them. The day after composing this essay in December 1994, Mekbel went out to lunch with a friend in a local neighborhood. Like many other journalists still in Algeria at the time, he had the habit of sitting facing the front door in the event that an attacker entered, a reflex that some media workers retain to this day. On that fateful afternoon, the gunman came in through the kitchen.



Cartoon by Ali Delim in honor of 20th anniversary of Saïd Mekbel's killing. The cartoon reads: "Saïd Mekbel in Heaven for journalists. Here it is not the quills that are missing." (Cartoon used with permission). (Source: presse-dz.com)

The essay that he had written about the pitiful existence of journalists living under terrorism appeared in newspapers that day only hours before his death. It would be republished in numerous Algerian papers over the next few days as devastated colleagues prepared for his funeral.

Guerroui was kidnapped and murdered in September 1995, while Dorbane died when a bomb that militants had placed near the



*Ali Dilem.* (Source: *Metropolis Bleu*,  
*Wikipedia.org*)

offices of his newspaper exploded on February 11, 1996

Even for those Algerian comedians who survived what writer Mustapha Benfodil has termed “an intellectocide,” a killing spree that left hundreds of Algeria’s intelligentsia dead, fear of assaults against themselves and their families caused

immeasurable suffering and insecurity, inciting many to seek refuge abroad.

But not only did the rebelling armies target humorists for assassination, surviving death lists that the militants had created in the mid-1990s show that they occasionally prioritized condemning humorists. The satirical writer Mekbel and his colleague Ali Dilem, a caricaturist, appeared frequently on these “hit parades,” the ironic name that those targeted gave the lists. At times, the rebel groups even marked Mekbel and Dilem as the numbers one and two to be murdered.

Their crime? Why kill the humorists?

According to propaganda tracts that the armed rebels printed, journalists including Dilem and Mekbel deserved to die for producing cartoons and writings they believed not only defied

God and sowed discord among Muslims but supported an illegitimate and impious military regime in Algeria. Leaders of one major organization in the war responsible for killing intellectuals reportedly stated “Those who combat us with the pen will die by the sword.”

Yet, if the rebels were concerned about journalists collaborating with the Algerian state, it was investigative journalists rather than caricaturists and columnists who were the ones covering major events and therefore the most capable of manipulating security information for the state (which is, of course, not to say that they did such a thing or that they deserved to be murdered even if they had).

The placement of two comedic artists at the top of their killing lists makes clear that the insurgents prioritized attacking artists whose work resonated with the population and who, in their opinion, symbolically challenged their cause.

Algerian readers faithfully devoured Mekbel’s column and Dilem’s cartoons, with their playful way of ridiculing Islamist partisans, the armed insurgents, and other political figures.

What can these cases of threatened and murdered artists and writers in Algeria reveal for the post-January 7th, 2015 world?

There is no reason to believe that another country will soon experience the systematic terrorism against intellectuals that Algeria endured in the 1990s. Yet, the *Charlie Hebdo* attack along with the July 2012 murder of popular Somalian comedian Abdi Jeylani Malaq Marshale by al-Shabab fighters indicate that

extremists may keep finding satirists a nuisance that they are willing to kill to get rid of.

Al-Shabab militants gunned down the noted Somali radio personality and comic as he left work one night. Marshale had ridiculed the group in his routines and had received death threats on numerous occasions prior to his murder.

In the future, humorists and especially cartoonists might prove more likely than other media workers outside of combat zones to find themselves in terrorists' sights.

As the cases of Mekbel, Guerroui, and Dorbane demonstrate, the murder of humorists by extremists is not a new phenomenon born in the 2000s at the moment when European caricaturists started drawing the Prophet Muhammad.

Indeed, these attacks against humorists have a long history and were not simply conditioned by cultural differences. In the Algerian case, the humorists were locals— not westerners—killed over their drawings and their jokes. ♦

## Civilizations of Ancient Iraq

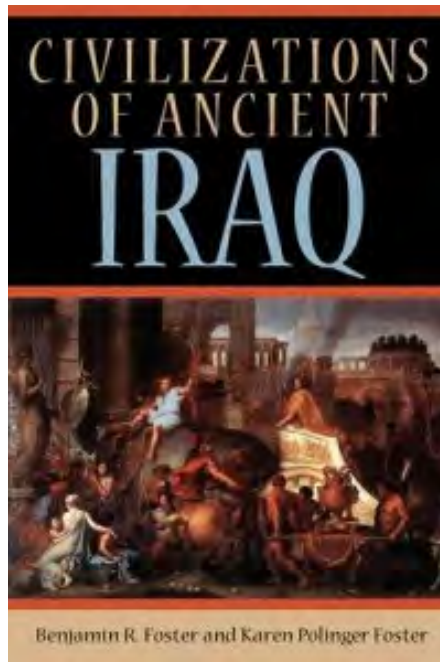
### Review By

**DALLAS DeFOREST**

(Published January 2010)

Western civilization owes much to ancient Iraq. It was here that the earliest form of writing was developed, which produced the world's first poetry and prose and led, eventually, to the development of the Greek alphabet. This region produced the first towns, cities, states and empires in human history, and also witnessed pioneering developments in mathematics, astronomy and law.

In this book, Benjamin and Karen Foster provide a concise, engaging and informative historical survey of ancient Iraq from its earliest history some ten thousand years ago to the seventh century of the common era. They tell the stories of successive civilizations and peoples in Iraq, from Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians and Persians to Parthians, Seleucids,



Romans and Sassanians. Throughout the book the authors integrate selections of primary source material into their discussions of political, cultural and economic issues. They also maintain an important focus on cultural heritage issues throughout.

The book begins with a geographical introduction to ancient Iraq, focusing on the central role of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in sustaining civilization in Mesopotamia (I will use this term interchangeably with ancient Iraq) and the important changes brought about by the agricultural revolution. Chapter two details the rise of the city of Uruk—the world's first—under the Sumerians in the middle of the fourth millennium. It was here that cuneiform writing was introduced in the Sumerian language (a non-Indo-European language and unrelated to any others known to us) with nearly 1,900 characters utilized for communication. Here, too, the first art-historical representations of specific persons and deities were created. In the next chapter, the Fosters detail the growth of city-state confederations in the third millennium after the decline of Uruk.

In one of the most rewarding chapters of the book, the Fosters explain the origins, administration and economic system of the region's first empire, that of Sargon of Akkad (d. 2279) and his

grandson, Naram-Sin (d. 2218). Sargon and Naram-Sin ruled from Agade, a city that has yet to be found. The authors note that both men had long lives in the memories and literature of Mesopotamia, since their names became proverbial for imperial grandeur and military prowess. Naram-Sin was, in fact, the first ruler to be worshipped as a god in his own right while he was still alive.

Chapter five takes us into the middle of the second millennium, to the Age of Hammurabi (r. 1792-50). Hammurabi was the "archetype" of an Amorite ruler, according to the authors. He centralized his empire in Babylon politically, economically and culturally; he was attentive to detail, hard-working, and produced voluminous correspondence, as well as his famous law code (pp. 77-81). A wonderful source for the social history of the age, it details, among other things, a surprisingly litigious culture. This age also produced a diverse range of literature: cook books, love literature and epics, to name only a few. It was at this time that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* was transformed from a series of narrative Sumerian poems into an Akkadian (a west Semitic language) epic. Chapter six details the rule of the Kassites, who in many ways continued the practices established by the Amorites and Hammurabi, until their kingdom collapsed during the upheavals of the twelfth century, which affected the whole of the eastern Mediterranean.

Chapter seven neatly summarizes what the authors call the "Assyrian Achievement," which fundamentally altered the geopolitical dynamics of Mesopotamia. The creation of the Neo-Assyrian empire over the course of the ninth and eighth centuries

brought the peoples of western Asia (from Egypt to Lebanon to Iraq) under a single imperial system for the first time. The Assyrians practiced forced deportation of conquered subjects, purposely displacing them in order to populate new cities, the countryside, palaces and "Assyrianize" the empire. A quasi-common culture was created out of all of this, in which Aramaic was the lingua franca. Yet the authors are careful to note that this process did not erase past identities, especially in the case of Babylonia, which remained a separate cultural unit in most respects. Indeed, the Assyrians encountered many rebellions and near-constant resistance from this region. And, in the end, it was Babylonia that emerged intact from the seventh century, prosperous and holding the mantle of Mesopotamian imperial power. For they joined the Medes in 612 in the attack on Nineveh, which violently brought an end to the Assyrian empire.

As the authors make clear, the Assyrian achievement involved "internationalizing" Mesopotamia. Successive rulers of ancient Iraq would control territories well beyond the confines of the Tigris and Euphrates: the Persians ruled from the Hellespont and Egypt in the west to the rugged mountains of Afghanistan in the East, while their successors, the Hellenistic Seleucids, would do largely the same. Even the Parthians ruled Mesopotamia and Iran, while the Sassanian Persians expanded somewhat farther to the east.

It was in the context of the Hellenistic, Roman and Sassanian Persian worlds that ancient Iraqi civilization came to an end, partially the result of the long-term internationalization of the region but also due to its transformation into a frontier zone once

the Romans conquered the eastern Mediterranean. The last dateable cuneiform tablet comes from 75 AD, from an astrological diary, which the authors take as a signifier that the living culture so well-described in this book had come to an end, absorbed by the imperial powers around and within it.

One of the highlights of this book is its incorporation of primary source documents from ancient Iraq. Readers may be surprised at the number of archives that have been discovered and the diversity of material contained within them. To mention only a few: 15,000 tablets dating to the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries were found at Nippur, a major regional center for the Kassite state. The archive contains administrative documents, detailing (among others thing) large-scale irrigation projects, but also correspondence (pp. 90-1); another archive from Kassite Babylonia comes from a family farm and details rural life at the time, especially the farmer's difficulty securing labor and equipment, all of which resulted in a lawsuit (p. 92); at the northern Iraqi site of Nuzi thousands of administrative records from a palace archive have been found, which contain financial accounts, muster lists for military service, and receipts for staple goods, such as oils and textiles (p. 99); and the city of Kanesh, in central Turkey, has produced 22,000 tablets that describe the business activities of Assyrian merchants residing there (pp. 106-8). Likewise, readers will certainly find beneficial the many "firsts" to which the authors point throughout the book: the first glass industry developed in the sixteenth to fifteenth centuries in northern Iraq (p. 100); the Nimrud banquet stele of Assurnasirpal II (r. 883-859) provides the first evidence we have for the pork dietary proscription in this region of the world. Among its long list

of slaughtered livestock (e.g., some 14,000 sheep) not one pig is mentioned (p. 126); and the first ground crystal lens, meant to correct astigmatism (p. 126).

One of the most important contributions this book makes is through its sustained focus on cultural heritage issues ongoing today in Iraq. Every figure in the book is coupled with a small caption that usually summarizes the initial discovery of the object and then its fate since the 2003 looting of the Iraq museum in the wake of the American invasion. An epilogue in the book details the early archaeological explorations undertaken in the country (by Layard, Rawlinson, W. Andrae and others) and the effects of the Gulf and Iraq Wars on the country's cultural heritage. The authors' first point out that from the time of the 1958 revolution to the Gulf War there was simply no black market for Iraqi antiquities. The sites in Iraq were well guarded, and the penalty for trafficking illegal antiquities was harsh, often death.

All of this changed after the Gulf War, when crippling UN sanctions hobbled Iraq and created a new sense of economic urgency among the population. Yet this activity was small in comparison to what has occurred since the start of the Iraq War. On 10 and 11 April 2003 the Iraqi museum was looted by local residents, passersby, and professional thieves. The destruction of thousands of years of cultural heritage was sudden and immense: roughly 15,000 of the museum's objects were stolen,<sup>1</sup> and this is to say nothing of the damage done to the context records (register books, excavation notes, file cards, etc.) stored in the museum, which cannot be quantified as objects can. Now, especially in the south, looting is well-organized. Gangs of



hundreds of men go by shuttle service to loot sites. As the authors note, "...the cultural heritage of Iraq is vanishing at a rate without precedent or parallel." (210). ♦

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1 In the aftermath of the looting, the United States dispatched a multiagency task force to the Iraq Museum to investigate and establish procedures for the recovery of stolen objects. Matthew Bogdanos, the commander of this force, has published his finding here: M. Bogdanos, "The Casualties of War: The Truth about the Iraq Museum," *American Journal of Archaeology* 109.3 (2005): 477-526. Some 5,000 of the 15,000 objects stolen have been recovered. The article may be downloaded freely here: <http://www.ajaonline.org/index.php?ptype=toc&iid=1>

Chapter 4

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# Maps & Charts

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Image: Babylonian map of the world, c. 500 BC. (Source: wikipedia.org, public domain)

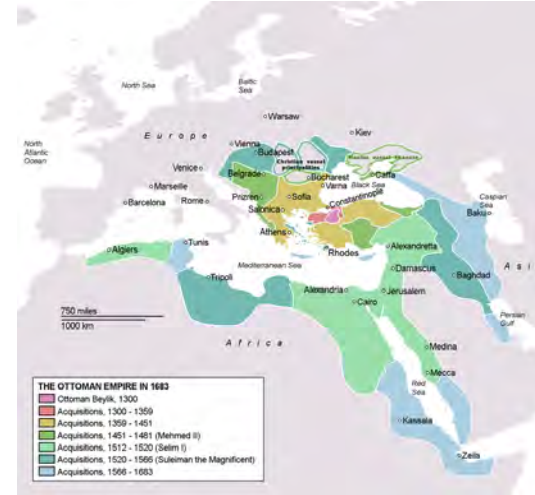


### Areas controlled by ISIL



(Red) Areas controlled by ISIL (as of May, 4 2015). (Ivory) Countries in which ISIL has claimed to have presence or control. (Source: NordNordWest, CC BY-SA 3.0)

### Ottoman Empire, 1683



Location of Ottoman Empire, 1683. (Source: Atilim Gunes, public domain, wikipedia.org)

### 1803 Cedid Atlas



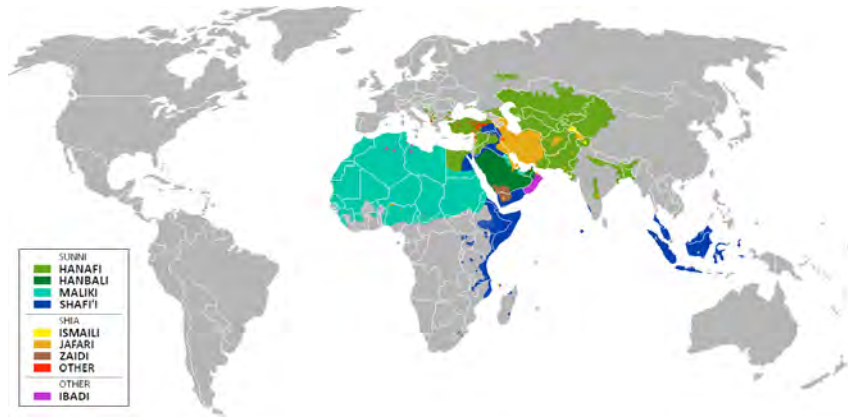
1803 Cedid Atlas, showing the area today known as Iraq divided between "Al Jazira" (pink), "Kurdistan" (blue), "Iraq" (green), and "Al Sham" (yellow). (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)

### Safavid Persia



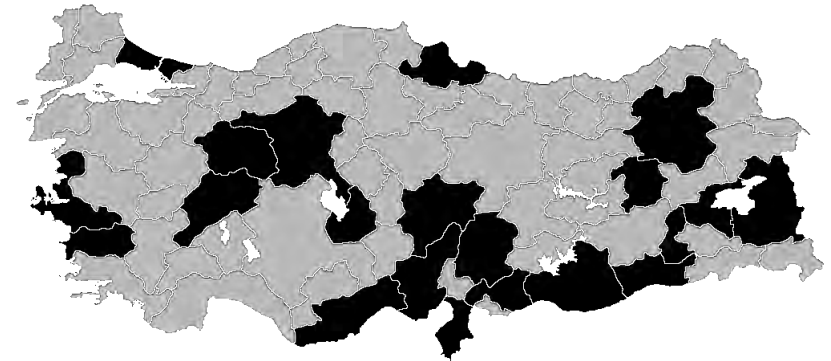
Map of Safavid Persia. The Safavid Dynasty ruled the region from 1501-1736. (Source:public domain,wikimedia.org)

### Sunni and Shia branches of Islam



*Distribution of Sunni and Shia branches of Islam. (Source: Peaceworld111, CC BY-SA 4.0, wikipedia.org)*

### Electricity Cuts, 2014



*Map of provinces that suffered from electricity cuts during the counting process for the 2014 local election. (Source: T.C. Ataturkiye, CC BY-SA 3.0, wikipedia.org)*

### Erdogan Foreign Trips



*Map of international trips made by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as prime minister. (Source: Random, public domain, wikipedia.org)*

### Turkey



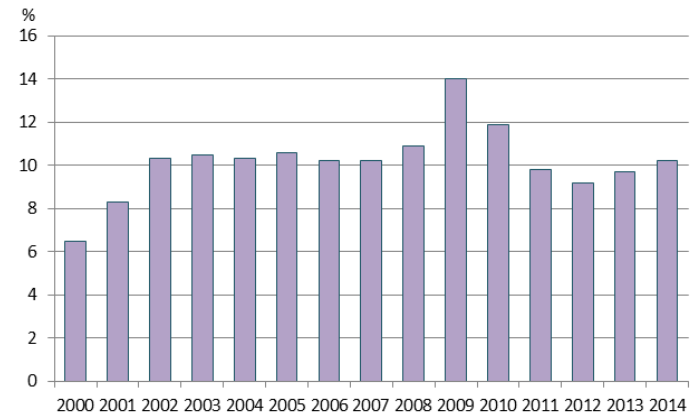
*A map of modern Turkey. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*

### Gezi Park



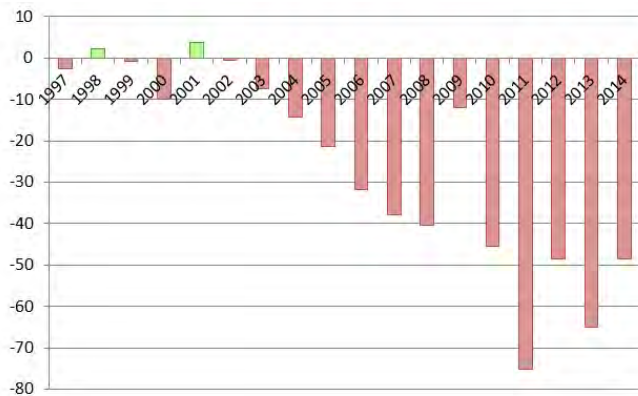
A hand-drawn map of the Gezi Park encampment. (Source: Anonymous, GDFL, wikipedia.org)

### Turkey's Unemployment (2000-14)



Turkey's unemployment rate from 2000 - 14. (Source: Random, CC BY-SA 4.0, wikipedia.org)

### Turkey Current Account Balance



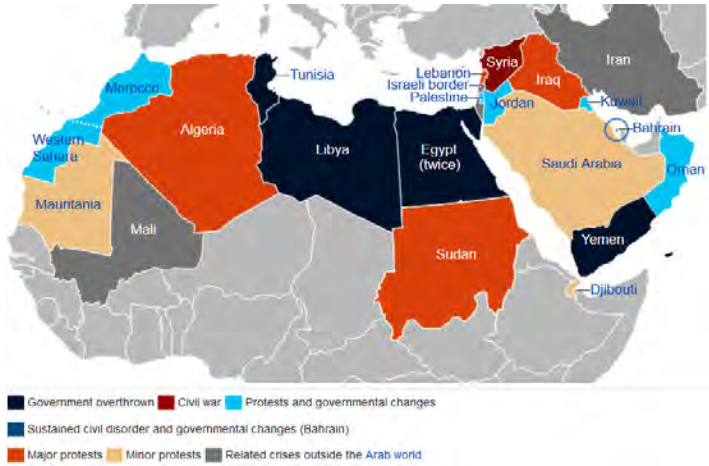
Turkey's inflation is one of the highest in the world, at 9%. This chart documents Turkey's current account balance. (Source: random, CC BY-SA 4.0, wikipedia.org)

### Egypt in the World



Egypt's global geographic position. (Source: Addicted04, CC BY-SA 3.0, wikipedia.org)

### Arab Spring Events by Country



Arab Spring events as of Summer 2014. (Source: Ian Remsen, public domain, wikipedia.org)

### Military-Imposed Curfew, 2013



Map showing areas placed under mandatory curfew, issued by the Egyptian government on August 14, 2013. (Source: RyanGerbil10, CC BY-SA 3.0, wikipedia.org)

### Egyptian Presidential Election Results, 2012



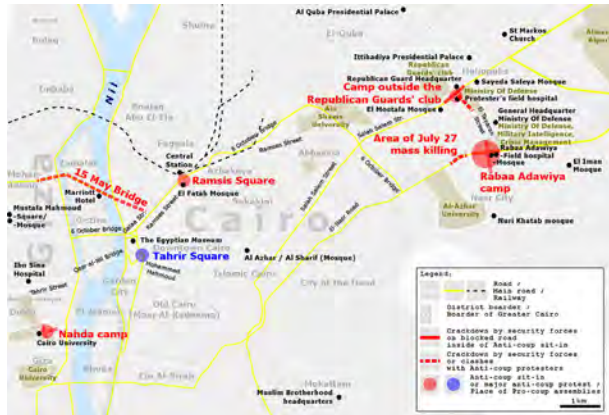
Map showing second-round presidential election results for Morsi (green) and Ahmed Shafik (purple) (Source: Arfarshchi, CC0, wikipedia.org)

### Political Map of Egypt



Map of Egypt showing large cities, boundaries, and other locations. (Source: UN department of field support and Cartographic Section, un.org)

### Attacks on Pro-Morsi Demonstrators, 2013.



This map illustrates five attacks on pro-Mosri protestors by Egyptian security forces between July and October, 2013. (Source: Anglo-Araneophilus, CC BY-SA 3.0, wikipedia.org)

### Egypt Paper Ballot



Historic document: an image of the Egypt paper ballot, first round, 2012, with names and pictures of candidates (Source: WP:N FCC#4, fair use, wikipedia.org)

### 2012 Egyptian Presidential Elections Results

Candidates	Parties	1st round		2nd round	
		Votes	%	Votes	%
Mohamed Morsi	Freedom and Justice Party	6,764,862	24.79%	13,036,131	61.73%
Ahmed Shafik	Independent	5,305,327	23.69%	12,347,360	68.27%
Hamdeen Sabahi	Dignity Party	4,800,273	20.72%		
Abdel Monem Abdul Fatah	Independent	4,005,279	17.47%		
Ahmed Moustafa	Independent	2,688,860	11.13%		
Mohammed Sami Al-Arini	Independent	225,374	1.01%		
Khaled Ali	Independent	134,056	0.68%		
Abu Al-Atz Al-Husseini	Socialist Popular Alliance Party	49,860	0.17%		
Moham Bantawey	National Progressive Unionist Party	29,189	0.13%		
Mahmoud Housseini	Independent	23,860	0.10%		
Muhammad Fawzi Isma	Democratic Generation Party	23,889	0.10%		
Housseini Kharabish	Democratic Front Party	22,606	0.09%		
Abdulla Al-Jayhali	Authenticity Party	12,249	0.05%		
<b>Total valid votes</b>		<b>23,268,646</b>	<b>68.88%</b>	<b>26,677,611</b>	<b>68.81%</b>
Invalid votes		406,720	1.72%	843,262	3.19%
Turnout		23,672,236	49.42%	26,420,763	51.85%
Abstentions		27,324,810	53.08%	24,638,021	48.15%
Registered voters		50,996,746		50,958,794	

2012 Egyptian Presidential Election Results

May and June 2012 Egyptian presidential election results. Morsi won just under 25 percent of the vote in the first round, the most out of all candidates. He won the second-round runoff election with 51.7 percent of the vote.

### Bangladesh



Map of Bangladesh (Source: UN OCHA, wikipedia.org)

## Bangladesh



Map of *Bangladesh*. (Source: public domain, internet)

## Durand Line between Afghanistan and Pakistan



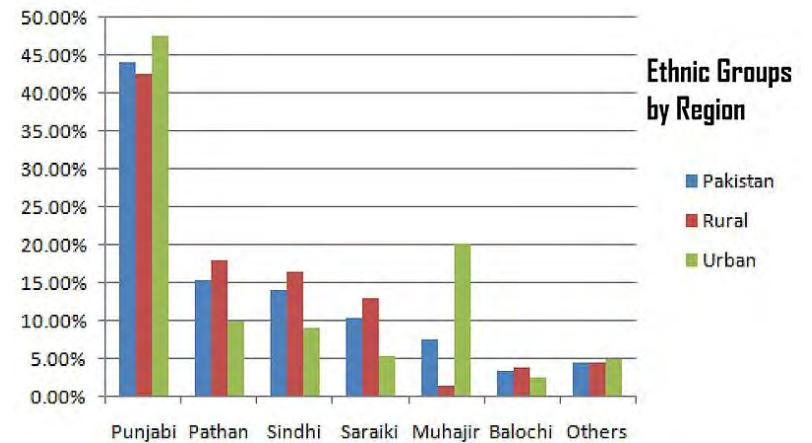
Map showing the *Durand Line (1893)*, in red, between Afghanistan and Pakistan. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)

## British Indian Empire in 1909.



"Political Divisions of the Indian Empire" in 1909. (Source:Fowler&fowler, wikipedia.org)

## Ethnic Groups in Pakistan by Region



Graph showing the current breakdown of ethnic groups by region in Pakistan. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)

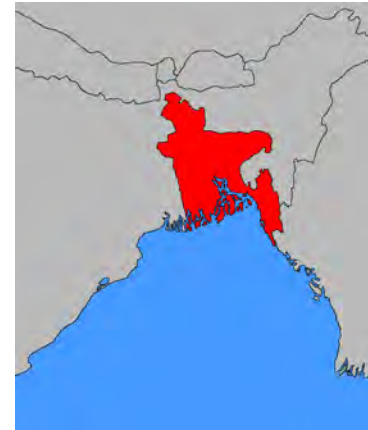


### India at the End of the British Period



*Map highlighting India in 1947. (Source: public domain, internet)*

### Location of East Pakistan, 1955-1971



*This map shows the location of East Pakistan (today Bangladesh). (Source: Green giant, CC BY-SA 4.0)*

### Location of Balochistan province in Pakistan



*This map highlights the location of Balochistan in Pakistan. (Source: TUBS, wikipedia.org)*

### Location of Kashmir Conflict



*This map highlights the location of the conflict in Kashmir among Pakistan, India, and China. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)*

## Military Movements during Bangladesh Liberation Civil War, 1971



Part of what it also called the India-Pakistan War of 1971, the Bangladesh Liberation War saw battles between India and Pakistan. [This map](#) shows approximate movements of military units. (Source: Mike Young, public domain, wikipedia.org)

## Pakistan Population Density



Population density of Pakistan. Darker red indicates higher densities. (Source: nomi887, wikipedia.org)

## Pakistan in 2002



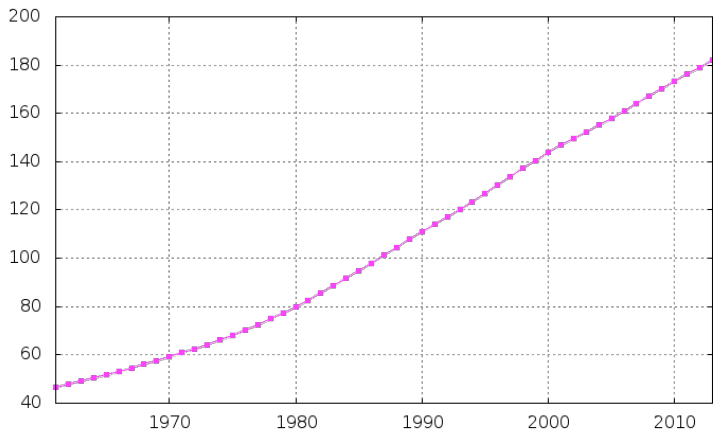
Map of Pakistan in 2002. (Source: CIA, public domain, wikipedia.org)

## Partition of India, Pakistan, and Kashmir



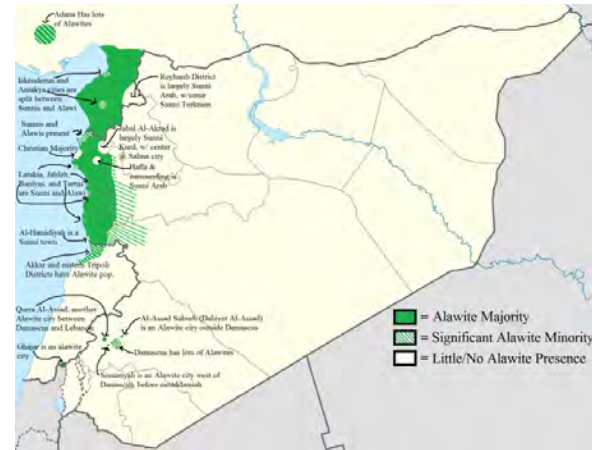
[This map](#) shows the partition of India, West Pakistan, East Pakistan, and Kashmir, including the directions of movements of Hindus, Sikhs, and Muslims. (Source: Partage\_de\_l'Inde.svg, public domain, wikipedia.org)

## Population of Pakistan



Graph showing the Population of Pakistan, 1961-2003. (Source: CC BY 2.0, wikipedia.org)

## Alawite Populations in Syria



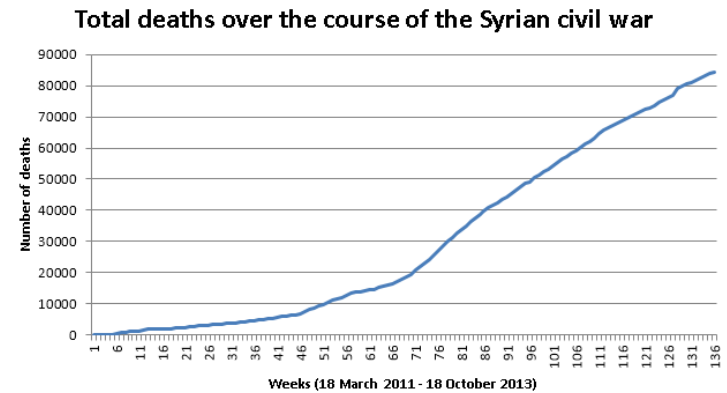
Distribution of minority and majority Alawite populations in Syria. (Source: Moester101, commons.wikimedia.org)

## Provinces and Federal Territories of Pakistan



Today, Pakistan has **four provinces and four federal territories**. (Source: public domain, wikipedia.org)

## Civil War Casualties



This chart shows the death toll by week during the civil conflict in Syria. Source of data: Syrian National Council. (Source: GraysonWiki & Futuretrillionaire, CC BY-SA 3.0, wikipedia.org)

### Mamluk Sultanate



The Mamluks, whose territory is shown here circa 1279, subjected the Alawites to major repression after a religious scholar declared their belief system heretical. (Source: Gabagool, creative commons, wikipedia.org)

### Ottoman Syria



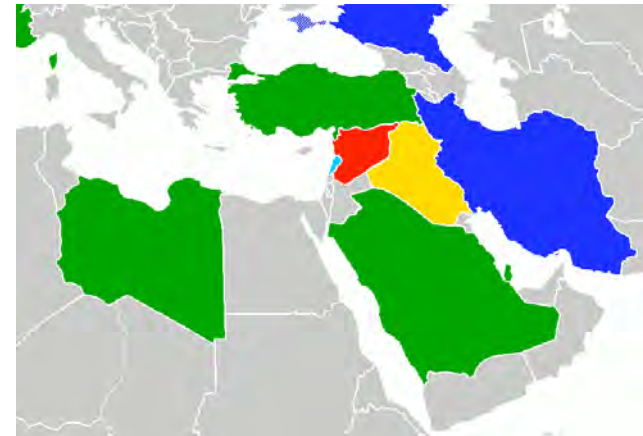
Map of Ottoman Syria in 1851. (Source: Henry Warren, public domain, wikipedia.org)

### Ottoman Empire



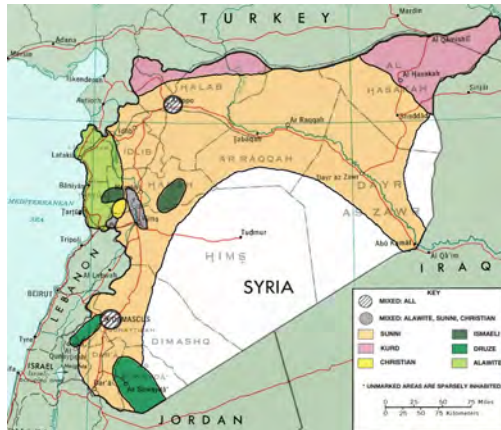
Alawites resisted continuous Ottoman attempts to tax their villages and to convert them to Sunni Islam. (Source: lynxxx, public domain, wikipedia.org)

### Syria



Countries in green support the rebels; in blue support the Assad regime; in yellow have groups supporting both sides of the civil war. Syria is in red. (Source: Cowik, CC BY-SA 3.0)

## Syria's religions



Syria's ethno-religious composition in 1976. (Source: Central Intelligence Agency)

## Syria



By promoting separate identities and creating autonomous zones in Syria along the lines of ethnic and sectarian differences, the French mandate aimed to maximize French control and influence in Syria. (Source, Don-kun, wikimedia.org)

## Syrian Civil War



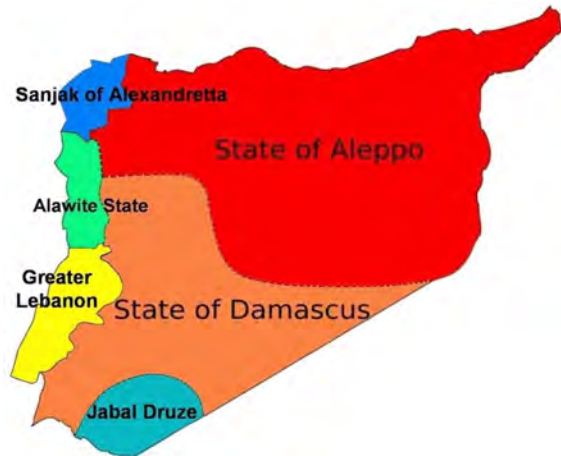
The military situation in Syria in early September 2013. The size of each circle corresponds to the population of the city. Green: controlled by pro-Assad forces; brown: controlled by anti-Assad forces; mustard: controlled by Kurdish forces; blue: fighting is ongoing and control is unclear. (Source: [Syria\\_location\\_map2.svg](#), wikimedia.org)

## Current map of Syria



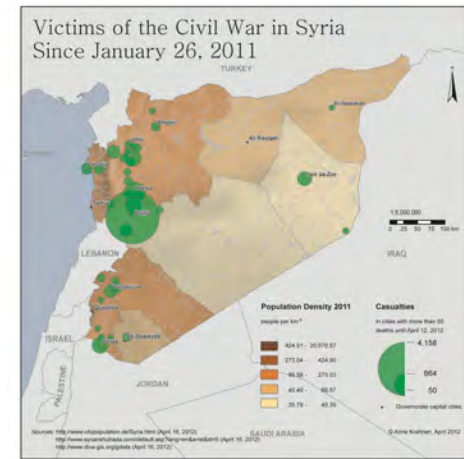
Source: CIA World Fact Book

Map of the autonomous areas under the French Mandate of Syria before 1937



Source: public domain

Victims of the civil war in Syria since January 26, 2011



Relief map of Syria



Source: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, public domain, wikimedia.org

Detailed map of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, showing the political divisions, and areas of Palestinian [green] and Israeli control, 2006



Source: GNU license

Detailed map of the Gaza Strip, the blockade is being held off the Mediterranean Coast



Source: Gringer, CC BY-SA 3.0, wikipedia.org.

Map of Israel, the Palestinian territories (West Bank and Gaza Strip), the Golan Heights, and portions of neighbouring countries, 2004



Source: public domain.

Gaza



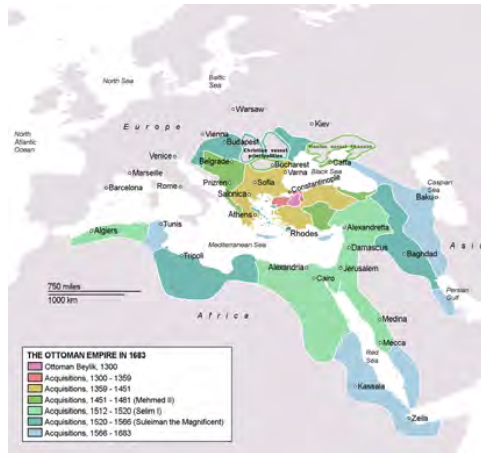
Source: Congressional Research Service

Map of Palestine during the Medieval Period, created in 1890



Source: Mustafa, wikipedia.org

Map of the Ottoman Empire



Source: Atilim Gunes, public domain, wikipedia.org.

Map showing a U.N.-proposed partition plan for Israel and Palestine, 1947



Source: CIA, public domain, wikipedia.org.

Map of the Six Day War, 1967



Source: public domain, wikipedia.org

Map showing Ancient Palestine and the location of the 12 Tribes of Israel, 1759



Source: Tobias Lotter, public domain, wikipedia.org



Map showing the Gaza flotilla raid



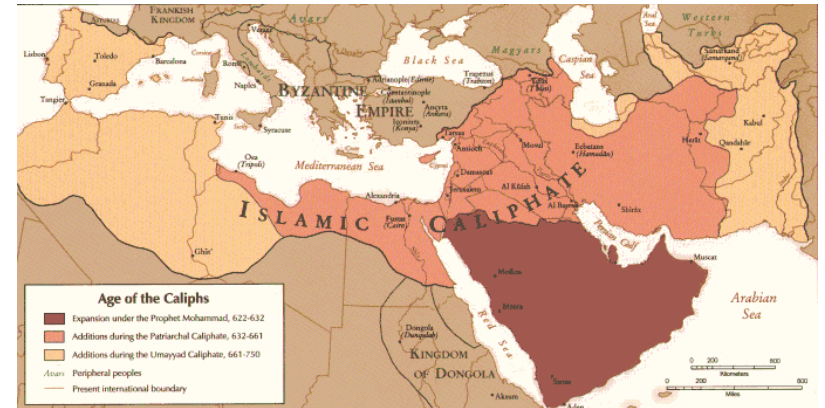
Source: Montgomery, public domain, wikimedia.org

Map showing the territory under Palestinian control and Israeli settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, 2007



Source: public domain

Afghanistan as the Eastern Part of the Islamic (Ummayyad) Caliphate, 7th century CE



Source: Public Domain-Work of American Government, wikimedia.org

Afghanistan as the Eastern Part of the Persian Empire (from circa 300 BCE to 600 CE)



Source: Public Domain (wikipedia.org)



### Jordan River



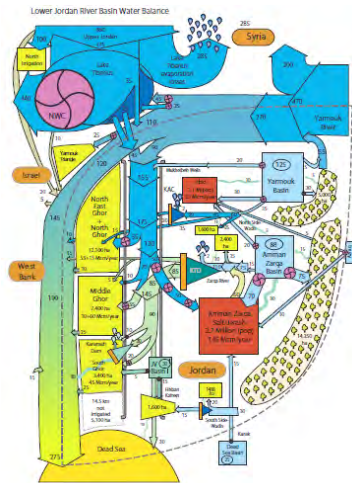
Source: public domain, wikipedia.org

### Map of National Water Carrier of Israel



Source: public domain, wikipedia.org

### Lower Jordan River Water Balance 1950-1975



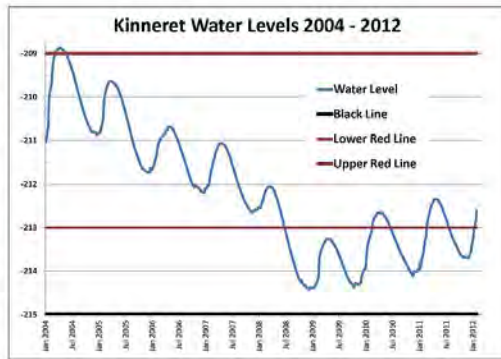
Source: Courcier et al., 2005, World Bank.

### Map of the source of the Jordan, 1869



Source: MacGregor, public domain, wikipedia.org

## Sea of Galilee water levels January 2004 to February 2012



Source: Derends, CC BY 3.0, wikipedia.org

## Eritrea



Source: UN Cartographic Section, wikipedia.org

## The Madaba Map, Jordan, 6th-century CE



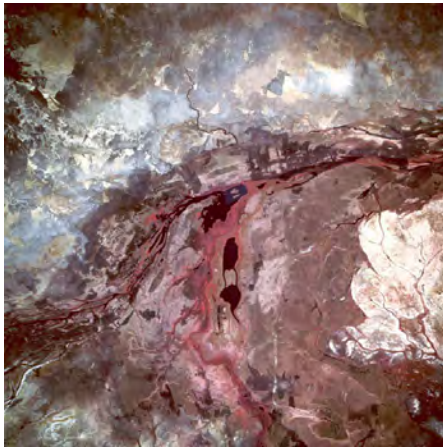
Source: CC BY-SA 2.5, wikipedia.org

## Lake Nasser



Map of Egypt showing the location of Lake Nasser and the Toshka Lakes. (Source: public domain, wikimedia.org)

## The Sudd



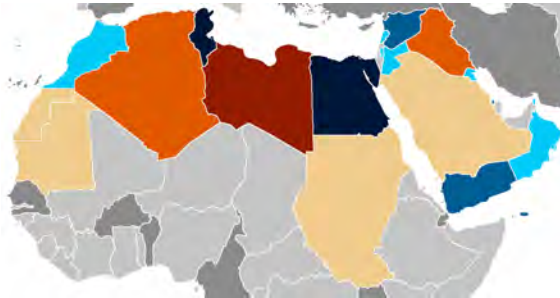
The Sudd, a swamp in South Sudan, contributes to the Nile's historic lack of navigability. (Source: NASA, public domain, wikipedia.org)

## A map showing the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline



Source: Thomas, wikimedia.org

## A map showing countries affected by the Arab Spring



Comments: Revolutions (Tunisia, Egypt) are shown in black, civil war (Libya) in brown, sustained civil disorder and governmental changes (Syria, Yemen) in dark blue, protests and governmental changes (Jordan, Oman, Lebanon) in light blue, major protests (Morocco, Algeria, Iraq) in orange, and smaller protests (Western Sahara, Mauritania, Sudan, Saudi Arabia) in tan. (Source: Kudzu1, wikimedia.org)

## A map showing the Dardanelles



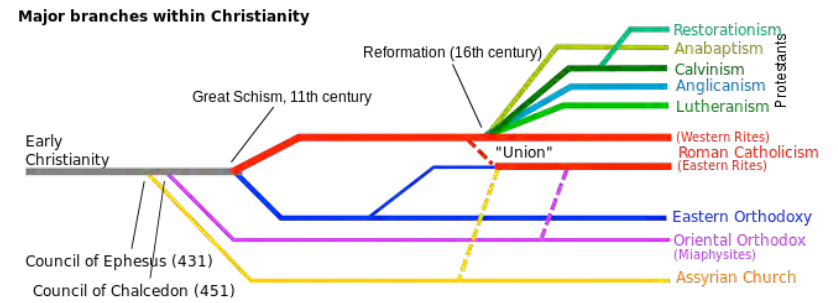
Source: public domain, wikipedia.org

An orthographic projection map of Turkey



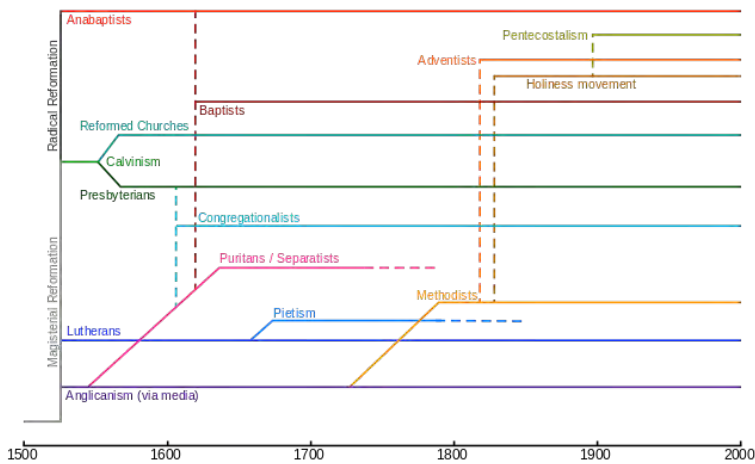
Source: public domain, wikimedia.org

Christianity over time



Source, public domain, wikipedia.org

Protestantism



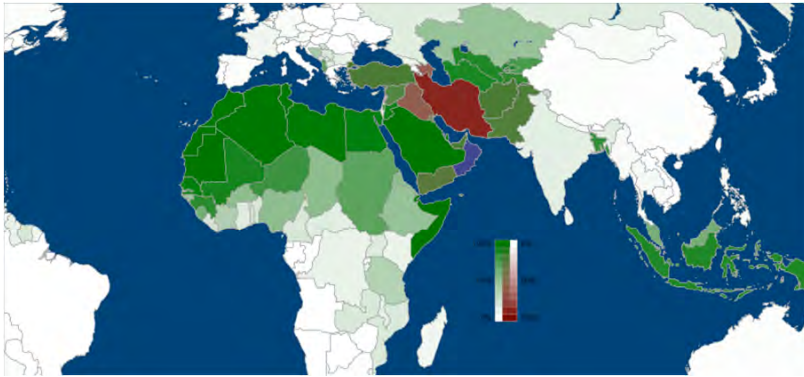
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Prevailing world religions



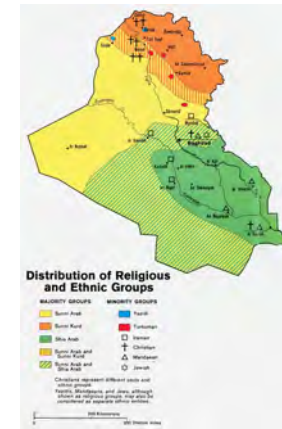
Source: public domain, wikipedia.org

### The Percentage of Muslims by Type and Country



Source: public domain

### Distribution of Religious and Ethnic Groups (Iraq 1978)



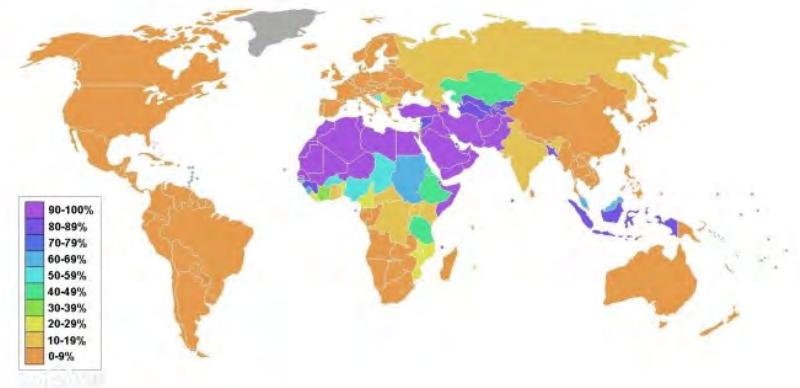
Source: Perry Castaneda Map Library at the University of Texas

### Arabic Ascendancy under Caliph Walid I



Source: Perry Castaneda Map Library at the University of Texas

### Islam Percentage by Country



Source: User-created map from Wikipedia

## About Us

# About *Origins:* Current Events in Historical Perspective

"For insight into the complicated and complicating events ... , one needs perspective, not attitudes; context, not anecdotes; analyses, not postures. For any kind of lasting illumination the focus must be on the history routinely ignored or played down or unknown." — Toni Morrison

***Origins: Current Events in Historical Perspective* connects history with today.**

<http://origins.osu.edu>

Every month since 2007, we've provided historical insight on current events that matter to the United States and to the world. Our main article appears on the 15<sup>th</sup> of each month and features an expert who analyzes a pressing issue—whether political, cultural, or social—in a broader, deeper context. *Origins'* main articles focus on the long-term trends and patterns, search for the foundations of today's events, and explore the often complicated nature of a particular current event.

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*Connecting History* catches the newest blogs and coolest links to historical stuff across the web, featuring film reviews, postcards from across the globe, and "Top Ten" lists.

And our podcast *History Talk* features interviews and segments about today's most interesting topics— it's a history podcast for everyone. *Origins* helps bridge that gap..

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