



Recent Books on Iran, Islamic Militancy, and the Near East

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Introduction

United States forces have entered a new era of dealing with the complexities of reconstruction, insurgency operations and empowering a people very traumatized by leaders who exceeded the bounds of responsible behavior towards their own people and who thrive on chaos. This new era necessitates understanding the religious and cultural idiosyncrasies of regions that were not on the forefront of American military discussion or thought during the Cold War. Coalition efforts that empower Iraqis politically and economically, while managing Hizballah in Lebanon, and Iran's Islamic Republic, call for a crash course in the symbolism and practices of Shiite Islam. Three books in particular will provide the foundation for just such a crash course.

The first book, by UT-Austin Islamic and Iranian historian Karman Scot Aghaie, is *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*. The second, by author Andrew Mango, is *The Turks Today*, which argues that we must encourage Turkey to continue serving as a secular role model for other Islamic nations to follow. The third book, by Paris-based social scientist Olivier Roy, is *Globalized Islam: The Search for the New Ummah*, a sequel to his *The Failure of Political Islam*.

The Martyrs of Karbala

Karman Scot Aghaie is an Assistant Professor of Islamic and Iranian history at the University of Texas at Austin, and author of *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*, an important primer for those involved in civil affairs, and who are deploying to regions with a concentration of Shiites (forty percent of Iraq is Shiite).[1] Readers will learn about numerous important concepts like *Moharram*, *Ahl-Al-Sunnah*, and *Ahl Al-Bayt* that will enhance situational awareness of the theater of operations.

Moharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar and for Shiite Muslims a more significantly religious month than for their Sunni counterparts. It brings with it the main difference between Shiite and Sunni, for on the 10th of Moharram (also called Ashoora), Hussein, grandson of Prophet Mohammad fought a battle on the plains of Karbala (in Iraq) against Yazid (the second Ummayyad emperor) for the fate of whether Muslims would be ruled by successors of the Prophet or through other means (tribal consensuses, tyranny, popular selection). Hussein, a member of

the *Ahl-Al-Beyt* (Family of the House of the Prophet, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, and son of the Prophet's cousin Ali) was killed in battle in 680 AD.

The book chronicles the Karbala syndrome and the series of rituals that would evolve to mourn the death of Prophet Mohammed grandson; these rituals would form the basis of what distinguishes Shiite Muslims from Sunnis. By the sixteenth century, the time of the Safavid dynasty that ruled Persia, Shiite Islam became the state religion and the rituals *Rowzeh Khani* a ritual sermon that recounts the events of Karbala, this would be a major body of literature. In the eighteenth century, during the Persian Qajar dynasty, the events of Karbala came complete with stage props and actors reenacting the battle. Readers will learn how during the period actors playing the Shiite nemesis Yazid and the actual murderer of Hussein, known as Shimr were dressed in European uniforms to make them more odious. This may explain the Iranian psychological connection of western military uniforms as being evil.

The book also goes into detail about the procession of mourners who rub their chests with mud and beat them as a symbol of death of loved one. Others may heighten their sorrow with flagellation with metal chains to the beat of drummer. This is not too far from the concept of redemption through pain that was prevalent in the Christian theosophy of the Middle Ages. A man sprays rose water on the mourners, symbolizing the Prophet's love for perfumes and cleanliness. Standard bearers carry a large float with standards (*alamat*) of the family of the Prophet who were at Karbala. It is the cavalry of Shiite Islam and to be standard-bearer is a high honor in Shiite communities that observe this ritual. Imagine a military convoy or jeep trying to drive through this procession; this is exactly what an Israeli army jeep did in Operation Peace for Galilee that stimulated months of riots and attacks on Israeli Defense Force units in Lebanon. Did the Israeli troops driving the jeep understand the frenzy, passions and rituals that they were attempting to drive through?

In the procession of the double-edged sword of Ali (*Zul-feqar*) carried by Hussein, his injured horse (*Zhu-al-Jannah*) and women carrying a crib of Ali Asghar, an infant killed in battle as well as processions carrying shovels symbolic of digging the graves. The procession ends with a man in chains on a camel, symbolizing Zein Al-Abdin, son of Hussein who was captured and taken prisoner. In understanding these words and symbols one ascertains the modern intentions of weapons systems and deployments by the Iranians, who tend to label operations based on the symbols of Karbala. Several battles in the Iran-Iraq War were labeled Operation Karbala I, II, III and so on. *The Martyrs of Karbala* is an excellent book that should be perused by U.S. forces deploying to the region.

The Turks Today

One cannot understand NATO, Islamic affairs and the Middle East without understanding the Republic of Turkey. The Turkish Republic has demonstrated itself as an Islamic secularist state and a worthy Islamic economic competitor. In my opinion, it is vital that the United States and its allies ensure that Turkey maintains its growth and prosperity as it enjoys its status as a NATO ally and foster its bid to become a member of the European Union (EU).

Andrew Mango is author of *The Turks Today*. In this book, he makes a compelling argument for keeping Turkey evolving along the right path: one that makes it an example that Islamic nations can benefit from secular government.^[2] Mango, who was born in Istanbul, speaks and reads Turkish, is the author of an important biography of Kemal Attaturk, the founder of modern Turkey. Attaturk was a leader admired by many including Pakistan's current President Pervez Musharraf. Denying Turkey admission to the EU is foolhardy, argues Mango, and one can understand that the integrating Turkey into the EU is a matter of national security for NATO.

Readers will learn how Turkey incorporates Islam as a means of teaching religious humanism. It infuses secular humanism and gives it an Islamic character. Turks involved in religion promote the idea that Islam must break out of its intellectual stagnation and meet modernity. To compete with Turks who train in Egypt and Saudi Arabia and return to evangelize (at best) or radicalize (at worst), the Turkish government is luring many to study Islam in the country that is imbued with a more tolerant and humanistic version of Islamic modernism. The Turkish authorities that investigated the November 2003 bombings in Istanbul revealed that Turks who had studied in Pakistan and Afghanistan carried out the attack. The author argues that Islam in Turkey cannot be removed from Turkey, but can be managed in a constructive way through positive interpretations of Islamic precedent, history and law.

Mango reveals that eighty-eight percent of Turks polled found the Army to be the most trustworthy institution in Turkey. He quotes a senior official on the Turkish National Security Council reflecting that Army briefs are clear and contain solid facts and evidence; politicians used to shooting their mouths off do not measure up. The Turkish Army purges from its ranks anyone with Islamist leanings and teaches that as long as Kemalism is respected, any Turkish policy that brings it closer to contemporary civilization will be acceptable to the armed forces. The army is the guarantor of Turkey's secularism. Balancing the influence of the army and civil-military relations in Turkey remains among the biggest challenges of the nation. In 1982, the Army pushed through a revision to the constitution giving more power to the executive.

The chapter on Ankara, Turkey's capitol, takes readers into the problems of the Turkish bureaucracy. The parliament in Ankara, the 550 unicameral Turkish Grand Assembly is less trusted by citizens, the National Security Council (the executive) dictates if there is a weak president and the Constitutional Court (the judiciary) upholds secular Kemalist ideals. The eighty-one provinces are modeled after the French '*departemente*' system each with a *Vali* (prefect or governor) and *Qaymakam* (deputy or district governors). Turkey's relations with its neighbors are discussed, such the Kurds in Northern Iraq. What was interesting was the Turkish pressure in 1998 on Syria to expel Kurdish leader Abdallah Ocalan. Iran and Syria used the Kurdish PKK to undermine Saddam Hussein and pro-western Turkey. I recommend this book for anyone with orders to the EUCOM or CENTCOM area of operation.

Globalized Islam: The Search for the New Ummah

Olivier Roy is a Professor of Social Sciences in Paris, France. His books are found primarily in French and are a part of a growing trend of academics who theorize that Political Islam has failed and this surge of violence represents its last gasp. His 2004 book, *Globalized Islam: The Search for the New Ummah*,^[3] is a sequel to his 1992 *The Failure of Political Islam* that appeared in English in 1994.

Understanding where the Islamic militant movement is going and exploring various scenarios is vital in today's military studies. His book is an exploration of how Islamic militancy has become infused with Third World theories, Marxism, fascism, and nationalism. It cannot escape the whirlwind of ideas that has drifted over the decades into the Middle East. All militant websites seemed to urge for a peripheral jihad in the frontiers (Chechnya, the Philippines island of Mindanao, Afghanistan, Bosnia, Kashmir) and for an imaginary *ummah* (Islamic society) in which they hold dominion under the guise of piety. He points out that many of these websites originate not from the periphery but from Europe, Malaysia and even North America areas in which there is access to technology. This is a key observation: for the Islamic militants, a cell requires access to free societies and western technologies to propagate and acquire tools for their rejectionist movements. The author also debates whether Al-Qaeda is a strategic threat or merely a security problem. He observes that Islamic radical ideologues like Qutb, Banna, Zawahiri and Al-Mauwdudi found more of a following in young educated youths in their early days of promoting their militant ideas than the traditional *ulama* (clergy). Yet in 2005, these ideas could become more main-stream if not checked by a Muslim counter-argument to the insanity of jihadist rhetoric.

This book is a wonderful exploration of ideas on the future of Islamic radicalism but is not recommended for those with just a slight understanding of the Islamic militant movement. But only those counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency personnel who have read a few basic books should tackle the ideas of Olivier Roy. This book is part of the Paris-based *Centre d'Etudes et Recherches Internationales* (CERI) series published in conjunction with Columbia University.

Conclusion

With U.S. forces facing new challenges and confronting the complexities of post-conflict reconstruction in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and continuing their counter-insurgency operations in both countries, it has become more important than ever for the warfighter to understand the cultural and religious traditions of this region, so far from the forefront of American military discussion and thought during the Cold War.

By reading the three books reviewed above—Karman Scot Aghaie's *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran*; Andrew Mango's *The Turks Today*; and Olivier Roy's *Globalized Islam: The Search for the New Ummah*—warfighters will benefit from a much-needed crash course in the symbolism and practices of Shiite Islam, better preparing them for the complex operational realities of this war-torn land.

About the Author

LCDR Aboul-Enein is a Plans Operations and Medical Intelligence Officer specially detailed to the Office of the Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs where he serves as Director for North Africa and Egypt as well as an Advisor on Islamic Militant Ideology. He is author of *Ayman Al-Zawahiri: The Ideologue of Modern Islamic Militant Ideology* (U.S. Air War College Center for Counterproliferation, 2004) and co-author of *Islamic Rulings on Warfare* (Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2004).

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References

1. Karman Scot Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle: [University of Washington Press](#), January 2005, 248 pages, paperback).
2. Andrew Mango, *The Turks Today* (New York: [Overlook Press](#), 2004, 288 pages, hardback).
3. Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for the New Ummah* (New York, [Columbia University Press](#), 2004, 340 pages).