

Strategic Insight

Tribal Tendencies, Global Realities: Islamic Group Dynamics in the Modern World

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Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, a body of "knowledge" has seemingly grown up virtually overnight describing a conflict of some sort between Islam and the Western world. The talk shows and op-ed pages of our newspapers are full of nuanced descriptions of this conflict. Many Americans are frankly mystified by the evident animosity directed at them by parts of the Islamic world. We do not recall any offense intentionally given to the adherents of Islam, nor do Americans have a history of persecuting Muslims or a tradition of disrespect for Islam. So why, we ask, do so many seem to hate us to the extent that some of them would attack our civilians en masse and others of them cheer at the result? What we hear most often in answer to this question is that the conflict between these two cultures, or 'civilizations', as Samuel Huntington^[1] calls them, is based upon a long history of struggle dating back to the Crusades, or even to the birth and expansion of Islam in the 7th century.

This article will argue that the animosity between Islam and the West is a result of numerous factors, of which the legacy of historical conflict in the collective memory of the Islamic peoples is but one important aspect. Past conflict alone cannot explain the full range of discontent now seen in the Islamic world. Rather these historical events have to be viewed in the context of religious, economic and political aspects that contribute to the outlook specific to each group. Inseparable from these cultural differences and historical contingencies, however, is the basic underlying sociological mechanisms by which people form groups and focus collective efforts in ways that allow them to gain advantage over competing individuals and rival groups. Acknowledgement of the tendency of people to engage in cooperative group behavior (and the resultant attitudes and actions towards individuals outside the group) does not challenge the theory that the current antagonism is rooted in historic conflicts and cultural difference. Rather this sociological perspective complements and helps to explain the manifestations observed in both international relations and behaviors closer to home.

Tribal Tendencies—The Theory

The theory that humans could have a predisposition to cooperate in groups and by doing so earn an advantage over rival individuals and groups dates at least as far back as Charles Darwin:

As man is a social animal, it is almost certain that he would inherit a tendency to be faithful to his comrades and obedient to the leader of his tribe; for these qualities are common to most social animals^[2]

A trend in modern scholarship has been to extend this theory to encompass behavior observed in modern life, including the broader scope of behaviors in large groups, beyond the family, kin and tribal entities, to include city-states, nation states and transnational bodies such as religions.

Although there are a number of theories that seek to explain this phenomenon, suffice it to say that some themes are common in the literature:^[3]

- Individuals seem to have an innate predisposition to cooperate in groups.
- Groups tend to have cultural markers that allow the members of the group to identify who is and who is not a member.
- Group members demonstrate preferences for members of the group, and reinforce group norms with a system of rewards and punishments.
- Individuals can demonstrate significant emotional attachment to membership in groups whose limits are abstract, impersonal and ideologically defined rather than just through interpersonal dependencies.

If this theory has merit, it could go a long way toward aiding our understanding of some of the manifestations of cultural conflict seen in the world and most prominently in the Middle East.

Samuel Huntington argues persuasively that what we are seeing in areas where Islam is in conflict with outsiders is an expression of deep divisions at the level of conflicting civilizations. Huntington's central conclusion is that the most dangerous conflicts in the near future are likely to occur along the cultural fault lines separating what he terms the seven or eight civilizations.^[4] Although not all observers agree with Huntington's analyses^[5], most would have to agree that in the 10 years since his ideas came to the public's notice, the course of events in the Balkans and the middle east seem to support the predictive power of his theory.

What is interesting, however, is how closely the sociological theory of tribal tendencies corresponds to Huntington's approach. The chart below shows Huntington's positions compared to similar perspectives take from a sociological point of view.

Clash of Civilizations vs. Tribal Instincts Hypothesis

| Issue | Huntington | Richardson and Boyd |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Self image, relationships, contrast to outsiders | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences among civilizations are real, basic, and long lasting. • They go to core of how people see themselves and how they view key issues such as the relationships between God and humans, the citizen and the state, parents and children, and husband and wife. • Taken together these perspectives control how people identify themselves in contrast to outsiders who do not share these views. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humans are strikingly prone to emotional attachment to rather abstract, large, impersonal, marked groups • This emotion in turn can motivate members to actions involving great risk. • Symbols motivate behavior in the absence of any personal knowledge on the individuals with whom one is interacting. |
| Increased awareness of other cultures | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The advent of near instantaneous worldwide communications and media allows the increase of interaction and awareness of different civilizations. • This circumstance leads not to a convergence of culture | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mass media is used in modern societies to simulate tribes on a larger scale. • The persistence of ethnic sentiments in a large-scale modern world that would otherwise tend to make |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| | but its opposite: an increased awareness of one's own civilization as contrasted with that of others. | them obsolete is an example of the persistence of the tribal instinct. |
| Rise of fundamentalism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The process of modernization, while increasing the identification along the lines of civilization and culture, weakens the links between the individual and state as a source of identity. • This gap has been filled the world over by religious, and particularly fundamentalist movements. Such movements provide the basis for identity and commitment that transcends boundaries and unties civilizations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In times of great stress, fundamentalist churches, often characterized by strong beliefs and ethical prohibitions, weed out the lightly committed who are likely to take more than they give to the religious community. • Stricter churches make better providers of the collective benefits of strong commitments to the community. |
| Response to incursion by outsiders | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The process of civilization consciousness is made more acute by the desire to resist the perceived strength of the West as a civilization. • Thus we see a reactionary back-to-our-roots phenomenon in non-Western cultures. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups which feel threatened by an outside group will tend to develop strategies to compensate including reinforcing cultural markers that further distinguish themselves from the outgroup. |

Anecdotal support for the predisposition to engage in tribal behavior comes from everyday observations. People actively seek out opportunities to engage in mock tribal affiliations and combat in sports. Fans derive great satisfaction from becoming a member of a group, supporting their own 'warriors' and often wearing clothing which provides the cultural marker for group identity. The intense interest shown for the details of the lives of prominent athletes may be an indicator of this innate tendency to focus group attention on selected members of the group most able to defend the group and contend with its 'enemies'.^[7] Some would argue that we see this tribal behavior in many of the structures of modern life such as schools, businesses, clubs and political parties. The marked tendency toward factionalism among political parties, even where the given party seems rather homogenous in its membership and basic belief system lends support to this view.

Tribal Tendencies—The Application

Islam may serve as one such overarching theme that fosters civilization consciousness by providing the cultural markers, including an abstract system of belief and ritual, that offers a special attractiveness as a refuge from an increasingly alienating Western free market world. Western culture, on the other hand, with its emphasis on flexibility in human relationships, plurality of beliefs, and an abiding ambiguity and complexity is especially suited for material success in the modern capitalistic society, but may not satisfy the need for tribal affinity, especially for those groups who do not share in the benefits of such a system.

In an interesting experiment related in a report of a 1984 study, children were shown two groups of photographs of other children. The researchers told the children that one group contained photos of popular children and the other unpopular. When given the chance to show preference to any given individual, the children would favor the popular children—*unless the children were told they themselves were a member of the unpopular group*, in which case they favored their perceived group mates.[\[8\]](#)

Islam is relatively speaking at the other end of the spectrum from the Western experience. It offers deep spiritual succor and a universal brotherhood of believers in a way that is not generally experienced by the secularly oriented West. Muslims who meet anywhere in the world will share certain core attitudes directly related to their religious beliefs[\[9\]](#)—this cannot necessarily be said to the same degree of most Christians living in the West. Western Christianity is either regionally specific (Bible belt in US for example), or so subsumed into the Western liberal democratic ethic that it ceases to be a defining factor among Christians. More to the point, the pluralistic society that the West has become, no longer requires the cultural markers provided by religion in order to accomplish the social goals of group identification which were heretofore served by religion. In Western liberal democracies, the basic assurances and stability required to safeguard oneself and one's kin, provide for the necessities of life and participate in the opportunities and freedoms offered by such systems, do not depend on religious cultural identification as they might have in more turbulent times and places.

Certainly cultural markers are still important, and there are many indications that this basic human need to belong to a group is still with us, influencing our lives in many ways. But this group identification no longer comes primarily from religion in the West. Manner of dress, hairstyle, dialect, type of automobile driven, location and type of dwelling, profession and level of education, and preferences for recreation and entertainment are examples of cultural markers that people use to order their relations and gauge their level of confidence when interacting with others. None of these are primarily correlated to religion. Religious discrimination in the United States, for example, although pervasive at one time in our history, no longer restricts the opportunities of members of minority religious organizations as it once did. Jews, for example, traditional targets of religious discrimination in the United States, as an identifiable group, earn more per capita than does the average American.[\[10\]](#)

Tribal Tendencies—The History

Clearly in the areas of the world occupied by those of Islamic faith, religion is much more central to every aspect of life, from family to international relations. Part of this, of course, is the result of the history of Islam and the inseparable nature of its history as it relates to contact with other religions. Broadly speaking, the history of Islam can be divided into three time periods: the initial expansion in the 7th and 8th century, a period of stabilization where the expansion reached its limits, and a period of withdrawal and domination by Western powers.

The early history of Islam is one marked by rapid expansion, including the military conquest of large areas of the 7th century world. One century after its relatively obscure beginnings on the Arabian Peninsula, the armies of Islam controlled vast areas and had converted millions of inhabitants to the religion of Islam. This part of Islamic history was a vital force in defining and reinforcing a self image of Islam as a victorious, prosperous, sovereign force. Like the Persian, Greek and Roman advances in their respective periods of conquest, Islam too felt that the righteousness of its cause was manifest in the success of its armies.

Although others, like Alexander in the 4th century BC, had also conquered large areas, Islam was singularly successful in transforming the cultures of these diverse regions and maintaining control for relatively long periods of time. Certainly, the appeal of the new religion must have been due in some measure to its ability to satisfy some basic sociological need to provide the necessary cultural markers required for long lasting cohesive groups. The religion itself is rich in beautiful literature, satisfying ritual, and offers a well-developed, intricate and complex theological doctrine. But for the typical pagan convert during the first centuries after Mohamed, Islam had the major advantage that it was relatively simple to become one of the faithful and thus join the group, the benefits of which were manifest in their martial

accomplishments. The five pillars of Islam^[11] (profession of faith, daily prayer, alms giving, fasting during Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to Mecca) required of all members are both simple in their application and useful in their function of providing objective criteria to judge who is and who is not among the faithful. A faith whose membership is based primarily on practice rather than doctrine (as compared with Christianity) had major advantages in the rapid spread of Islam where adherence to group norms could be verified and reinforced during mandatory daily observances.

In practical implementation, the legitimization of warfare as a means of expanding both the political and religious authority of Islam must have been especially useful in raising armies and maintaining loyalty. In accordance with the rules for Islam, warfare could be justified against infidels, apostates, bandits and rebels. War against the first two of these, infidels and apostates, counted as jihad, or holy war. Any believer killed in jihad became a shahid, or martyr, and was guaranteed a place in paradise. Additionally, men were encouraged to participate in war: "He who dies without taking part in a campaign, dies in a kind of disbelief."^[12] Since God was sovereign, Muslim armies were in theory commanded by God. Historian Bernard Lewis writes, "It was perfectly legitimate [in Muslim eyes] for Muslims to conquer and rule Europe and Europeans," because such an action actually benefited these conquered people by allowing them to convert to the true religion and to live according to God's law.^[13] At various times during its early history, Islamic Caliphates or Sultanates ruled formerly Christian lands in the Levant, Asia Minor (Western Turkey), the Balkans, North Africa, Spain and France.

For almost one thousand years, being a Muslim meant living in an Islamic society and living under Islamic law. One could travel from India to Southeast Asia to the Middle East to Eastern Europe to North Africa and see nothing but lands under Islamic rule. It is with this sense of absolute righteousness based upon an extended period of victory and rule that Islam then faced a reversal of fortune, and the consequent feeling of utter humiliation which continues today and remains a common source of inflammation by radical groups and terrorists. In the late 17th century, Islam was forced to withdraw from territory in the Christian West that it had occupied for almost a thousand years. In the East, British colonialism put pressure on Islam there as well. This strategic withdrawal had major consequences for the region and served as a challenge to the self-assured confidence that had been the hallmark of Islamic thought in general.^[14]

In modern times Muslim reversals and set backs have increased the agony of this process of strategic withdrawal. The defeat of the last Ottoman Sultanate at the end of WW I, and the subsequent occupation of formerly Arab-speaking lands by the British and French ended a millennium of Muslim sovereignty over those areas. The division of other Islamic lands among the victorious allies after WW II continued this trend.

This perception of internal weakness and external threat prompted a series of reform movements in Islam. The so-called Islamic Modernists sought to reinterpret Islam in a way that would allow compatibility or at least competition with the West. Other movements saw the problems faced by the Islamic world as caused by a failure to adhere strictly to the older and more traditional interpretation of Islamic law. Although these movements certainly left a legacy of reforms in some aspects of Islamic life, in general they have been replaced in contemporary times by organizations appealing to a rejection of Western culture and resistance to change along a more fundamentalist religious doctrine.^[15] Of course not all Muslims approve of these reactionary movements, but the mass appeal and visible activism must certainly impede economic and social integration in the developed world. The failure of adaptive reform, although it certainly has complex roots, may be due in part to the difficulty of adopting ways of thinking which challenge the cultural (tribal) identity of a people so long used to primacy in political and religious life.^[16]

Many have argued that there is no such thing as 'Islam' per se. The 1.2 billion people of Muslim faith live in different lands and share different values. Arab Muslims make up only about 20% of the Islamic population world wide. In Pakistan and Iran, for example, despite reputations for being fundamentalist nations in many regards, women there are afforded opportunities to participate in public life to a far greater extent than in Saudi Arabia where they may not drive or vote and must remain covered in public.

Furthermore, it has been pointed out that the incidence of terrorism against the West, and the United States in particular, comes from a small, marginalized minority of radical discontents who, far from representing Islam, pervert many of its fundamental guidelines by attacking the innocent and committing suicide. According to this line of argument it is unhelpful to discuss an *Islamic* reaction to the West because the diversity of Islamic peoples makes such an analysis meaningless.

Others have presented a contrary view. Military historian Victor Davis Hanson tells his readers:

September 11 was not merely an act of terrorism per se—isolated and disgruntled individuals of a small clique mad at the state of their world, and so taking out their frustrations against innocents in the United States. Rather, if al-Qaeda did not exist, it would have to have been invented to assuage the psychological wounds of hundreds of millions of Muslims who are without much consensual government, freedom, and material security. Bin Laden is the ultimate representation of Islam's failure to come to grips with the dizzying and sometimes terrifying pace of globalization and the spread of popular Western culture.^[17]

According to this view, it hardly matters that Islam is not a monolithic entity that responds the same way to every stimulus. More important by far is the perception that a significant portion of the Islamic populations, especially in the Arab states, express deep antagonism towards the Judeo-Christian Western culture. It is from this milieu of discontent and hatred that the terrorist organizations draw upon for both active and passive support. By this argument the terrorists, though small in number, are dependent for their existence on the ill will toward the West of millions of people whose ideological basis rests firmly in religious beliefs. Islam is not the enemy of the West, perhaps, but it is the necessary ingredient, without which, there would be no ideological justification for the terrorism now prevalent.

Regardless of which of the arguments above seems the most convincing, it is clear that understanding the underlying perceptions that drive group identity and action will be important in formulating any meaningful understanding or appropriate response.

Tribal Tendencies—The Perspective

One of the aspects of Western relations to the Islamic world which those in the West find so perplexing is the difference of perspective between the two groups. How is it possible for our two societies to observe, and sometimes participate, in the same event and come away with a marked different interpretation of what happened? Our everyday experience tells us that group behavior has consequences on individual perception. Take any close call by an official in a sporting event. Virtually in every instance, the teams and fans will divide their judgement of what actually occurred along the lines of which perception or version of reality favors their respective group. This is a phenomenon that instant replay has hardly helped mitigate.

Historian Thomas Cahill once asked the question, how real is history? He answered by saying that each generation writes its version of history according to its own vantage point.^[18] This tendency may be amplified in Islamic relations with the West where many events, both historical and contemporary, are viewed by the actors through the lens of group-derived reality. Although the mechanism for this selective, value-laden perception is undoubtedly complex, the need to observe events in ways that benefit and reinforce group cohesiveness seems more manifest. Contemporary examples abound. The 1991 Gulf war is seen by most in the West as an effort to free Kuwait from an illegal occupation by another Arab country. Western and Arab nations participated in a joint and combined military intervention. But many in the Islamic world view the event as an American aggression against Islam and the Arabic peoples. "To view this war as an American aggression against Iraq may seem a little odd, but this perspective is widely accepted in the Islamic world."^[19]

The presence of media on the battlefield and the ability to provide detailed documentation by video seems to have no more ability to resolve this divergence of perception between the groups than does the

existence of instant replay in sporting events. In April 2003, when US troops overran Baghdad, crowds of people surged into the street to topple statues of Saddam Hussein. These scenes, which galvanized the Western world, had little effect on the rest of Islam. According to one Middle East expert interviewed by Fox News, none of the Arab media organizations broadcast that image. Instead, the major story of the day for most of the Arab world was the supposedly intentional killing of an Al Jazeera journalist by American forces during the fighting in Baghdad.

Admittedly, this divergence of perspective seems quite pronounced. It may be that the Arab world is perhaps more vulnerable to manipulation than other cultures because of its low level of literacy and relatively high degree of intellectual isolation.

About 50% of all persons in the Arab world are illiterate. Women and girls fare the worst. They also are often the first to leave school and the least likely to gain any significant education. One wonders how the children learn when their mothers are illiterate or poorly educated . . . When one considers that often literacy in the region is defined as attending four years of elementary school or being able to write one's name, then one wonders what we are really talking about.[\[20\]](#)

A 2002 report sponsored by the Regional Bureau of Arab States presents a discouraging picture: The total number of books translated in the Arab countries in the past 1,200 years is only about 100,000, a number equivalent to the number translated in one year of a typical Western nation.[\[21\]](#) Thus the Arab world not only missed the Western experiences of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, it may also have missed the opportunity to read about it.

Even when considering their own history, Islamic perspective tends to focus on the history of Islam while neglecting the pagan past:

[For] the Muslim peoples . . . awareness dates from the advent of Islam, with perhaps some reference to pre-Islamic times necessary to explain historic allusions in the Qur'an . . . Even in countries of ancient civilization like those of the Middle East, the knowledge of pagan history—of their own ancestors, whose monuments and inscriptions lay around them—was minimal. The ancient languages and scripts were forgotten, the ancient records buried, until they were recovered and deciphered in modern times by inquisitive Western archaeologists and philologists.[\[22\]](#)

Tribal Tendencies—Policy Choices

Relations between the West and Islam have reached a critical stage marked by terrorism on an unprecedented scale and open hostilities in Iraq. Not since the Reconquista in Spain, perhaps, has the conflict been so overt and so volatile. Though as President George W. Bush has stated, the United States is not at war with Islam, the war on terrorism will require the engagement and cooperation of much of the Islamic world in order for it to be successful.

Although the rapid victory over Iraq by a relatively small US and UK force was not a surprise to military observers, the ultimate fulfillment of coalition objectives (i.e. a stable, peaceful Iraq that does not threaten the West) will require a high degree of sensitivity. Post-war stability and cooperation in Iraq will depend to a large extent on whether the role America and the West offers the Iraqi people is consistent with their sense of Islamic identity and the dignity that is due the legacy of their forefathers.

A case in point was the US entry into An Najaf in April 2003. As the city was taken, the Shiite population went to the streets to welcome their liberators. The scene changed its complexion in an instant, however, when the crowd misunderstood the intention of the entering unit. The local US commander in a small convoy was in route to a scheduled meeting with the local religious leader. The crowds turned nasty when they came to believe the unit was on its way toward the Tomb of Ali, an act that would have been considered a great insult to their faith.[\[23\]](#) In a scene widely covered on television, the US commander defused the situation by having his soldiers take a knee and point their weapons downward to show their

non-hostile intent. The lesson from this incident should be indicative of the broader issue—actions by the US military and those representing the West in general must not challenge the cultural and group identity of the Islamic people, especially where the situation is one in which cooperation is the key to success.

This is not to say that religious sensitivities are the only concern in rebuilding Iraq. Surely a large portion of the majority Shiite population of Iraq would consider the establishment of a permanent Western-style liberal democracy as a thing to be avoided. As Bernard Lewis observes:

[T]he democrats are of course at a disadvantage. Their ideology requires them, even when in power, to give freedom and rights to their Islamist opposition. The Islamist, when in power, are under no such obligation. On the contrary, their principles require them to suppress what they see as impious and subversive activities. . . Their electoral policy has been classically summarized as 'One man (men only), one vote, once'.^[24]

As of this writing the situation in Iraq and the Middle East is one of uneasy calm. The United States, the symbol of the West to many of Islamic faith, is by necessity engaged as never before with the Islamic world. In the months and years ahead, policy choices as well as decisions made on the spot under great stress will shape the possibilities for future stability and peace. As the leaders in the West pick their way through the possible courses of action, it might be well to bear in mind that the reaction from the Islamic world will in some measure be conditioned by their group-biased sensitivities.

For more topical analysis from the CCC, see our [Strategic Insights](#) section.

For related links, see our [Middle East Resources](#)

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9. It is well appreciated that Islam is not a single block of identical belief. However, despite the difference between Shiite and Sunni, and the some regional differences, shared core beliefs are relatively homogenous based on the acceptance in the inerrancy of the Koran and the five pillars of Islam as the basis of Islamic practice.
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13. Lewis, p.55.

14. Interestingly enough, the Christian Crusades to recapture the holy lands, a phenomenon so often mentioned as a source of historical animosity, did not raise the same level of concern at the time they took place. As Lewis tells us, the assault and capture of Jerusalem by Christians in 1099 did not prompt a Jihad, and the neighboring Muslim states did not even respond to calls for help: "The words Crusade and Crusader do not even occur in the Arabic historiography of the time, in which the Crusaders are referred to as infidels, the Christians, or most frequently, the Franks, a general term for Catholic - and later on protestant . . . Awareness of the Crusades as a distinct historical phenomenon dates from the nineteenth century, and the translation of European books of history. Since then, there is a new perception of the Crusades as an early prototype of expansion of European imperialism into the Islamic world. A more accurate description would present them as a long-delayed, very limited, and finally ineffectual response to the jihad." Lewis, p.50-51.

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