

What is Coming Next?

Capt. @Mitchell Gray



Islamic Theology of Counter Terrorism
اسلام کے تھیولوجی آف کاؤنٹر ٹیرورزم

The Arabs of the Middle East have adopted several strategies in the last century to achieve unity and independence. This paper will briefly discuss some of the major movements ranging from nationalism, the PLO and Political Islam. Based on the successes and failures this paper attempts to predict what course Political Islam is likely to adopt based on the fact that Political Islam has offered the only successes so far and that current political currents may help them achieve their goals provided they renounce terrorism as a method of political expression.

As we reflect on the 100-year anniversary of World War I, we must take note that the European powers, mainly Britain and France, created the “modern” Middle East based on secret agreements made during the war along with an assortment of promises, side deals and post-war adjustments. The British were mainly concerned with securing oil in Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) which required them to acquire Mosul from the French in return for French access to the oil produced by the British dominated Turkish Petroleum Company. When the dust settled, Britain would administer affairs in today’s Jordan, Iraq and the Palestinian zone. France would exercise suzerainty over Syria and “Greater Lebanon” which annexed former Ottoman Syria zones into a larger state.

The post war reconfiguration failed to satisfy Arab nationalism. The Arab nationalist movement strengthened in the Ottoman Empire when the Young Turks took control in 1908 and were accused of Turkification at the expense of the Arab subjects. To satisfy its war aims the British made agreements with selected Arab leaders that promised an independent Arab entity in exchange for Arab support against the Ottomans during the war. However, the British did not exactly mean full independence. The British had no plans for the Arabs to exercise foreign policies without their consent.

The post-war League of Nations mandates provided for British and French supervision of newly created states until these states were fully capable of self-rule. Arab dreams of independence were subjugated to the western controlled Hashemite rulers in Jordan, Syria and Iraq. The early responses to this state of affairs was a variety of anti-European organizations, most notably the Muslim Brotherhood that was formed in the Canal Zone in 1926. The Arabs balked at western supervision, especially in light of the postwar proclamations by American President Woodrow Wilson that called for self-determination.

After the war, Damascus became the leading Arab city for nationalist ideas. Syria violently opposed the French who forcefully exerted their will in Syria. During the inter-war years from 1918-1941, Damascus was the center for conspiracies, secret societies and various combinations who supported Arab unity and opposed European rule. During the Second World War, the seeds of the Ba’ath party were planted in Syria, which was a socialist and Arab nationalist ideology that formed two mutually hostile branches; one in Syria, the other in Iraq.

When World War II ended in 1945, new forces had been unleashed. On one hand, there was the awesome military and industrial power of the United States that was spectacularly displayed with the use of atomic weapons on Japan and on the other was the gigantic size and will of the Soviet Union.

Though allied during the war to defeat Nazi Germany, the two superpowers were soon engaged in a Cold War that featured an open and democratic west versus the collective economies and government dominance of the east. For the next few decades, the decisive conflicts of the Cold War would be fought by proxies in the developing world of Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Middle East.

The Arab world was shaken to the core by the rise of Egyptian strongman Gamal Abdel Nasser, who came from the ranks of the Egyptian Army Officer Corps and demanded Arab unity. The charismatic Nasser, who often gave speeches in colloquial Egyptian Arabic, appealed to millions of Arabs throughout the Middle East who pressured their governments to fall in line with Nasser's policies. Nasser skillfully followed a policy of non-alignment in the Cold War, although the United States viewed him as leaning towards the Soviet camp. Nasser, a secularist, was often at odds with Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and his execution of Islamist Sayyid Qutb in 1966 made a martyr of Qutb. Nasser banned the Brotherhood and viewed the Islamic movement as a threat to his nationalist ideology. The center of gravity of Arab opposition to the West had shifted from Damascus to Cairo.

The post WWII, Arab world experienced a series of crises in the 1950s such as the 1956 Suez Crisis that weakened European power in the region and enhanced Nasser's standing when the United States failed to support an effort by Britain, France and Israel to defeat Nasser, the 1958 Iraq Revolution that deposed British backed Nuri al-Said and the "events of 1958" in Lebanon when their Christian president Camille Chamoun invoked the Eisenhower doctrine to summon American troops to deter Soviet backed Syria from invading the country. Both Syria and Iraq overthrew their Hashemite Kings isolating Jordan as the surviving Hashemite Kingdom.

Two other events greatly shaped the post WWII Arab world. The first was the creation of Israel in 1948, that immediately led to a war with the Arabs and Palestinian refugees, and the other was the rise of the Gulf States as major oil producers. The western states believed that oil was running out and their industries and militaries required stable and secure sources of foreign oil. When the Persians elected a populist, who vowed to nationalize the nation's oil assets, the Anglo-Persian oil company balked. The British convinced the Americans that Iran was vulnerable to Soviet penetration so the CIA arranged a coup that toppled the newly elected Prime Minister and reinstated the Shah of Iran to the throne. The memories of this western intervention would explode 26 years later when Islamic forces overthrow the Iranian Shah, who was seen as a stooge of the West.

Until 1967, the Arab nationalist movement was dominated by Nasser and the rising Ba'ath parties. But the 1967 Six-Day war changed everything. A dispute about water resources exposed the simmering resentment over the existence of Israel and the plight of over a million Palestinian refugees in Jordan and Lebanon who demanded their right of return to their homes. A stunning preemptive attack by the Israeli forces quickly knocked out the Egyptian air force and a fast-moving ground assault mopped up the ranks of several stunned Arab armies. Israel, in the span of a week, had greatly increased its size by acquiring the Golan Heights, the West Bank and the Sinai as well as Jerusalem. For the Arabs, it was a massive humiliation. For Nasser, it marked the beginning of his decline as leader of the Middle East.

The new Arab leadership was taken over by Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO). The PLO was an umbrella for disparate groups and the strongest was the guerilla force Fateh, led by Arafat. The PLO did not promote an Islamic agenda. In fact, the PLO's rise coincided with the global student protests and far left uprisings in the late 1960s. Soon the PLO would be seen as part of a global liberation movement that opposed the capitalist order. The PLO trained with and conducted operations with political leftists such as the Baader-Meinhoff Gang and the Japanese Red Army. The PLO received various types of support from the Soviets, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, North Korea, China, North Vietnam, Cuba and Libya to name the most prominent.

PLO guerillas were heavy handed in Jordan and Lebanon. Jordan's King Hussein ordered their forcible repulsion in September 1970 and the PLO moved their headquarters to Beirut. Before long, the PLO had militarized the Palestinian camps in Lebanon setting the stage for sectarian conflict that would erupt in a civil war in 1975. The PLO was pushed out of Lebanon by Israeli forces and ultimately, they could not achieve their objectives. The organization became highly corrupt and despite lip service the other Arab states were not willing to risk their positions on behalf of the Palestinian cause. In the end, the PLO could not unify the Arabs sufficiently because their cause—though important—was more local in nature.

In 1973 another brief war between the Arabs and Israelis caused global economic panic when OPEC ordered an oil embargo against western nations for their support of Israel during the war. As the price of fuel skyrocketed, it caused the greatest shift of wealth from west to east the world had ever seen. This greatly facilitated the development of Political Islam because the House of Saud had an agreement with the House of al-Wahhab that in return for legitimacy among the diverse tribes they would support the religious ideology the west calls Wahhabism.

Political Islam, more than nationalism, unifies Arabs because Islam is a complete system for humanity and its application is above all secular authorities. The Islamic community of believers is worldwide, regardless of any man-made boundaries. After the failure of Arab states in the 1967 war the concept of Arab nationalism lost considerable appeal which created an opening for Political Islam.

The stream of petrodollars from the Saudis flowed its way to radical madrassas in Pakistan that created a future cadre of jihadists. When the Islamic Revolution succeeded in Iran in 1979 it galvanized the Islamic world showing that a western backed government could be replaced by an Islamic one. In late 1979 the Soviets made the decision to invade Afghanistan to prop up a puppet communist regime. Seizing on an opportunity to bloody the Soviets, the administration of U.S. president Jimmy Carter secretly decided to funnel aid through the Pakistan intelligence services and that policy was continued by President Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

While the U.S. was pursuing myopic Cold War policies, they either ignored or minimized the growing threat of radical Islam. During the late 1980s the United States even permitted the radical Egyptian cleric Umar Abdel Rahman, the "blind sheikh", to openly operate in three mosques in Brooklyn and Jersey City to raise recruits and money for the Jihad in Afghanistan.

Soon, the early al-Qaeda cells (originally known as the Services Bureau) were proliferating across thirty American cities from New York City to Oklahoma City and Tucson, Arizona.

When the Soviets—thanks to U.S. stinger missiles—staggered out of Afghanistan, the U.S. abandoned Afghanistan because it had achieved its Cold War objectives. Yet the merger of Egyptian Islamic Jihad (EIJ) and the Services Bureau produced a new entity, the al-Qaeda organization led by Saudi exile Usama Bin Laden and EIJ leader Dr. Ayman Zawahiri. The goal of this group was to replace western supported Arab regimes and replace them with Islamic states. To accomplish this task, the organization needed to defeat the United States.

Usama bin Laden calculated that the U.S. was morally corrupt and spineless. He was emboldened by equivocal behavior by the U.S. after Islamic attacks in Beirut, Mogadishu, Africa, Yemen and even in New York City, where the 1993 World Trade Center bombing was treated primarily as a criminal case when in fact it was organized by the blind Sheikh's operatives with help from al-Qaeda contractor terrorist Ramzi Yousef.

The heavy U.S. response to the September 11 attacks surprised and ultimately crippled al-Qaeda. But the U.S. invasion of Iraq led to a long insurgency that the U.S. was not prepared for and the de-baathification of Iraq created a large power vacuum as the minority Sunnis were defrocked in favor of the majority Shia which ultimately benefited Iran.

From an operational standpoint, neither al-Qaeda nor any other group has succeeded in a large-scale terror attack in the United States since 9/11. Is this due to improved counter terrorism measures or diminished capabilities by the terror groups? One must consider that al-Qaeda succeeded in its attacks by inducing the U.S. to invade Afghanistan where it hoped that U.S. would suffer a similar fate as the Soviets experienced. The U.S. has yet to achieve stability and democracy in Iraq or Afghanistan. The attacks of September 11 largely achieved al-Qaeda's goals despite the fact that most of the leadership was ultimately killed or captured.

The rise of the Islamic State, or ISIS, was the result of the collapse of the powerful Iraqi state. Yet ISIS alienated many Muslims with their brutal methods and smothering application of Sharia that terrorized millions of Muslims. While ISIS has spread from Syria to Libya and even the Philippines, it has lost its territory and momentum.

In the last century there were several responses to western colonialism and interference in Arab countries. So far, these have failed. Among the most important movements have been Arab Nationalism, Nasserism, the PLO and Political Islam. These movements have so far not undone the essential agreements made among western powers during and after WWI. More recently, the so-called Arab Spring also failed to produce lasting change despite toppling some Arab strongmen like Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and even Libya's Moamar Ghadaffy. What will happen next?

For now, Arab nationalism will remain a dead concept. Despite its failures, Political Islam has had successes with revolutionary governments in Iran and Sudan. Likewise, Hezbollah has gained near full control over Lebanon's government.

Thus, the use of terrorism as a tactic will always be a threat but moving forward, we will see Islamic groups muster along the lines of Hezbollah in order to gain political support. This “slow” method has the same goal of groups like al-Qaeda and that is to replace western backed Arab regimes with Islamic rule.

The chief difference between these competing methods is that groups like al-Qaeda believed in taking the fight directly to the enemies whereas ISIS sought to control territory. Political Islam will likely decide that changing governments from the inside is the most practical method. This does not mean that there will be no more terror attacks or efforts to control territory or a revolutionary effort. But it does mean that countering Political Islam will require the ability to identify it and to defeat it ideologically or through the “hearts and minds” of citizens.

In order to gain support the Islamists will ally with global movements that they can use for their purposes. In the United States this means closer relations with the radical left-wing elements which has already embraced or supported Islamic causes compatible with their anti-capitalist and anti-Israel rhetoric. These groups may promote an Islamic agenda as a civil rights issue especially in regard to immigration, asylum and national security matters that involve individual liberties. In essence, Political Islam will migrate towards left wing politics not so much because they agree with their policies but because they can link their cause with an established political movement that already is sending representatives to Congress.

To accomplish this task, Political Islam may divert resources from terror attacks to more sophisticated forms of modern warfare such as propaganda, communications, social media and “controlling the narrative” in the public square. Political Islam can gain more power by sending its operatives to journalism schools rather than hijacking jets or setting off bombs in public places. These groups will look to China, Russia, Iran and North Korea as the leading practitioners of this soft power. The leftists in America should understand that Political Islam is not a civil rights issue and that at the end of the day their goal is no different that of al-Qaeda or ISIS. While these groups may publicly attach themselves to causes such as human rights, humane treatment of immigrants and “justice” for the oppressed, the wise student of these groups knows that regimes like Iran and Sudan are not providing equality, justice and freedom for all. Photo: Politico