The Revolt of Islam: When did the conflict with the West begin, and how could it end?

by Bernard Lewis November 19, 2001

President Bush and other Western politicians have taken great pains to make it clear that the war in which we are engaged is a war against terrorism—not a war against Arabs, or, more generally, against Muslims, who are urged to join us in this struggle against our common enemy. Osama bin Laden’s message is the opposite. For bin Laden and those who follow him, this is a religious war, a war for Islam and against infidels, and therefore, inevitably, against the United States, the greatest power in the world of the infidels.

In his pronouncements, bin Laden makes frequent references to history. One of the most dramatic was his mention, in the October 7th videotape, of the “humiliation and disgrace” that Islam has suffered for “more than eighty years.” Most American—and, no doubt, European—observers of the Middle Eastern scene began an anxious search for something that had happened “more than eighty years” ago, and came up with various answers. We can be fairly sure that bin Laden’s Muslim listeners—the people he was addressing—picked up the allusion immediately and appreciated its significance. In 1918, the Ottoman sultanate, the last of the great Muslim empires, was finally defeated—its capital, Constantinople, occupied, its sovereign held captive, and much of its territory partitioned between the victorious British and French Empires. The Turks eventually succeeded in liberating their homeland, but they did so not in the name of Islam but through a secular nationalist movement. One of their first acts, in November, 1922, was to abolish the sultanate. The Ottoman sovereign was not only a sultan, the ruler of a specific state; he was also widely recognized as the caliph, the head of all Sunni Islam, and the last in a line of such rulers that dated back to the death of the Prophet Muhammad, in 632 A.D. After a brief experiment with a separate caliph, the Turks, in March, 1924, abolished the caliphate, too. During its nearly thirteen centuries, the caliphate had gone through many vicissitudes, but it remained a potent symbol of Muslim unity, even identity, and its abolition, under the double assault of foreign imperialists and domestic modernists, was felt throughout the Muslim world.

Historical allusions such as bin Laden’s, which may seem abstruse to many Americans, are common among Muslims, and can be properly understood only within the context of Middle Eastern perceptions of identity and against the background of Middle Eastern history. Even the concepts of history and identity require redefinition for the Westerner trying to understand the contemporary Middle East. In current American usage, the phrase “that’s history” is commonly used to dismiss something as unimportant, of no relevance to current concerns, and, despite an immense investment in the teaching and writing of history, the general level of historical knowledge in our society is abysmally low. The Muslim peoples, like everyone else in the world, are shaped by their history, but, unlike some others, they are keenly aware of it. In the nineteen-eighties, during the Iran-Iraq war, for instance, both sides waged massive propaganda campaigns that frequently evoked events and personalities dating back as far as the seventh century. These were not detailed narratives but rapid, incomplete allusions, and yet both sides employed them in the secure knowledge that they would be understood by their target audiences—even by the large proportion of that audience that was illiterate. Middle Easterners’ perception of history is nourished from the pulpit, by the schools, and by the media, and, although it may be—indeed, often is—slanted and inaccurate, it is nevertheless vivid and powerfully resonant.

But history of what? In the Western world, the basic unit of human organization is the nation, which is then subdivided in various ways, one of which is by religion. Muslims, however, tend to see not a nation
subdivided into religious groups but a religion subdivided into nations. This is no doubt partly because most of the nation-states that make up the modern Middle East are relatively new creations, left over from the era of Anglo-French imperial domination that followed the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, and they preserve the state-building and frontier demarcations of their former imperial masters. Even their names reflect this artificiality: Iraq was a medieval province, with borders very different from those of the modern republic; Syria, Palestine, and Libya are names from classical antiquity that hadn’t been used in the region for a thousand years or more before they were revived and imposed by European imperialists in the twentieth century; Algeria and Tunisia do not even exist as words in Arabic—the same name serves for the city and the country. Most remarkable of all, there is no word in the Arabic language for Arabia, and modern Saudi Arabia is spoken of instead as “the Saudi Arab kingdom” or “the peninsula of the Arabs,” depending on the context. This is not because Arabic is a poor language—quite the reverse is true—but because the Arabs simply did not think in terms of combined ethnic and territorial identity. Indeed, the caliph Omar, the second in succession after the Prophet Muhammad, is quoted as saying to the Arabs, “Learn your genealogies, and do not be like the local peasants who, when they are asked who they are, reply: ’I am from such-and-such a place.’ ”

In the early centuries of the Muslim era, the Islamic community was one state under one ruler. Even after that community split up into many states, the ideal of a single Islamic polity persisted. The states were almost all dynastic, with shifting frontiers, and it is surely significant that, in the immensely rich historiography of the Islamic world in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, there are histories of dynasties, of cities, and, primarily, of the Islamic state and community, but no histories of Arabia, Persia, or Turkey. Both Arabs and Turks produced a vast literature describing their struggles against Christian Europe, from the first Arab incursions in the eighth century to the final Turkish retreat in the twentieth. But until the modern period, when European concepts and categories became dominant, Islamic commentators almost always referred to their opponents not in territorial or ethnic terms but simply as infidels (kafir). They never referred to their own side as Arab or Turkish; they identified themselves as Muslims. This perspective helps to explain, among other things, Pakistan’s concern for the Taliban in Afghanistan. The name Pakistan, a twentieth-century invention, designates a country defined entirely by its Islamic religion. In every other respect, the country and people of Pakistan are—as they have been for millennia—part of India. An Afghanistan defined by its Islamic identity would be a natural ally, even a satellite, of Pakistan. An Afghanistan defined by ethnic nationality, on the other hand, could be a dangerous neighbor, advancing irredentist claims on the Pashto-speaking areas of northwestern Pakistan and perhaps even allying itself with India.

II—THE HOUSE OF WAR

In the course of human history, many civilizations have risen and fallen—China, India, Greece, Rome, and, before them, the ancient civilizations of the Middle East. During the centuries that in European history are called medieval, the most advanced civilization in the world was undoubtedly that of Islam. Islam may have been equalled—or even, in some ways, surpassed—by India and China, but both of those civilizations remained essentially limited to one region and to one ethnic group, and their impact on the rest of the world was correspondingly restricted. The civilization of Islam, on the other hand, was ecumenical in its outlook, and explicitly so in its aspirations. One of the basic tasks bequeathed to Muslims by the Prophet was jihad. This word, which literally means “striving,” was usually cited in the Koranic phrase “striving in the path of God” and was interpreted to mean armed struggle for the defense or advancement of Muslim power. In principle, the world was divided into two houses: the House of Islam, in which a Muslim government ruled and Muslim law prevailed, and the House of War, the rest of the world, still inhabited and, more important, ruled by infidels. Between the two, there was to be a perpetual state of war until the entire world either embraced Islam or submitted to the rule of the Muslim state.

From an early date, Muslims knew that there were certain differences among the peoples of the House of War. Most of them were simply polytheists and idolaters, who represented no serious threat to Islam and were likely prospects for conversion. The major exception was the Christians, whom Muslims recognized as having a religion of the same kind as their own, and therefore as their primary rival in the struggle for world...
domination—or, as they would have put it, world enlightenment. It is surely significant that the Koranic and other inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock, one of the earliest Muslim religious structures outside Arabia, built in Jerusalem between 691 and 692 A.D., include a number of directly anti-Christian polemics: “Praise be to God, who begets no son, and has no partner,” and “He is God, one, eternal. He does not beget, nor is he begotten, and he has no peer.” For the early Muslims, the leader of Christendom, the Christian equivalent of the Muslim caliph, was the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople. Later, his place was taken by the Holy Roman Emperor in Vienna, and his in turn by the new rulers of the West. Each of these, in his time, was the principal adversary of the jihad.

In practice, of course, the application of jihad wasn’t always rigorous or violent. The canonically obligatory state of war could be interrupted by what were legally defined as “truces,” but these differed little from the so-called peace treaties the warring European powers signed with one another. Such truces were made by the Prophet with his pagan enemies, and they became the basis of what one might call Islamic international law. In the lands under Muslim rule, Islamic law required that Jews and Christians be allowed to practice their religions and run their own affairs, subject to certain disabilities, the most important being a poll tax that they were required to pay. In modern parlance, Jews and Christians in the classical Islamic state were what we would call second-class citizens, but second-class citizenship, established by law and the Koran and recognized by public opinion, was far better than the total lack of citizenship that was the fate of non-Christians and even of some deviant Christians in the West. The jihad also did not prevent Muslim governments from occasionally seeking Christian allies against Muslim rivals—even during the Crusades, when Christians set up four principalities in the Syro-Palestinian area. The great twelfth-century Muslim leader Saladin, for instance, entered into an agreement with the Crusader king of Jerusalem, to keep the peace for their mutual convenience.

Under the medieval caliphate, and again under the Persian and Turkish dynasties, the empire of Islam was the richest, most powerful, most creative, most enlightened region in the world, and for most of the Middle Ages Christendom was on the defensive. In the fifteenth century, the Christian counterattack expanded. The Tatars were expelled from Russia, and the Moors from Spain. But in southeastern Europe, where the Ottoman sultan confronted first the Byzantine and then the Holy Roman Emperor, Muslim power prevailed, and these setbacks were seen as minor and peripheral. As late as the seventeenth century, Turkish pashas still ruled in Budapest and Belgrade, Turkish armies were besieging Vienna, and Barbary corsairs were raiding lands as distant as the British Isles and, on one occasion, in 1627, even Iceland.

Then came the great change. The second Turkish siege of Vienna, in 1683, ended in total failure followed by headlong retreat—an entirely new experience for the Ottoman armies. A contemporary Turkish historian, Silihdar Mehmet Aga, described the disaster with commendable frankness: “This was a calamitous defeat, so great that there has been none like it since the first appearance of the Ottoman state.” This defeat, suffered by what was then the major military power of the Muslim world, gave rise to a new debate, which in a sense has been going on ever since. The argument began among the Ottoman military and political élite as a discussion of two questions: Why had the once victorious Ottoman armies been vanquished by the despised Christian enemy? And how could they restore the previous situation?

There was good reason for concern. Defeat followed defeat, and Christian European forces, having liberated their own lands, pursued their former invaders whence they had come, the Russians moving into North and Central Asia, the Portuguese into Africa and around Africa to South and Southeast Asia. Even small European powers such as Holland and Portugal were able to build vast empires in the East and to establish a dominant role in trade.

For most historians, Middle Eastern and Western alike, the conventional beginning of modern history in the Middle East dates from 1798, when the French Revolution, in the person of Napoleon Bonaparte, landed in Egypt. Within a remarkably short time, General Bonaparte and his small expeditionary force were able to conquer, occupy, and rule the country. There had been, before this, attacks, retreats, and losses of territory on
the remote frontiers, where the Turks and the Persians faced Austria and Russia. But for a small Western force to invade one of the heartlands of Islam was a profound shock. The departure of the French was, in a sense, an even greater shock. They were forced to leave Egypt not by the Egyptians, nor by their suzerains the Turks, but by a small squadron of the British Royal Navy, commanded by a young admiral named Horatio Nelson. This was the second bitter lesson the Muslims had to learn: not only could a Western power arrive, invade, and rule at will but only another Western power could get it out.

By the early twentieth century—although a precarious independence was retained by Turkey and Iran and by some remoter countries like Afghanistan, which at that time did not seem worth the trouble of invading—almost the entire Muslim world had been incorporated into the four European empires of Britain, France, Russia, and the Netherlands. Middle Eastern governments and factions were forced to learn how to play these mighty rivals off against one another. For a time, they played the game with some success. Since the Western allies—Britain and France—and then the United States—effectively dominated the region, Middle Eastern resisters naturally looked to those allies’ enemies for support. In the Second World War, they turned to Germany; in the Cold War, to the Soviet Union.

And then came the collapse of the Soviet Union, which left the United States as the sole world superpower. The era of Middle Eastern history that had been inaugurated by Napoleon and Nelson was ended by Gorbachev and the elder George Bush. At first, it seemed that the era of imperial rivalry had ended with the withdrawal of both competitors: the Soviet Union couldn’t play the imperial role, and the United States wouldn’t. But most Middle Easterners didn’t see it that way. For them, this was simply a new phase in the old imperial game, with America as the latest in a succession of Western imperial overlords, except that this overlord had no rival—no Hitler or Stalin—whom they could use either to damage or to influence the West. In the absence of such a patron, Middle Easterners found themselves obliged to mobilize their own force of resistance. Al Qaeda—its leaders, its sponsors, its financiers—is one such force.

III—“THE GREAT SATAN”

America’s new role—and the Middle East’s perception of it—was vividly illustrated by an incident in Pakistan in 1979. On November 20th, a band of a thousand Muslim religious radicals seized the Great Mosque in Mecca and held it for a time against the Saudi security forces. Their declared aim was to “purify Islam” and liberate the holy land of Arabia from the royal “clique of infidels” and the corrupt religious leaders who supported them. Their leader, in speeches played from loudspeakers, denounced Westerners as the destroyers of fundamental Islamic values and the Saudi government as their accomplices. He called for a return to the old Islamic traditions of “justice and equality.” After some hard fighting, the rebels were suppressed. Their leader was executed on January 9, 1980, along with sixty-two of his followers, among them Egyptians, Kuwaitis, Yemenis, and citizens of other Arab countries.

Meanwhile, a demonstration in support of the rebels took place in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad. A rumor had circulated—endorsed by Ayatollah Khomeini, who was then in the process of establishing himself as the revolutionary leader in Iran—that American troops had been involved in the clashes in Mecca. The American Embassy was attacked by a crowd of Muslim demonstrators, and two Americans and two Pakistani employees were killed. Why had Khomeini stood by a report that was not only false but wildly improbable?

These events took place within the context of the Iranian revolution of 1979. On November 4th, the United States Embassy in Teheran had been seized, and fifty-two Americans were taken hostage; those hostages were then held for four hundred and forty-four days, until their release on January 20, 1981. The motives for this, baffling to many at the time, have become clearer since, thanks to subsequent statements and revelations from the hostage-takers and others. It is now apparent that the hostage crisis occurred not because relations between Iran and the United States were deteriorating but because they were improving. In the fall of 1979, the relatively moderate Iranian Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan, had arranged to meet with the American national-security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, under the aegis of the Algerian government. The two men
met on November 1st, and were reported to have been photographed shaking hands. There seemed to be a real possibility—in the eyes of the radicals, a real danger—that there might be some accommodation between the two countries. Protesters seized the Embassy and took the American diplomats hostage in order to destroy any hope of further dialogue.

For Khomeini, the United States was “the Great Satan,” the principal adversary against whom he had to wage his holy war for Islam. America was by then perceived—rightly—as the leader of what we like to call “the free world.” Then, as in the past, this world of unbelievers was seen as the only serious force rivalling and preventing the divinely ordained spread and triumph of Islam. But American observers, reluctant to recognize the historical quality of the hostility, sought other reasons for the anti-American sentiment that had been intensifying in the Islamic world for some time. One explanation, which was widely accepted, particularly in American foreign-policy circles, was that America’s image had been tarnished by its wartime and continuing alliance with the former colonial powers of Europe.

In their country’s defense, some American commentators pointed out that, unlike the Western European imperialists, America had itself been a victim of colonialism; the United States was the first country to win freedom from British rule. But the hope that the Middle Eastern subjects of the former British and French Empires would accept the American Revolution as a model for their own anti-imperialist struggle rested on a basic fallacy that Arab writers were quick to point out. The American Revolution was fought not by Native American nationalists but by British settlers, and, far from being a victory against colonialism, it represented colonialism’s ultimate triumph—the English in North America succeeded in colonizing the land so thoroughly that they no longer needed the support of the mother country.

It is hardly surprising that former colonial subjects in the Middle East would see America as being tainted by the same kind of imperialism as Western Europe. But Middle Eastern resentment of imperial powers has not always been consistent. The Soviet Union, which extended the imperial conquests of the tsars of Russia, ruled with no light hand over tens of millions of Muslim subjects in Central Asian states and in the Caucasus; had it not been for American opposition and the Cold War, the Arab world might well have shared the fate of Poland and Hungary, or, more probably, that of Uzbekistan. And yet the Soviet Union suffered no similar backlash of anger and hatred from the Arab community. Even the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in 1979—a clear case of imperialist aggression, conquest, and domination—triggered only a muted response in the Islamic world. The P.L.O. observer at the United Nations defended the invasion, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference did little to protest it. South Yemen and Syria boycotted a meeting held to discuss the issue, Libya delivered an attack on the United States, and the P.L.O. representative abstained from voting and submitted his reservations in writing. Ironically, it was the United States, in the end, that was left to orchestrate an Islamic response to Soviet imperialism in Afghanistan.

As the Western European empires faded, Middle Eastern anti-Americanism was attributed more and more to another cause: American support for Israel, first in its conflict with the Palestinian Arabs, then in its conflict with the neighboring Arab states and the larger Islamic world. There is certainly support for this hypothesis in Arab statements on the subject. But there are incongruities, too. In the nineteen-thirties, Nazi Germany’s policies were the main cause of Jewish migration to Palestine, then a British mandate, and the consequent reinforcement of the Jewish community there. The Nazis not only permitted this migration; they facilitated it until the outbreak of the war, while the British, in the somewhat forlorn hope of winning Arab good will, imposed and enforced restrictions. Nevertheless, the Palestinian leadership of the time, and many other Arab leaders, supported the Germans, who sent the Jews to Palestine, rather than the British, who tried to keep them out.

The same kind of discrepancy can be seen in the events leading to and following the establishment of the State of Israel, in 1948. The Soviet Union played a significant role in procuring the majority by which the General Assembly of the United Nations voted to establish a Jewish state in Palestine, and then gave Israel immediate de-jure recognition. The United States, however, gave only de-facto recognition. More important,
the American government maintained a partial arms embargo on Israel, while Czechoslovakia, at Moscow’s direction, immediately sent a supply of weaponry, which enabled the new state to survive the attempts to strangle it at birth. As late as the war of 1967, Israel still relied for its arms on European, mainly French, suppliers, not on the United States.

The Soviet Union had been one of Israel’s biggest supporters. Yet, when Egypt announced an arms deal with Russia, in September of 1955, there was an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response in the Arab press. The Chambers of Deputies in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan met immediately and voted resolutions of congratulation to President Nasser; even Nuri Said, the pro-Western ruler of Iraq, felt obliged to congratulate his Egyptian colleague—this despite the fact that the Arabs had no special love of Russia, nor did Muslims in the Arab world or elsewhere wish to invite either Communist ideology or Soviet power to their lands. What delighted them was that they saw the arms deal—no doubt correctly—as a slap in the face for the West. The slap, and the agitated Western response, reinforced the mood of hatred and spite toward the West and encouraged its exponents. It also encouraged the United States to look more favorably on Israel, now seen as a reliable and potentially useful ally in a largely hostile region. Today, it is often forgotten that the strategic relationship between the United States and Israel was a consequence, not a cause, of Soviet penetration.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is only one of many struggles between the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds—on a list that includes Nigeria, Sudan, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Chechnya, Sinkiang, Kashmir, and Mindanao—but it has attracted far more attention than any of the others. There are several reasons for this. First, since Israel is a democracy and an open society, it is much easier to report—and misreport—what is going on. Second, Jews are involved, and this can usually secure the attention of those who, for one reason or another, are for or against them. Third, and most important, resentment of Israel is the only grievance that can be freely and safely expressed in those Muslim countries where the media are either wholly owned or strictly overseen by the government. Indeed, Israel serves as a useful stand-in for complaints about the economic privation and political repression under which most Muslim people live, and as a way of deflecting the resulting anger.

IV—DOUBLE STANDARDS

This raises another issue. Increasingly in recent decades, Middle Easterners have articulated a new grievance against American policy: not American complicity with imperialism or with Zionism but something nearer home and more immediate—American complicity with the corrupt tyrants who rule over them. For obvious reasons, this particular complaint does not often appear in public discourse. Middle Eastern governments, such as those of Iraq, Syria, and the Palestine Authority, have developed great skill in controlling their own media and manipulating those of Western countries. Nor, for equally obvious reasons, is it raised in diplomatic negotiation. But it is discussed, with increasing anguish and urgency, in private conversations with listeners who can be trusted, and recently even in public. (Interestingly, the Iranian revolution of 1979 was one time when this resentment was expressed openly. The Shah was accused of supporting America, but America was also attacked for imposing an impious and tyrannical leader as its puppet.)

Almost the entire Muslim world is affected by poverty and tyranny. Both of these problems are attributed, especially by those with an interest in diverting attention from themselves, to America—the first to American economic dominance and exploitation, now thinly disguised as “globalization”; the second to America’s support for the many so-called Muslim tyrants who serve its purposes. Globalization has become a major theme in the Arab media, and it is almost always raised in connection with American economic penetration. The increasingly wretched economic situation in most of the Muslim world, relative not only to the West but also to the tiger economies of East Asia, fuels these frustrations. American paramountcy, as Middle Easterners see it, indicates where to direct the blame and the resulting hostility.

There is some justice in one charge that is frequently levelled against the United States: Middle Easterners increasingly complain that the United States judges them by different and lower standards than it does
Europeans and Americans, both in what is expected of them and in what they may expect—in terms of their financial well-being and their political freedom. They assert that Western spokesmen repeatedly overlook or even defend actions and support rulers that they would not tolerate in their own countries. As many Middle Easterners see it, the Western and American governments’ basic position is: “We don’t care what you do to your own people at home, so long as you are coöperative in meeting our needs and protecting our interests.”

The most dramatic example of this form of racial and cultural arrogance was what Iraqis and others see as the betrayal of 1991, when the United States called on the Iraqi people to revolt against Saddam Hussein. The rebels of northern and southern Iraq did so, and the United States forces watched while Saddam, using the helicopters that the ceasefire agreement had allowed him to retain, bloodily suppressed them, group by group. The reasoning behind this action—or, rather, inaction—is not difficult to see. Certainly, the victorious Gulf War coalition wanted a change of government in Iraq, but they had hoped for a coup d’état, not a revolution. They saw a genuine popular uprising as dangerous—it could lead to uncertainty or even anarchy in the region. A coup would be more predictable and could achieve the desired result—the replacement of Saddam Hussein by another, more amenable tyrant, who could take his place among America’s so-called allies in the coalition. The United States’ abandonment of Afghanistan after the departure of the Soviets was understood in much the same way as its abandonment of the Iraqi rebels.

Another example of this double standard occurred in the Syrian city of Hama and in refugee camps in Sabra and Shatila. The troubles in Hama began with an uprising headed by the radical group the Muslim Brothers in 1982. The government responded swiftly. Troops were sent, supported by armor, artillery, and aircraft, and within a very short time they had reduced a large part of the city to rubble. The number killed was estimated, by Amnesty International, at somewhere between ten thousand and twenty-five thousand. The action, which was ordered and supervised by the Syrian President, Hafiz al-Assad, attracted little attention at the time, and did not prevent the United States from subsequently courting Assad, who received a long succession of visits from American Secretaries of State James Baker, Warren Christopher, and Madeleine Albright, and even from President Clinton. It is hardly likely that Americans would have been so eager to propitiate a ruler who had perpetrated such crimes on Western soil, with Western victims.

The massacre of seven hundred to eight hundred Palestinian refugees in Sabra and Shatila that same year was carried out by Lebanese militiamen, led by a Lebanese commander who subsequently became a minister in the Syrian-sponsored Lebanese government, and it was seen as a reprisal for the assassination of the Lebanese President Bashir Gemayyel. Ariel Sharon, who at the time commanded the Israeli forces in Lebanon, was reprimanded by an Israeli commission of inquiry for not having foreseen and prevented the massacre, and was forced to resign from his position as Minister of Defense. It is understandable that the Palestinians and other Arabs should lay sole blame for the massacre on Sharon. What is puzzling is that Europeans and Americans should do the same. Some even wanted to try Sharon for crimes against humanity before a tribunal in Europe. No such suggestion was made regarding either Saddam Hussein or Hafiz al-Assad, who slaughtered tens of thousands of their compatriots. It is easy to understand the bitterness of those who see the implication here. It was as if the milita who had carried out the deed were animals, not accountable by the same human standards as the Israelis.

Thanks to modern communications, the people of the Middle East are increasingly aware of the deep and widening gulf between the opportunities of the free world outside their borders and the appalling privation and repression within them. The resulting anger is naturally directed first against their rulers, and then against those whom they see as keeping those rulers in power for selfish reasons. It is surely significant that most of the terrorists who have been identified in the September 11th attacks on New York and Washington come from Saudi Arabia and Egypt—that is, from countries whose rulers are deemed friendly to the United States.

V—A FAILURE OF MODERNITY
If America’s double standards—and its selfish support for corrupt regimes in the Arab world—have long caused anger among Muslims, why has that anger only recently found its expression in acts of terrorism? In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Muslims responded in two ways to the widening imbalance of power and wealth between their societies and those of the West. The reformers or modernizers tried to identify the sources of Western wealth and power and adapt them to their own use, in order to meet the West on equal terms. Muslim governments—first in Turkey, then in Egypt and Iran—made great efforts to modernize, that is, to Westernize, the weaponry and equipment of their armed forces; they even dressed them in Western-style uniforms and marched them to the tune of brass bands. When defeats on the battlefield were matched by others in the marketplace, the reformers tried to discover the secrets of Western economic success and to emulate them by establishing industries of their own. Young Muslim students who were sent to the West to study the arts of war also came back with dangerous and explosive notions about elected assemblies and constitutional governments.

All attempts at reform ended badly. If anything, the modernization of the armed forces accelerated the process of defeat and withdrawal, culminating in the humiliating failure of five Arab states and armies to prevent a half million Jews from building a new state in the debris of the British Mandate in Palestine in 1948. With rare exceptions, the economic reforms, capitalist and socialist alike, fared no better. The Middle Eastern combination of low productivity and high birth rate makes for an unstable mix, and by all indications the Arab countries, in such matters as job creation, education, technology, and productivity, lag ever farther behind the West. Even worse, the Arab nations also lag behind the more recent recruits to Western-style modernity, such as Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore. Out of a hundred and fifty-five countries ranked for economic freedom in 2001, the highest-ranking Muslim states are Bahrain (No. 9), the United Arab Emirates (No. 14), and Kuwait (No. 42). According to the World Bank, in 2000 the average annual income in the Muslim countries from Morocco to Bangladesh was only half the world average, and in the nineties the combined gross national products of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon—that is, three of Israel’s Arab neighbors—were considerably smaller than that of Israel alone. The per-capita figures are worse. According to United Nations statistics, Israel’s per-capita G.D.P. was three and a half times that of Lebanon and Syria, twelve times that of Jordan, and thirteen and a half times that of Egypt. The contrast with the West, and now also with the Far East, is even more disconcerting.

Modernization in politics has fared no better—perhaps even worse—than in warfare and economics. Many Islamic countries have experimented with democratic institutions of one kind or another. In some, as in Turkey, Iran, and Tunisia, they were introduced by innovative native reformers; in others, they were installed and then bequeathed by departing imperialists. The record, with the possible exception of Turkey, is one of almost unrelieved failure. Western-style parties and parliaments almost invariably ended in corrupt tyrannies, maintained by repression and indoctrination. The only European model that worked, in the sense of accomplishing its purposes, was the one-party dictatorship. The Baath Party, different branches of which have ruled Iraq and Syria for decades, incorporated the worst features of its Nazi and Soviet models. Since the death of Nasser, in 1970, no Arab leader has been able to gain extensive support outside his own country. Indeed, no Arab leader has been willing to submit his claim to power to a free vote. The leaders who have come closest to winning pan-Arab approval are Qaddafi in the seventies and, more recently, Saddam Hussein. That these two, of all Arab rulers, should enjoy such wide popularity is in itself both appalling and revealing.

In view of this, it is hardly surprising that many Muslims speak of the failure of modernization. The rejection of modernity in favor of a return to the sacred past has a varied and ramified history in the region and has given rise to a number of movements. The most important of these, Wahhabism, has lasted more than two and a half centuries and exerts a significant influence on Muslim movements in the Middle East today. Its founder, Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1703–87), was a theologian from the Najd area of Arabia. In 1744, he launched a campaign of purification and renewal. His purpose was to return the Muslim world to the pure and authentic Islam of the Prophet, removing and, where necessary, destroying all later accretions. The Wahhabi cause was embraced by the Saudi rulers of Najd, who promoted it, for a while successfully, by force. In a series of campaigns, they carried their rule and their faith to much of central and eastern Arabia, before being rebuffed, at the end of the eighteenth century, by the Ottoman sultan, whom the Saudi ruler had
denounced as a backslider from the true faith and a usurper in the Muslim state. The second alliance of Wahhabi doctrine and Saudi force began in the last years of the Ottoman Empire and continued after the collapse. The Saudi conquest of the Hejaz, including the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, increased the prestige of the House of Saud and gave new scope to the Wahhabi doctrine, which spread, in a variety of forms, throughout the Islamic world.

From the nineteen-thirties on, the discovery of oil in the eastern provinces of Arabia and its exploitation, chiefly by American companies, brought vast new wealth and bitter new social tensions. In the old society, inequalities of wealth had been limited, and their effects were restrained, on the one hand, by the traditional social bonds and obligations that linked rich and poor and, on the other hand, by the privacy of Muslim home life. Modernization has all too often widened the gap, destroyed those social bonds, and, through the universality of the modern media, made the resulting inequalities painfully visible. All this has created new and receptive audiences for Wahhabi teachings and those of other like-minded groups, among them the Muslim Brothers in Egypt and Syria and the Taliban in Afghanistan.

It has now become normal to designate these movements as “fundamentalist.” The term is unfortunate for a number of reasons. It was originally an American Protestant term, used to designate Protestant churches that differed in some respects from the mainstream churches. These differences bear no resemblance to those that divide Muslim fundamentalists from the Islamic mainstream, and the use of the term can therefore be misleading. Broadly speaking, Muslim fundamentalists are those who feel that the troubles of the Muslim world at the present time are the result not of insufficient modernization but of excessive modernization. From their point of view, the primary struggle is not against the Western enemy as such but against the Westernizing enemies at home, who have imported and imposed infidel ways on Muslim peoples. The task of the Muslims is to depose and remove these infidel rulers, sometimes by defeating or expelling their foreign patrons and protectors, and to abrogate and destroy the laws, institutions, and social customs that they have introduced, so as to return to a purely Islamic way of life, in accordance with the principles of Islam and the rules of the Holy Law.

VI—THE RISE OF TERRORISM

Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda followers may not represent Islam, and their statements and their actions directly contradict basic Islamic principles and teachings, but they do arise from within Muslim civilization, just as Hitler and the Nazis arose from within Christian civilization, so they must be seen in their own cultural, religious, and historical context.

If one looks at the historical record, the Muslim approach to war does not differ greatly from that of Christians, or that of Jews in the very ancient and very modern periods when the option was open to them. While Muslims, perhaps more frequently than Christians, made war against the followers of other faiths to bring them within the scope of Islam, Christians—with the notable exception of the Crusades, which were themselves an imitation of Muslim practice—were more prone to fight internal religious wars against those whom they saw as schismatics or heretics. Islam, no doubt owing to the political and military involvement of its founder, takes what one might call a more pragmatic view than the Gospels of the realities of societal relationships. Because war for the faith has been a religious obligation within Islam from the beginning, it is elaborately regulated. Islamic religious law, or the Sharia, deals in some detail with such matters as the opening, conclusion, and resumption of hostilities, the avoidance of injury to noncombatants, the treatment of prisoners, the division of booty, and even the types of weapons that may be used. Some of these rules have been explained away by modern radical commentators who support the fundamentalists; others are simply disregarded.

What about terrorism? Followers of many faiths have at one time or another invoked religion in the practice of murder, both retail and wholesale. Two words deriving from such movements in Eastern religions have even entered the English language: “thug,” from India, and “assassin,” from the Middle East, both
commemorating fanatical religious sects whose form of worship was to murder those whom they regarded as enemies of the faith. The question of the lawfulness of assassination in Islam first arose in 656 A.D., with the murder of the third caliph. Uthman, by pious Muslim rebels who believed they were carrying out the will of God. The first of a succession of civil wars was fought over the question of whether the rebels were fulfilling or defying God’s commandment. Islamic law and tradition are very clear on the duty of obedience to the Islamic ruler. But they also quote two sayings attributed to the Prophet: “There is no obedience in sin” and “Do not obey a creature against his creator.” If a ruler orders something that is contrary to the law of God, then the duty of obedience is replaced by a duty of disobedience. The notion of tyrannicide—the justified removal of a tyrant—was not an Islamic innovation; it was familiar in antiquity, among Jews, Greeks, and Romans alike, and those who performed it were often acclaimed as heroes.

Members of the eleventh-to-thirteenth-century Muslim sect known as the Assassins, which was based in Iran and Syria, seem to have been the first to transform the act that was named after them into a system and an ideology. Their efforts, contrary to popular belief, were primarily directed not against the Crusaders but against their own leaders, whom they saw as impious usurpers. In this sense, the Assassins are the true predecessors of many of the so-called Islamic terrorists of today, some of whom explicitly make this point. The name Assassins, with its connotation of “hashish-taker,” was given to them by their Muslim enemies. They called themselves fidaveen—those who are ready to sacrifice their lives for their cause. The term has been revived and adopted by their modern imitators. In two respects, however—in their choice of weapons and of victims—the Assassins were markedly different from their modern successors. The victim was always an individual—a highly placed political, military, or religious leader who was seen as the source of evil. He, and he alone, was killed. This action was not terrorism in the current sense of that term but, rather, what we would call “targeted assassination.” The method was always the same: the dagger. The Assassins disdained the use of poison, crossbows, and other weapons that could be used from a distance, and the Assassin did not expect—or, it would seem, even desire—to survive his act, which he believed would insure him eternal bliss. But in no circumstance did he commit suicide. He died at the hands of his captors.

The twentieth century brought a renewal of such actions in the Middle East, though of different types and for different purposes, and terrorism has gone through several phases. During the last years of the British Empire, imperial Britain faced terrorist movements in its Middle Eastern dependencies that represented three different cultures: Greeks in Cyprus, Jews in Palestine, and Arabs in Aden. All three acted from nationalist, rather than religious, motives. Though very different in their backgrounds and political circumstances, the three were substantially alike in their tactics. Their purpose was to persuade the imperial power that staying in the region was not worth the cost in blood. Their method was to attack the military and, to a lesser extent, administrative personnel and installations. All three operated only within their own territory and generally avoided collateral damage. All three succeeded in their endeavors.

Thanks to the rapid development of the media, and especially of television, the more recent forms of terrorism are targeted not at specific and limited enemy objectives but at world opinion. Their primary purpose is not to defeat or even to weaken the enemy militarily but to gain publicity—a psychological victory. The most successful group by far in this exercise has been the Palestine Liberation Organization. The P.L.O. was founded in 1964 but became important in 1967, after the defeat of the combined Arab armies in the Six-Day War. Regular warfare had failed; it was time to try other methods. The targets in this form of armed struggle were not military or other government establishments, which are usually too well guarded, but public places and gatherings of any kind, which are overwhelmingly civilian, and in which the victims do not necessarily have a connection to the declared enemy. Examples of this include, in 1970, the hijacking of three aircraft—one Swiss, one British, and one American—which were all taken to Amman; the 1972 murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics; the seizure in 1973 of the Saudi Embassy in Khartoum, and the murder there of two Americans and a Belgian diplomat; and the takeover of the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro, in 1985. Other attacks were directed against schools, shopping malls, discothèques, pizzerias, and even passengers waiting in line at European airports. These and other attacks by the P.L.O. were immediately and remarkably successful in attaining their objectives—the capture of newspaper headlines and television screens. They also drew a great deal of support in sometimes unexpected places, and raised their perpetrators
to starring roles in the drama of international relations. Small wonder that others were encouraged to follow
their example—in Ireland, in Spain, and elsewhere.

The Arab terrorists of the seventies and eighties made it clear that they were waging a war for an Arab or
Palestinian cause, not for Islam. Indeed, a significant proportion of the P.L.O. leaders and activists were
Christian. Unlike socialism, which was discredited by its failure, nationalism was discredited by its success.
In every Arab land but Palestine, the nationalists achieved their purposes—the defeat and departure of
imperialist rulers, and the establishment of national sovereignty under national leaders. For a while, freedom
and independence were used as more or less synonymous and interchangeable terms. The early experience of
independence, however, revealed that this was a sad error. Independence and freedom are very different, and
all too often the attainment of one meant the end of the other.

Both in defeat and in victory, the Arab nationalists of the twentieth century pioneered the methods that were
later adopted by religious terrorists, in particular the lack of concern at the slaughter of innocent bystanders.
This unconcern reached new proportions in the terror campaign launched by Osama bin Laden in the early
nineties. The first major example was the bombing of two American embassies in East Africa in 1998. In
order to kill twelve American diplomats, the terrorists were willing to slaughter more than two hundred
Africans, many of them Muslims, who happened to be in the vicinity. The same disregard for human life, on
a vastly greater scale, underlay the action in New York on September 11th.

There is no doubt that the foundation of Al Qaeda and the consecutive declarations of war by Osama bin
Laden marked the beginning of a new and ominous phase in the history of both Islam and terrorism. The
triggers for bin Laden’s actions, as he himself has explained very clearly, were America’s presence in Arabia
during the Gulf War—a desecration of the Muslim Holy Land—and America’s use of Saudi Arabia as a base
for an attack on Iraq. If Arabia is the most symbolic location in the world of Islam, Baghdad, the seat of the
caliphate for half a millennium and the scene of some of the most glorious chapters in Islamic history, is the
second.

There was another, perhaps more important, factor driving bin Laden. In the past, Muslims fighting against
the West could always turn to the enemies of the West for comfort, encouragement, and material and military
help. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, for the first time in centuries there was no such useful enemy.
There were some nations that had the will, but they lacked the means to play the role of the Third Reich or
the Soviet Union. Bin Laden and his cohorts soon realized that, in the new configuration of world power, if
they wished to fight America they had to do it themselves. Some eleven years ago, they created Al Qaeda,
which included many veterans of the war in Afghanistan. Their task might have seemed daunting to anyone
else, but they did not see it that way. In their view, they had already driven the Russians out of Afghanistan,
in a defeat so overwhelming that it led directly to the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. Having overcome
the superpower that they had always regarded as more formidable, they felt ready to take on the other; in this
they were encouraged by the opinion, often expressed by Osama bin Laden, among others, that America was
a paper tiger.

Muslim terrorists had been driven by such beliefs before. One of the most surprising revelations in the
memoirs of those who held the American Embassy in Teheran from 1979 to 1981 was that their original
intention had been to hold the building and the hostages for only a few days. They changed their minds when
statements from Washington made it clear that there was no danger of serious action against them. They
finally released the hostages, they explained, only because they feared that the new President, Ronald Reagan,
might approach the problem “like a cowboy.”

Bin Laden and his followers clearly have no such concern, and their hatred is neither constrained by fear nor
diluted by respect. As precedents, they repeatedly cite the American retreats from Vietnam, from Lebanon,
and—the most important of all, in their eyes—from Somalia. Bin Laden’s remarks in an interview with John
Miller, of ABC News, on May 28, 1998, are especially revealing:
We have seen in the last decade the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier, who is ready to wage cold wars and unprepared to fight long wars. This was proven in Beirut when the Marines fled after two explosions. It also proves they can run in less than twenty-four hours, and this was also repeated in Somalia. . . . The youth were surprised at the low morale of the American soldiers. . . . After a few blows, they ran in defeat. . . . They forgot about being the world leader and the leader of the new world order. [They] left, dragging their corpses and their shameful defeat, and stopped using such titles.

Similar inferences are drawn when American spokesmen refuse to implicate—and sometimes even hasten to exculpate—parties that most Middle Easterners believe to be deeply involved in the attacks on America. A good example is the repeated official denial of any Iraqi involvement in the events of September 11th. It may indeed be true that there is no evidence of Iraqi involvement, and that the Administration is unwilling to make false accusations. But it is difficult for Middle Easterners to resist the idea that this refusal to implicate Saddam Hussein is due less to a concern for legality than to a fear of confronting him. He would indeed be a formidable adversary. If he faces the prospect of imminent destruction, as would be inevitable in a real confrontation, there is no knowing what he might do with his already considerable arsenal of unconventional weapons. Certainly, he would not be restrained by any scruples, or by the consideration that the greatest victims of any such attack would be his own people and their immediate neighbors.

For Osama bin Laden, 2001 marks the resumption of the war for the religious dominance of the world that began in the seventh century. For him and his followers, this is a moment of opportunity. Today, America exemplifies the civilization and embodies the leadership of the House of War, and, like Rome and Byzantium, it has become degenerate and demoralized, ready to be overthrown. Khomeini’s designation of the United States as “the Great Satan” was telling. In the Koran, Satan is described as “the insidious tempter who whispers in the hearts of men.” This is the essential point about Satan: he is neither a conqueror nor an exploiter—he is, first and last, a tempter. And for the members of Al Qaeda it is the seduction of America that represents the greatest threat to the kind of Islam they wish to impose on their fellow-Muslims.

But there are others for whom America offers a different kind of temptation—the promise of human rights, of free institutions, and of a responsible and elected government. There are a growing number of individuals and even some movements that have undertaken the complex task of introducing such institutions in their own countries. It is not easy. Similar attempts, as noted, led to many of today’s corrupt regimes. Of the fifty-seven member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, only one, the Turkish Republic, has operated democratic institutions over a long period of time and, despite difficult and ongoing problems, has made progress in establishing a liberal economy and a free society and political order.

In two countries, Iraq and Iran, where the regimes are strongly anti-American, there are democratic oppositions capable of taking over and forming governments. We could do much to help them, and have done little. In most other countries in the region, there are people who share our values, sympathize with us, and would like to share our way of life. They understand freedom, and want to enjoy it at home. It is more difficult for us to help those people, but at least we should not hinder them. If they succeed, we shall have friends and allies in the true, not just the diplomatic, sense of these words.

Meanwhile, there is a more urgent problem. If bin Laden can persuade the world of Islam to accept his views and his leadership, then a long and bitter struggle lies ahead, and not only for America. Sooner or later, Al Qaeda and related groups will clash with the other neighbors of Islam—Russia, China, India—who may prove less squeamish than the Americans in using their power against Muslims and their sanctuaries. If bin Laden is correct in his calculations and succeeds in his war, then a dark future awaits the world, especially the part of it that embraces Islam. ♦