

Roots of rancor: Examining Islamic militancy

by [Charles Kimball](#) in the [October 24, 2001](#) issue

Commentary since September 11 has produced a cognitive dissonance among Americans about Islam, the world's second largest religious tradition. On the one hand, selected Muslim leaders declare that "Islam is a religion of peace" and President Bush asserts repeatedly that the U.S. has no quarrel with Islam, "which is a good and peaceful religion." On the other hand, taped messages from Osama bin Laden and Sulaiman abu Gaith, the five-page document of suicide bomber Muhammad Atta, and large public demonstrations supporting bin Laden in Pakistan, Indonesia, Iraq and Gaza reveal clear connections to a militant Islam.

Basic questions still abound: What does the Qur'an teach about jihad? Why do so many Muslims appear to hate the U.S.? How can we make sense of the mixed messages about Islam? What terminology is most appropriate to describe the Muslims who are demanding change?

Before engaging these pressing questions, it is essential to recognize the need for a more accurate understanding of Islam. Most Americans know very little about Islam. It is worse than simple ignorance: much of what people think they know is incorrect or distorted. The reasons are rooted in a long history of interaction between Christians and Muslims, much of which has been characterized by mistrust, misunderstanding and mutual antipathy. In order to make sense of the Qur'anic passages about jihad, for instance, it is helpful to know more about Islamic understandings of God, revelation, and the religious and social requirements for the faithful. The prospect of really coming to know another tradition is daunting, but it must not immobilize us. Understanding Islam more accurately and learning to live cooperatively with Muslims who share our society and fragile planet is not an optional task.

Some basic demographic information underscores the point. There are approximately 1.2 billion Muslims in the world. The four countries with the largest

Muslim populations are in Asia: Indonesia (160 million), Pakistan (140 million), Bangladesh and India (120-130 million each). There are twice as many Muslims in China (35 million) as there are Southern Baptists (the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S.) in the world.

Islam is now or soon will be the second largest religion in the U.S., with approximately 7 million adherents. There are more Muslims in America than there are Presbyterians and Episcopalians combined. Islam continues to grow rapidly as a permanent part of the religious and political landscape throughout the world.

Given the size and scope of Islam and the obvious turbulence among many Muslims, the previous question comes into focus: What is the meaning of jihad? The Arabic word means “striving or struggling in the way of God.” Muslims should strive to know and do the will of God. Historically, the “greater” jihad refers to the struggle each person has with himself or herself to do what is right. Human sinfulness, pride and selfishness are our major obstacles.

The “lesser” jihad involves the outward defense of Islam. Muslims should be prepared to defend Islam, including military defense, when the community of faith is under attack. While the vast majority of Muslims reject the violent extremism manifest on September 11, some Islamist leaders and groups clearly attempt to justify their behavior in the context of a holy war or struggle in defense of Islam. Thus, Osama bin Laden calls on the “nation of Islam” to join with him in this holy war.

Why are these people so angry? How can they justify turning airplanes into bombs and killing thousands as heroic actions? The answers are not simple or straightforward. Labeling the perpetrators terrorists or evildoers rings true, but it does not answer the questions. We can begin to get some clarity, however, by taking seriously the religious, historical, political, social and economic dynamics.

A number of factors are operating simultaneously in predominantly Muslim countries to give rise to politically active individuals and groups, often referred to as Islamists. At the same time, very specific historical, political, social and economic circumstances are giving rise to different movements in particular settings.

Many Muslims are convinced that Islam can provide a framework for the future. They point to the past and note how Islam led the world for centuries as the greatest civilizational system. A famous saying attributed to Muhammad enjoins Muslims to

“seek knowledge wherever you may find it, even unto China.” For many centuries, Muslim scholars and thinkers did just that.

The popular Western image of Islam as unsophisticated and anti-intellectual quickly disappears in the face of even a cursory survey of Islamic history. The error of this image is particularly ironic in view of the major ways Islamic civilization helped shape Western society as we know it. When Europe was languishing in the “Dark Ages,” Islamic civilization was thriving from Spain to India. For several centuries, Muslims led the world in areas such as mathematics, chemistry, medicine, philosophy, navigation, architecture, horticulture and astronomy.

Muslims are proud of their history and civilization. But something went wrong. From the 16th through the 20th century many of the lands with a Muslim majority were under the control of outside powers. European colonial powers dominated prior to the rise of the two super powers following World War II. In the last decade, the U.S. has stood alone as the world’s superpower.

The formation of many new nations during the past 60 years adds another layer. Muslims who hoped and worked for revitalized, contemporary Islamic states have been thwarted time and again during recent decades. Although many Muslim lands now have indigenous leaders, there are not many examples where those who govern are in power by virtue of popular choice. Instead, one finds dynastic rule by kings or military and political leaders who seized and maintain power through force.

Movements for political reform have frequently been marginalized or crushed. Despicable human rights records in many Muslim countries add to the frustration. The details vary from country to country, but the pattern is all too familiar. The data are available through Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the annual reports published by the U.S. Department of State.

Economic disparity and perceptions of exploitation are additional ingredients contributing to political instability. Extraordinary wealth enjoyed by the ruling elite coupled with images of opulence in the West provide evidence for those who argue that their countries are still very much controlled by external powers.

Many believe that Islam can once again provide a viable framework for the state and for society. Many also believe that existing political, economic and social systems have failed. When most avenues for political change appear to be blocked, more and more individuals and groups are attracted to revolutionary movements.

Many groups take inspiration from the Iranian revolution. In a largely nonviolent process, Iranians toppled one of the most affluent and powerful leaders, the shah. A state-of-the-art military machine, a brutal secret police and full partnership with the U.S. proved no match for a popular revolution led by the Ayatollah Khomeini. A change few thought possible occurred with astonishing swiftness. I experienced these events firsthand as one of seven Americans to meet with the ayatollah and the students holding the U.S. Embassy in the course of three trips to Iran during the hostage crisis.

My work with the churches in the Middle East during the 1980s brought me in contact with many groups working for political change. I became aware of some of the groups that attracted considerable attention subsequently, namely: Hezbollah, Islamic Jihad, Hamas and the Islamic Salvation Front.

It is vital to understand these and various other groups and movements in their respective contexts. Individual leaders and groups take shape in specific places with distinctive histories and contemporary circumstances. It is this factor that many analysts seem to miss. Islam is not monolithic. Sweeping generalizations devoid of careful contextual analysis will lead inevitably to erroneous conclusions. Egypt is not Algeria; Algeria is not Afghanistan; Afghanistan is not Iran; and so on. When journalists and pundits engage the question, “Why do they hate us?” they find partial answers in clashing value systems and general grievances related to inconsistent U.S. foreign policies. But the roots of frustration go much deeper. They are lodged in particular settings.

Consider Egypt. This poor, overpopulated country contains deep currents of frustration. For many centuries, Egypt, and al-Azhar University in particular, has been at the intellectual center of the Muslim world. Early in the 20th century, Egypt gave birth to the Muslim Brotherhood. Various reform movements have come and gone and some have been radicalized over the decades. Although Anwar Sadat, who made peace with Israel, was popular in the West, not all Egyptians felt the same way—as was clear when Muslim extremists assassinated him in 1981. Fringe groups convinced that the regime of Hosni Mubarak is beyond redemption have surfaced in Egypt on a number of occasions over the past 20 years. They have attacked tourist groups from Japan and Germany as a way to dry up an indispensable source of revenue for Egypt: tourism. Their goal was to destabilize the Mubarak government.

A group of 12 Egyptian nationals, led by the blind cleric Omar Abdel-Rahman, was convicted of the first attempt to blow up the World Trade Center in 1993. They also had plans to kill Mubarak and Butros Butros Ghali, the Egyptian who served as general secretary of the United Nations. The apparent ringleader for the September 11 hijackings and attacks was Muhammad Atta, an Egyptian.

As for understanding Hezbollah, one must understand the religious, political and social dynamics of Lebanon. Similarly, the Islamic Salvation Front is inseparable from the French colonial past and more recent history of Algeria. Hamas—which includes educational, social, political and military institutional structures primarily in Gaza—cannot be understood apart from the tortured history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The desire for clarity about the Islamic connections to turbulent forces is understandable. Bringing the picture into focus requires both an awareness of widespread aspirations among Muslims and a lot of hard, painstaking work in the dense thicket of the particulars present in specific situations.

The range of Muslim activists' viewpoints—which range from advocating socio-political-economic reform to seeking violent revolutionary action—presents a challenge of terminology. Some journalists favor “Islamic fundamentalists” or “Muslim fanatics”; some speak of “militant Islam.” Others, including the U.S. administration, wish to avoid any adjectival use of Muslim or Islamic. They speak instead of “evildoers” and “terrorists.” I prefer the term “violent extremists” to describe the al-Qaeda network. It conveys both the modus operandi and the undeniable link to the fringes of Islam without unnecessarily furthering negative, stereotypical images of Islam.

While many Muslim activists share the vision that Islam can provide the framework for their respective societies, there is no consensus on precisely what an Islamic state should look like. If one were to ask 50 Islamist leaders to outline their vision for an Islamic state in the 21st century, the results would be anything but consistent.

Recent attempts to develop Islamic states illustrate the disparate visions. Iran developed an Islamic republic, a governmental structure based largely on the model of a Western parliamentary democracy. Pakistan, the only country created explicitly to be an Islamic state, has had a tumultuous history for more than 50 years. No Muslims I know look to Pakistan as the model they seek to emulate.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban (literally “the students” of Islam), a religiously inspired political and military faction, seized power five years ago after 15 years of devastating warfare. They imposed an extraordinarily rigid and extreme version of Islamic law—to the horror of most of the world. Prior to September 11, only three countries—Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—had diplomatic relations with the Taliban. Osama bin Laden’s rhetoric may strike a chord with some disgruntled and dispossessed Muslims in various lands, but there is no evidence that anyone (other than a few people with close ties in neighboring Pakistan) is lining up to take courses from the Taliban on how to organize an Islamic state.

There are many other voices within Islam. Given the nature of our pluralist, interdependent world, some Muslims believe that secular democratic states that guarantee religious freedom are the best model for the future. Many Muslims are deeply troubled by the very real problems of religious intolerance, persecution of minorities and the treatment of women within their societies. This debate will continue.

Anger and frustration inspiring violence directed toward the United States is not new, but the events of September 11 shifted everything to a different level. The meticulous planning as well as the locations, magnitude and audacity of these attacks were unprecedented. While the vast majority of Muslims worldwide were horrified and disgusted by such indiscriminate violence, clearly there are some on the fringes of Islam who interpret these acts in the context of a holy war. The perpetrators ignore Islam’s absolute prohibitions against suicide and the taking of innocent life, even in war. They see only the Qur’anic texts that promise paradise to those who die struggling in the way of God.

The depth of anger toward the U.S. is unmistakable. The extremists’ numbers may be relatively small, but, as we now know, it doesn’t take many people to wreak havoc.

The search for simple answers continues, with both Osama bin Laden and many analysts citing U.S. support of Israel and continuing sanctions against Iraq as primary sources of anger toward the U.S. Such rhetoric reflects only part of the truth. There seems to be little focus on the various ways Arab states have treated Palestinians over the years or the internal dynamics among Palestinian leaders as complicating factors. Why does Saddam Hussein bear no blame for using resources to fortify his regime while hundreds of thousands of children suffer in his country?

I do not want to diminish the importance of these things or the suffering of people caught in the middle. Positive movement forward is urgently needed, and it will help on many levels. But the lifting of sanctions on Iraq or the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian problem would not eliminate the frustration toward the U.S. The deeper issues, in my view, are tied to the enormous power of the U.S. and the inconsistency of policies affecting the Muslim countries in question. Far too often, our government has pursued short-sighted, self-serving policies that contradict the ideals most Americans believe we espouse. We don't pay much attention to the inconsistencies in foreign policy. People in other parts of the world who feel the impact of those policies pay close attention. And they take notes.

General Norman Swartzkopf has acknowledged several times on national TV that the U.S. helped train bin Laden and his forces. In the late 1970s they were considered "freedom fighters," since the enemy in Afghanistan was the U.S.S.R. Muslim revolutionaries next door in Iran at the same time were labeled "fanatics."

During the 1980s, the U.S. supported Iraq in the ten-year war of attrition against Iran. Many public-policy advocates, myself included, were highly vocal in opposition to the support of Saddam Hussein. His human rights record was among the worst in the world, and he used chemical weapons on both Kurds in his country and Iranians. President Bush labeled Saddam Hussein "an evil man" in his press conference on October 11, noting that he "gassed his own people." True. Where was the "official" outrage when these events were taking place?

The operative policy in these instances was simple: the enemy of my enemy is my friend. The fallacy of such short-term, expedient policies is now all too clear.

I recently posed this question to some top U.S. business leaders: "How many of you are familiar with U.S. policies in Algeria in the last decade?" Not one hand was raised. Although not many Americans were paying attention, Muslims around the world know that the U.S. supported the regime in power when it halted elections in the early '90s after the first of two rounds. It was clear that Islamic parties were going to win the elections with 80 percent of the popular vote. Some in Congress were confused as well, thinking that we supported democratization and self-determination. Why would we help stop free elections? A top official from the Department of State was summoned for congressional testimony. He explained that our policy is "one person, one vote." "But," he added, "we are not for one person, one vote, one time." Should the Islamic parties win, he suggested, they would

abolish democracy. So, the reasoning went, the U.S. cannot support a process whereby parties will use democracy in order to get power and then abolish democracy. So the policy actually turned out to be this: one person, no votes, any time.

Many Muslims around the world are unimpressed by presidential speeches extolling our virtues as freedom-loving, peaceful people who cherish democracy and our way of life. They see canceled elections and the subsequent arrest of Islamist leaders in Algeria. They see U.S. support for many repressive regimes they consider illegitimate. They see the pervasive influence of hedonistic Western culture on their traditional societies. Add in the frustration over the plight of the Palestinians and of civilians in Iraq and you've got a volatile mix.

Where do we go from here? A two-track approach is needed. The short-term task entails a careful, systematic, global effort to neutralize these misguided, violent extremists. The challenge involves pursuing military, political and economic policies that won't drive many more frustrated and angry people into the ranks of the al-Qaida network. Patience and a great deal of collective wisdom are needed.

The longer-term challenge for the U.S. is to find new ways to work with other nations in pursuit of peace and stability. This is not wishful thinking. I'm not talking about lighting a candle and singing "We Are the World." Rather, the U.S. must take a hard look at our own policies and resolve to take principled, consistent positions in support of fundamental human rights, self-determination, democratization and genuine economic opportunities.