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Islam: its origin, philosophy and laws

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Islam, the foundation of state laws in Islamic countries, is a religion of submission. The religion is not unified. The main division is between Sunni and Shi'a, and has persisted since the death of Muhammad. Once a majority Islamic population is achieved in a community, extremist exponents of Islam will generally prevail over moderate Muslims and Shariah will be enforced as the law of the land.

Key words: Muhammad; Islam; Sunni; Shi'a; Alawi; Druze; caliphate; infidels; Sunnah; Shariah; fatwā; jihad.

Westerners, including Australian Defence Force personnel, going to the Middle East need to have a basic understanding of the concepts of Islam and its multiple divisions. In this paper, I will address the origin and philosophy of Islam and its Shariah and Sunnah laws and will discuss its religious and cultural practices.¹

Muhammad

Muhammad was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, on 22 April 571 and died on 8 June 632. An orphan from age 6 years, he was raised by his uncle, Abi Talib, leader of the Bani Hashem clan and the father of Ali, the historical patriarch of Shi'a followers. Aged 25 years, Muhammad married a wealthy 40-year-old widow named Khadija. Muhammad's surviving descendants are by his daughter, Fatima al Zahra, from his wife Khadija. In his early days, Muhammad was an Ebionite and he did not acquire multiple wives until after the death of Khadija.

Khadija's cousin, Waraqah Bin Nawfal, was the Ebionite Archbishop of Mecca. He became Muhammad's tutor in philosophy and religion. Ebionites are monotheists who reject the doctrine of the Trinity, and the Catholic/Orthodox version of the Crucifixion.

Muhammad and his prophecy were rejected by the elders of Mecca and he was forced to migrate to Yasrib (later was called Medina). Muhammad subsequently returned to Mecca and conquered it with 10,000 men.

The Qur'an

The Qur'an (Koran), which means 'recitation', was first narrated by Zaid bin Thabit Al-Ansari and was compiled from people's memories during the days of the first Caliph, Abu Bakr, some 20 years after Muhammad's death. Othman Bani Affan, the third Caliph, reorganised it and compiled more surahs (chapters). He burned large numbers of verses and surahs that were in circulation via reciters. The Qur'an underwent further revisions under Iraq's governor, al-Hajjaj Ibn Yusuf (660–714). He ensured that all other versions of the Qur'an were burnt.

A disputed Muslim book, *Kass wa Nabi*, states that the first four chapters of the Qur'an were given to Muhammad by Waraqah and that Muhammad began versing the rest of

the Qur'an after Waraqah died. The difference in writing genre between the first four chapters and the rest of the book is distinct.

The Muslim observance of Ramadan is to commemorate the recording of the holy text. According to the Qur'an, Muhammad first received revelations in the lunar month of Ramadan.

The Islamic Faith

The foundation of the Islamic faith is *Shahadat el-Tawhid*, the statement that "The obligation of every Muslim is to declare that there is no God other than God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God".

The Caliph is the successor of the Prophet Muhammad and is the Guardian of God's Laws and the laws of his beloved Messenger. Currently, the King of Saudi Arabia is the Supreme Power of Islam and Muslims are bound to bow to him regardless of their political status and power. However, due to the divisions within Islam, other sects have their own caliphates. The highest clergy is the Mufti of Masjid Al-Haram in Mecca. The highest academic clergy is the Mufti of Masjid Al-Azhar in Cairo.

Islam is a total way of life and is the foundation of state laws in Islamic countries. Shariah is not only a religious imperative, it also embraces the judicial, political and social dimensions of community life. No clear distinction in Islam can be drawn between religious and judicial norms, because they can both be reduced to common sources, the Qur'an and the Sunnah (prophetic tradition). There are five pillars of Islam:

- Shahada – the obligation to declare that there is no God other than God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God;
- Salat – a requirement to pray five times a day;
- Zakat – an obligation to give 2.5 per cent of one's savings to the poor and needy;
- Sawm – a requirement to fast and exercise self-control during the holy month of Ramadan; and
- Hajj – an obligation to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's lifetime.

Other doctrinal beliefs include:

- rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, polytheism and the Crucifixion;
- the Ascension of Muhammad to the moon, to Jerusalem and then back to Mecca overnight;

¹I present only referenced facts; not a personal point of view. Dates given are *Anno Domini* (AD), also called Christian Era (CE).

- the acknowledgment of the Jews and the people of the Book *i.e.* the Nasara or Nasarenes – the term, Christian, was never mentioned in the Qur'an; and
- the power of al-Jihad.

Islam's Sects

There are 73 divisions in Islam. Sunni and Shi'a are the two major sects.

Sunni Islam

Sunni Islam has six sub-sects – Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali, Wahabi, and Zāhirī. However, there are also divisions within the sub-sects and some of these divisions have proclaimed themselves as sects or sub-sects. The Amawiyyin, a dynasty depicted with a green flag adopted by Saudi Arabia, are the original Sunnis. They purport to follow Prophet Muhammad and his companions. It is never mentioned, however, that they massacred Muhammad's family. The wife of Abu Sufian opened the chest of Hamzah and ate his heart. They killed his cousin and son-in-law Ali. Then they killed his grandsons, el Hassan and el Hussain. The Abbasiyyin, a dynasty depicted by a black flag adopted by Islamic State (ISIS), subsequently toppled the Amawiyyin and massacred them.

Shi'a or Shi'ite Islam

Shi'a is the short form of an historic phrase meaning 'followers of Ali', *i.e.* the faction or party of Muhammad's son-in-law Ali, whom the Shi'a believe to be Muhammad's successor. Adherents of its largest branch are commonly referred to as Twelvers, a name which is derived from their belief in twelve divinely ordained leaders. Similar to the Sunni sect, Shi'a has branched out into sub-sects and divisions, such as Zaydi and the Ismaili, and some sub-sects have proclaimed themselves as sects, such as Sufi, Alawi, Druze and others.

Causes of animosity between Sunni and Shi'a

According to the Shi'a faith, at the night of delivering the Prophecy, Ali Bin Abi Talib (son of Abi Talib, the uncle of Muhammad) gave his bed to his cousin Muhammad. When the Angel Gabriel arrived, he gave the prophecy to Muhammad instead of Ali by mistake. In their prayers, some Shi'a sects repeat the words "Tah-al-Amin" (meaning the Keeper got Lost) while looking over their shoulders. According to the Shi'i, Sunnis got the Calapha by deception at two historic events:

1. Muhammad said at his death bed that the closest to him will be the Calipha (successor). However, instead of having his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, as the new Calipha, the post was given to his friend, Abu Bakr, who was sitting beside his death bed.
2. The leader of the Amawi tribe, Mouaawiyah, took the Calapha from Ali by treachery plotted by Omar Ibn el-Aass.

Alawism

Alawism is the religion of the political elite of Syria, notably the Assad family. It has all the traces of being an independent religious system, but it received official confirmation of belonging to Islam in 1974, even though its faith differs strongly from Sunni and Shi'a. Many of its tenets are secret and known only to a select few Alawi.

According to a major disputed reference, Alawis have integrated doctrines from other religions, in particular from Ismaili, Nasarene and Christianity. Alawites are reported to celebrate certain Christian festivals which make use of bread and wine in their own way, including Christmas, Easter, and Palm Sunday. Alawis are similar to the Druze sect in their belief in reincarnation. A disputed book claims that sinners are reborn as Christians to cleanse their sins and then they are born as Alawis.

Druze

The theology of the Druze religion is called *hikma* and its main theme is that God incarnated himself in the Fatimid caliph, al-Hakim Bi-Amr Allah, who died in 1021. The Druze believe he did not die and that he is waiting to return to the world in order to bring a new golden age to true believers. The Book of Wisdom (*Kitab Al-Hikmah*) states that al-Hakim is Abraham, who was reincarnated as Moses, then Jesus and then al-Hakim. Similar to the Alawi faith, the wisdom is only known to select few.

Alliances

Shi'a have always been supportive of Alawis. Hizballah is funded by Iran and both are Shi'a. Sunni terrorists, such as the Palestinian movement, the Taliban and Pakistani terrorists, are funded by Sunni governments and monarchies.

Infidels ('Kuffar')

Christians are classified as polytheists and are not the original people of the 'Book'. Nor are they considered to be the Nasara or Nazarenes, a term used to describe Jews who converted to Christianity but who remained monotheist. According to Islam, the Christian New Testament is a sacrilege. Muslims believe that *Injil Barnaba* is the 'True Book'. *Injil Barnaba* mentions that a prophet named Ahmad will emerge and he will be the last of the prophets.

The intended fate of infidels is evident from the daily devotional recited by radical Islamists, such as Islamic State. In short, infidels are to be put to death. Indeed, when over 800 surrendered men and boys from the Qurayza tribe were beheaded, the Prophet Muhammad gave the order.

Khalid Ibn El Walid (592 – 642), is variously known as 'The Drawn Sword of God' and as a Hero of the Sunni World, for imitating the prophet by beheading surrendered enemy. Being a practice of the Prophet, the Islamic Brotherhood and Islamic State both imitate him today. They believe it is a Godly duty.

Philosophy, Ethics, Law and Sociology

Sunnah is the philosophy and ethics of the Islamic state founded by Muhammad. The Sunnah is the Decree in Hadith (Prophetic Conversations) and precedence set by the Prophet and the first three caliphates (Al-Sahaba – Companions of the Prophet). It includes their specific words, habits, practices, and their silent approvals.

Shariah is the written law drawn from the Qur'an. It is analogous to that of the Jews who draw their written law, the Talmud, from the Torah.

The word 'Islam' in Arabic means 'submission'. It

should not be confused with 'Salam' which means 'peace'. 'Muslim' means a 'surrendered soul'. When Muslims took over the Middle Eastern heartland of Christianity, they did so to the theme 'Aslem Taslam', which means 'surrender and you will survive'.

The Fatwā

In the Islamic faith, 'fatwā' is the term for a legal opinion, a learned interpretation or a legal pronouncement given by a qualified jurist on issues pertaining to the Islamic law. The person who issues a fatwā is called, in that respect, a mufti, *i.e.* an issuer of a fatwā. The law specialist could be any local mosque imam. The imam can decree anything he sees as necessary for the good of Islam.

For example, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, between 1992 – 1999, decreed by fatwā that the earth is flat, that photography of a living thing is immoral, and that women who study with men are no better than prostitutes.

Another example is the issue of fatwās from time to time by various muftis demanding the extermination of specific people seen to have offended the Prophet; people such as Geert Wilders, Mariwan Halabjaee, Salman Rushdie, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Theo van Gogh.

A fatwā can be anything that suits the mufti. For example, Fatwa (Nikah al-Jihad) is legalised sex for the warriors. Some muftis even legalised necrophilia. That does not mean, however, that other muftis will agree with the fatwā. Muftis can reject those fatwās with which they do not agree.

Shariah vs Democracy

A dilemma for modern, multicultural, democratic states is whether Shariah is compatible with democracy. Strictly applied, it is not. A religion, which is based on absolutism with fixed laws and which claims to have an infallible source of guidance from above, is incompatible with the principle of change voted by a majority.

Indeed, the Christian West faced a similar dilemma as democracy was evolving. The increasing desire and struggle for freedom of religious expression led to many bloodbaths and it was only fully resolved by the separation of 'church' and 'state'.

Socio-Political Tactics

Muhammad and his band of immigrants arrived in Medina in 622 completely dependent on the hospitality of the three Jewish tribes that lived there alongside the Arabs. In less than two years, two of the tribes that had welcomed him, the Banu Qaynuqa and the Banu Nadir, were evicted, losing their land and their wealth to the Muslims. These evictions occurred as soon as their guests had developed sufficient power to conquer them and confiscate their possessions. Muhammad accomplished this by deftly exploiting his opponents' divisions.

In later generations, Islam managed to convert the majority of Christians in the Middle East by: punishment by death and beheading; taking booty in battle in the form of weapons, horses, prisoners and moveable goods; permitting polygamy; legalising sex with pre-mature girls; and promising endless sex and rivers of honey and yogurt in heaven.

20th Century Governance

One source of tension between Muslims and the West over the past century stemmed from the Sykes-Picot Agreement between England and France in 1916. This agreement laid down the political map in the Middle East that lasted till 1990. It established the foundation of a Jewish state (which stemmed from the Balfour Promise); and otherwise aligned the landscape so as to enable Christians, in alliance with the largest Islamic minorities, to engineer stable governments which would perpetuate their ongoing economic interests.

It took 30 years to achieve this outcome. Essential to its implementation was the formation of a non-religious political party, the Baath Party, in 1947. The Baath Party in Iraq was controlled by the largest minority, the Sunnis; in Syria, it was dominated by the largest minority, the Alawis; and in Lebanon, the presidency is held by a Christian in order to maintain peace between Sunnis and Shi'as. They knew that, under any other arrangement, what is happening now in Iraq and Syria would have happened after World War II.

Al Jihad

Jihad refers to a religious duty of Muslims. In Arabic, the word *jihād* is a noun meaning 'struggle' or 'resisting'. A person engaged in jihad is called a Mujahid, the plural of which is Mujahideen. The word *jihād* appears frequently in the Qur'an. Within the context of the classical Islamic law, it refers to struggle against those who do not believe in the Islamic God, Allah, and do not acknowledge submission to Muslims. Accordingly, it is frequently translated as 'Holy War'. Jihad also has a military meaning; essentially armed struggle against wrong doers.

Prayer

Prayer is an important daily obligation of Muslims. According to the Hadith, which records the talks given by the prophet and the first three caliphates, a person who abandons the prayers will receive 15 punishments from Allah: six punishments in this lifetime; three while dying; three in the grave; and three on the Day of Judgment. Those who do not say their prayers of:

- Fajar – the glow of their face is taken away;
- Zohar – the blessing of their income is taken away;
- Asar – the strength of their body is taken away;
- Maghrib – they are not benefacted by their children; and
- Ishar – the peace of their sleep is taken away.

Prayer practices differ. Shi'a Muslims, after the end of the prayer, raise their hands three times, reciting *Allahhu Akbar*. Sunnis just look at the left and right shoulder saying *salams*. Also, Shi'as in the second *Rakaa* often read *Qunoot* (obedience), which for Sunnis is often done after *salat*.

Conclusion

Westerners, including Australian Defence Force personnel, going to the Middle East need to have a basic understanding of the concepts of Islam and its multiple divisions. Islam is the foundation of state laws in Islamic countries, a concept known as 'religion and government'.

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Islam is a religion of submission. The main cause of discordance in Islam is between the Sunni and Shi'a, a division that has persisted since the death of Muhammad. Once a majority Islamic population is achieved in a community, extremist exponents of Islam will generally prevail over moderate (apostate) Muslims.

The Author: Dr James Carmel developed a special interest in Middle Eastern religions when, early in his career, he served with the United Nations in the Middle East. He has since extensively researched Middle Eastern religious beliefs and cultural practices and is fluent in five languages including Arabic.