POLITICS, TERRORISM, AND THE SUNNI DIVIDE

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This E-Note is based on Mr. Helfont's forthcoming monograph, The Sunni Divide: Understanding Politics and Terrorism in the Arab Middle East*, a product of FPRI's Center on Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Homeland Security.*

Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood are two distinct forms of Sunni Islamism. They have separate histories and separate worldviews. In reality they are not even the same type of movement. Their origins were largely unrelated. Their historic missions have been completely different, as are their current goals and means of achieving those goals. Unfortunately, these differences too often are overshadowed by a false Sunni-Shia dichotomy that tends to lump all Sunni Islamists together. But learning the differences between Sunni Islamists is critical to understanding politics and terrorism in the Arab Middle East. One could even argue that the most important division shaping Arab politics is not between Sunnis and Shias but between the Wahhabis and the Brotherhood. Before delving into current issues, however, it is first necessary to define differences between Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Wahhabism stems from the theological teachings of Muhammad ibn abd al-Wahhab, the eighteenth century reformer. Abd al-Wahhab was one of several "revivalist" thinkers to emerge from that century. The mission of these revivalists was to purify and thereby revitalize Islam. They carried the banner of reform but unlike modern reformers, they wanted to transform Islam on traditionally Islamic grounds. They did not attempt to adapt it to other systems of thought, politics, or culture. Their goals did not include modernizing Islam to meet the demands of a changing world. In this sense they were pre-modern. Wahhabism is thus, at its heart, a pre-modern theological movement and Wahhabists continue to make mostly theological arguments about the oneness of God and proper forms of worship. Their historical mission has been a call to reform Islam according to a strict and narrowly defined theology. There are, of course, political implications to this understanding of Islam, but Wahhabism is still best understood as a theological reform movement.

The Muslim Brotherhood, on the other hand, is a political organization originating in Egypt's cosmopolitan cities during the twentieth century. The Brotherhood's Islamism is one of several political ideologies to emerge out of Egypt in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Like Pan-Arabism, nationalism, and socialism, which also emerged in Egypt at that time, the Brotherhood's Islamism is at its heart a political identity. The historical mission of the Brotherhood has been political reform based on an Islamic political identity. Just as nationalists promoted an ethno-national identity, and socialists promoted a class-based identity, the Brotherhood promoted a political identity based on Islam. Unlike the Wahhabists, however, the Brotherhood was not concerned with implementing a particular theology. It recruited members who held various understandings of Sunni Islam and its leaders were laymen, not Islamic scholars. The Brotherhood's founder, Hassan al-Banna was a school teacher, as was the important brotherhood theorist, Sayid Qutb. Al-Banna's successor Hassan al-Hudaybi was a lawyer. Thus, the reforms that the Brotherhood has called for have almost always been political, not theological. In fact, they often mixed traditional Islam with modern political thought. For example, the Brotherhood has embraced nationalism, constitutionalism, and participation in elections. Its rhetoric was—and continues to be—full of anti-Imperialist arguments that are common throughout the third world. These were not strictly Islamic concepts.

It should be clear, then, that Wahhabism and the Muslim Brotherhood are two distinct movements. Indeed the Muslim Brothers and the Wahhabists have often been fierce critics of one another. They each consider the other to have divided the Islamic community. Wahhabists blame the Muslim Brotherhood for what it calls *hizbiyyah* (partisanship). They claim that because the Brotherhood supports the formation of political parties, it has divided the Muslim world into competing factions. Further, Wahhabists criticize the Brotherhood's theological leniency, as well as its modern political influences. As one Wahhabist recently put it, the Muslim Brothers "have consistently overlooked the principal aspect of calling their followers to *tawhid* (the oneness of God) and forbidding them from polytheism, because these are matters which require time and effort to change, matters which people do not find easy to accept. [The Muslim Brothers] were more concerned with amassing groups

of people together rather than calling the people to the way of the Prophet."[1] The Brotherhood, on the other hand, has accused the Wahhabists of being so strict in their interpretations of Islam that they have caused *fitnah* (schism). They argue that this fitnah pits one group of Muslims against another and that Islam strictly forbids such divisions.

Regional Politics

Unfortunately, the differences and indeed the conflicts between the Brotherhood and the Wahhabists have not received the attention they deserve. In the aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, a bloody conflict broke out between Iraq's Sunnis and Shias. This conflict has led some to see the entire region through the prism of the age-old Sunni-Shia struggle. While this conflict is certainly important, dividing the Middle East along sectarian lines is not an accurate way to assess the loyalties—or predict the actions of—various regional actors.

For example, when Israel went to war with Hezbollah in Lebanon in the summer of 2006 and with Hamas in Gaza in the winter of 2008-2009, the region did not divide along sectarian lines. In both of these conflicts, the Shias from Hezbollah and Iran aligned with Sunni Islamists from Hamas and other Muslim Brotherhood associated organizations. On the other side of the regional divide were Sunni Arab Nationalists, traditional Sunni monarchies, and Sunni Islamists with Wahhabist tendencies. These groupings are generally indicative of the political order in the Middle East. Indeed, on other contentious issues that are said to divide Sunnis and Shias, the divisions that were apparent during the recent Israeli wars with Hezbollah and Hamas continue to be dominant. For example, the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood has often defended Iran's nuclear program ignoring the interests of its fellow Sunnis. So while a divide does exist in regional politics, it is not between Sunnis and Shias.

One reason for the Brotherhood's alliance with the Shias is that the Brotherhood is a political movement concerned with bringing Muslims together under an Islamic political identity. It is open to differing interpretations of Islam, and is, therefore, less critical of the Shias. Additionally, Ruhollah Khomeini's political Islam in Iran was very similar to the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology. Both called for *taqrib* (the bringing together of sects), both downplayed traditional theology, and both have similar understandings of an Islamic state. Iran, for example, has a constitution and holds elections. The regime, therefore, claims legitimacy based on a mix of Islamic and modern principles. If the Muslim Brotherhood were to form an Islamic state, it would probably look similar to the current Iranian state. This is despite the fact that one group is Sunni and the other is Shia. The Wahhabists, on the other hand, care more about theology than politics. They, therefore, denounce democracy as un-Islamic and often forbid Muslims from participating in elections. They deplore what they consider deviant sects such as Shiism, and even when their interests align such as in Hezbollah's war against Israel, the Wahhabists refuse to support Shias.

Both the Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabists compete for power and influence in most Arab states. Because the Middle Eastern political order is currently defined by Iran's push for hegemony, the competition between the Brotherhood and the Wahhabists has a profound affect on regional politics. Any gain the Brotherhood makes in comparison to the Wahhabists pushes the Arab states closer to Iran. Any gain the Wahhabists make pushes the Arab states away from Iran. This battle is currently taking place throughout the Arab Middle East, yet because most researchers and analysts lump all Sunni Islamists together, it has been mostly overlooked.

Policymakers, therefore, should understand that (1) the most important division in the Middle East is not between Sunnis and Shias, but the internal divisions within Sunni Islamism, and (2) the success or failure of Sunni Islamism, as a whole, is not as important to the regional balance of power as who among the Sunni Islamists are successful.

Jihad and Terrorism

The deep divisions between Sunni Islamists are not only important to the regional balance of power. The United States, for example, in trying to combat terrorism, must understand the difference between Wahhabists and the Muslim Brotherhood. Both streams of Sunni Islamism claim to carry out jihad in the name of Islam, so researchers and analysts often mistakenly lump them together. In reality, the Muslim Brotherhood's jihad is not the same as that of the Wahhabists. These two separate understandings of jihad may share several important similarities, but they also have significant differences and are sometimes even contradictory. Understanding how each group comprehends jihad is, therefore, paramount for policymakers concerned with terrorism. Failing to distinguish between these two groups could result in wasting valuable resources on preparing for an attack that will never come, or worse, being unprepared in the face of imminent danger.

In the modern world, the concept of jihad can been seen as both useful and problematic for Muslims. It is useful in offering a powerful and religiously sanctioned call to arms. Many modern Muslims, from both secular and religious movements, have called for jihad as a means of rallying support for war. However, for modern Muslims engaged in the battle of ideas, the legacy of jihad can be problematic. At present, there is a widely accepted stigma against offensive and expansionist warfare.

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[1] Haneef James Oliver, "Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimun" The Wahhabi Myth. <http://www.thewahhabimyth.com/ikhwan.htm >

This is particularly true in the Muslim world which was conquered and ruled by expansionist European empires in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Therefore, many Muslims, attempting to fuse Islam and modernity, have trouble coming to terms with the historical practice of expansionist jihad. Consider, for example, the sermons of the prominent Muslim Brotherhood related scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi. In one sermon, al-Qaradawi insists that the "Prophet Muhammad did not carry a sword, but used the good word to preach his message."[2] Nevertheless, in a sermon less than a year earlier, he had claimed that the Prophet Muhammad's life "was one of continuous jihad. The ten years he spent in Medina were bloody jihad and fighting against non-belief, infidelity, Judaism, and others."[3]

Because of this friction between pre-modern and modern norms, the Muslim Brotherhood has reinterpreted the meaning of jihad, infusing it with modern concepts. It generally understands jihad as resistance to expansionist warfare and imperialism. It does not consider domestic political violence to be jihad and it condemns attacks on other Muslims. The only time the Brotherhood considers jihad to be legitimate is when it takes place on Muslim land that it deems occupied by a non-Muslim force. Today, this would include Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Kashmir and other similar locales. Once jihad is declared, however, the Brotherhood uses whatever means it has at its disposal. This includes suicide bombings, targeting civilians, and the use of women and children.

Wahhabists, by comparison, care less about modern stigmas. While they may employ modern norms in their rhetoric, they refuse to have their actions constrained by modern discourse. For this reason, the concept of jihad has evolved differently within Wahhabism.

Wahhabists generally see the Brotherhood's reinterpretation of jihad as an abomination. Muhammad ibn abd al-Wahhab's interpretation of jihad makes no apology for aggression. In fact offensive jihad was essential for the spread of Wahhabism in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The famous union between abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad ibn Saud was based on the idea that Saud would have much to gain from religiously-sanctioned expansive warfare.

Modern Wahhabists attempt to stay true to the pre-modern teachings of abd al-Wahhab. They do not consider modern norms and stigmas to be of any significance. In fact, they view the permeation of these norms into Islam as a grave threat to the religion. Therefore, even completely non-political and non-violent Wahhabist recognize that the principle of offensive jihad is valid, although they do not currently practice it. They are extremely critical of the Muslim Brotherhood related scholars who have argued that offensive jihad is invalid in the modern period. As one non-violent Wahhabist argues, these Brotherhood scholars have "belittled" the Islamic tradition "in the name of 'understanding of priorities'" and they have "declared their loyalty for the Infidels in the name of 'creating a good picture of Islam.'"[4] This particular Wahhabist considers the more recent attempts to reinterpret jihad unsurprising since historically, the "figureheads of the Bankrupt Brotherhood" have been known to "distort, twist and water down the objectives of Jihad."[5]

Another important aspect of Wahhabists' interpretations of jihad is their very limited definition of who is a Muslim. This is based on their strict theological interpretation of Islam. Abd al-Wahhab had declared the overwhelming majority of eighteenth century Muslims to be unbelievers and authorized jihad to be waged against them. Abd al-Wahhab and his followers were especially confrontational toward non-Sunni Muslims including the Shias. This type of thinking was reinforced in the modern period when it was combined with Sayid Qutb's ideas. Qutb of course, was a Muslim Brother, but his followers formed radical offshoots of the Brotherhood that often combined with the Wahhabists and ultimately turned against the Brotherhood's original ideology. Unlike abd al-Wahhab, there is no evidence that Qutb himself was anti-Shia. His theory of *jahaliyyah*, however, opened the door for excommunicating Muslims who did not conform to his understanding of Islam. When Qutbism and Wahhabism were merged in the 1970s and 1980s, the result was a small but extremely violent strain of Wahhabist Islamism that produced groups such as al-Qaeda.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Understanding the divisions within Sunni Islamism will help analysts both avoid simple mistakes and put events into their proper contexts. For example, one should not expect the Muslim Brotherhood to be anti-Hezbollah or anti-Iran and vice versus. Conversely, one should also not expect Wahhabists and the Muslim Brotherhood to work together simply because they are both Sunni Islamists. When trying to understand terrorist threats, analysts should realize that the Muslim Brotherhood and the Wahhabists have different ideas of what constitutes legitimate jihad. Analysts should not expect the Brotherhood to

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[2] "Near/Middle East: Round-Up of Friday Sermons 22 Sep 06," BBC Monitoring, September 26, 2006.

[3] Qatar TV, "Live Sermon from Umar Bin-al-Khattab Mosque in Doha," (November 25, 2005), BBC Monitoring: Near/Middle East: Round-Up of Friday Sermons 25 Nov 05, (November 29, 2005).

[4] "Readings in Qaradawism: Part 4, Discontinuation of Jihaad." Salafi Publications,
<http://www.spubs.com/sps/sp.cfm?subsecID=NDV16&articleID=NDV160004&articlePages=1>

[5] Ibid.

carry out Al Qaida style attacks on the U.S. homeland or against other Muslims. Yet, Muslim Brotherhood critiques of this type of terrorism should not be taken to indicate that the Brotherhood has renounced violent jihad. To misunderstand this would be extremely dangerous because in several cases, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Muslim Brotherhood's understanding of jihad represents a direct military threat to the United States and our allies.

By viewing the Muslim Brotherhood and Wahhabism as two separate movements, U.S. policymakers can address each group separately, forming distinct policies for each.

Wahhabism presents a unique challenge for U.S. policymakers in that Wahhabists consider any epistemology not rooted entirely in traditional Islamic sources to be invalid. Therefore, it would be very difficult for the United States to engage Wahhabists in direct public diplomacy or a battle of ideas. After all, they do not accept the modern secular premises—whether liberal, realists, Marxist, etc. — that Western arguments rest upon. However, the United States does have a direct interest in limiting the influence of the more violent Wahhabists, and in empowering the most non-political scholars.

The first step is for U.S. diplomats and policymakers concerned with the Middle East to familiarize themselves with the internal arguments and language of Wahhabist debates. All Wahhabists, from the most violent to the most passive, share the same basic beliefs. What separates Al Qaeda from Wahhabists who oppose attacks on the United States, such as the Saudi religious establishment, is that some Wahhabists consider the United States to have entered into a treaty or an alliance with an Islamic ruler. The United States is, therefore, protected under Islamic law and an illegitimate target for jihad. These are technicalities of Islamic law but they are very important to Wahhabists and can make the difference in convincing a Muslim to support or refrain from supporting terrorism. Groups such as Al Qaeda understand this and use it in their propaganda. For example, when addressing its critics in the wake of 9/11, Al Qaeda made sure to assert that "Truly, America is not, nor has it ever been, a land of treaty or alliance."[6] U.S. policymakers and practitioners should understand these debates and in this example, make sure that the United States is portrayed as having entered into a treaty with a legitimate Islamic ruler. This can be done both by pressuring Middle Eastern governments to depict their relationship with the United States in this manner, and through public diplomacy which does the same. Of course, this type of public diplomacy will not, on its own, end the threat of Al Qaeda and other violent Wahhabists, but it can make it much easier for nonviolent Wahhabists to discourage others from attacking American targets.

Conversely, the Muslim Brotherhood, while not an organization that U.S. policymakers should support in its current form, is open to modernity and modernist arguments. The Brotherhood has made clear that, at least in theory, it accepts the validity of modern norms such as nonviolence, non-aggression, human rights, democracy, and constitutionalism. Policymakers concerned with public diplomacy should, therefore, identify where they feel the Brotherhood is not living up to these norms. For example, when the Brotherhood claims to be nonviolent, it should be challenged over its support for violence in Israel, Iraq, Chechnya, and Kashmir. When the Brotherhood claims to accept human rights, it should be shown where it falls short concerning religious minorities and women's rights. When the Brotherhood claims to be democratic, it should underscore where its proposed policies fail to meet democratic standards. Thus far, the United States has failed to articulate these types of arguments well. It has, therefore, let the Brotherhood's propaganda stand unchallenged; causing many in the Islamic world to conclude that the United States opposes the Brotherhood not because it is an undemocratic and often militant organization, but because it is Islamic. Policymakers should make clear that they intend to treat the Muslim Brotherhood as they would any other political party, regardless of religion. The more the debate focuses on the Muslim Brotherhood's politics and the less it focuses on its religion, the more successful U.S. policy will be. Through engaging the Brotherhood indirectly in the battle of ideas, the United States can challenge the Brotherhood to live up to the principles that it already claims to accept.

By refusing to favor either the Brotherhood or the Wahhabists,, U.S. policymakers might neutralize the most radical elements of each movement. This impartial approach might also avoid destabilizing the regional balance of power. The United States could then form policies that pull the Muslim Brotherhood away from militancy without pushing it toward Wahhabism. Concurrently, it could attempt to limit the extremes of Wahhabism without pushing this group toward the Iranian-led anti-Western camp. The United States would, therefore, be able to pursue its interests in long-term liberalization/democratization while continuing to support short-term stability.

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[6] "Translation of April 24, 2002 al-Qaeda document," Middle East Policy Council, www.mepc.org/journal_vol10/0306_alqaeda.asp