

**HISTORICAL**  

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**ATLAS OF**  

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**ISLAM**



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with  
**Azim Nanji**

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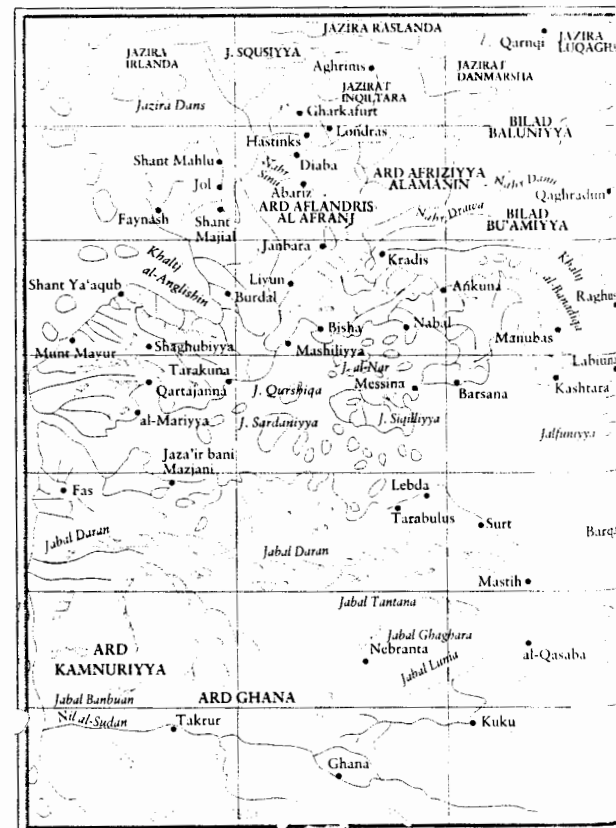
# Introduction

Since September 11th, 2001, barely a day passes without stories about Islam—the religion of about one-fifth of humanity—appearing in the media. The terrorists, who hijacked four American airliners and flew them into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon near Washington, killed more than three thousand people. This unleashed a “War on Terrorism” by the United States and its allies, leading to the removal of two Muslim governments, one in Afghanistan and the other in Iraq. It raised the profile of Islam throughout the world as a subject for analysis and discussion. The debates, in newspaper columns and broadcasting studios, in cafes, bars, and homes, have been heated and passionate. Questions that were previously discussed in the rarified atmosphere of academic conferences or graduate seminars, have entered the mainstream of public consciousness. What is the “law of jihad”? How is it that a “religion of peace” subscribed to by millions of ordinary, decent believers, can become an ideology of hatred for an angry minority? Why has Islam after the fall of communism become so freighted with passionate intensity? Or, to use the title of a best-selling essay by Bernard Lewis, the doyen of Orientalist scholars, “What went wrong?” with Islamic history, with its relationship with itself, and with the modern world?

Such questions are no longer academic, but are arguably of vital concern to most of the peoples living on this planet. Few would deny that Islam, or some variation thereof—whether distorted, perverted, corrupted, or hijacked by extremists—has become a force to be reckoned with, or at least a label attached to a phenomenon with menacing potentialities. Numerous atrocities have been attributed to and claimed by Islamic extremists, both before and since 9/11, causing mayhem and carnage in many of the world’s cities and tourist desti-

nations: Nairobi, Dar es Salaam, Mombasa, Riyadh, Casablanca, Bali, Tunisia, Jakarta, Bombay (Mumbai), and Istanbul. The list grows longer, the casualties mount. The responses of people and their governments are angry and perplexed. The far-reaching consequences of these responses for international peace and security should be enough to convince anyone (and not just the media editors who mold public consciousness to fit their advertisers’ priorities) that extreme manifestations of Islam are setting the agenda for argument and action in the twenty-first century.

Muslims living in the West and in the growing areas of the Muslim world that come within the West’s electronic footprint understandably resent the negative exposure that comes with the increasing concerns of outsiders. Islam is a religion of peace: the word “Islam,” a verbal noun meaning submission



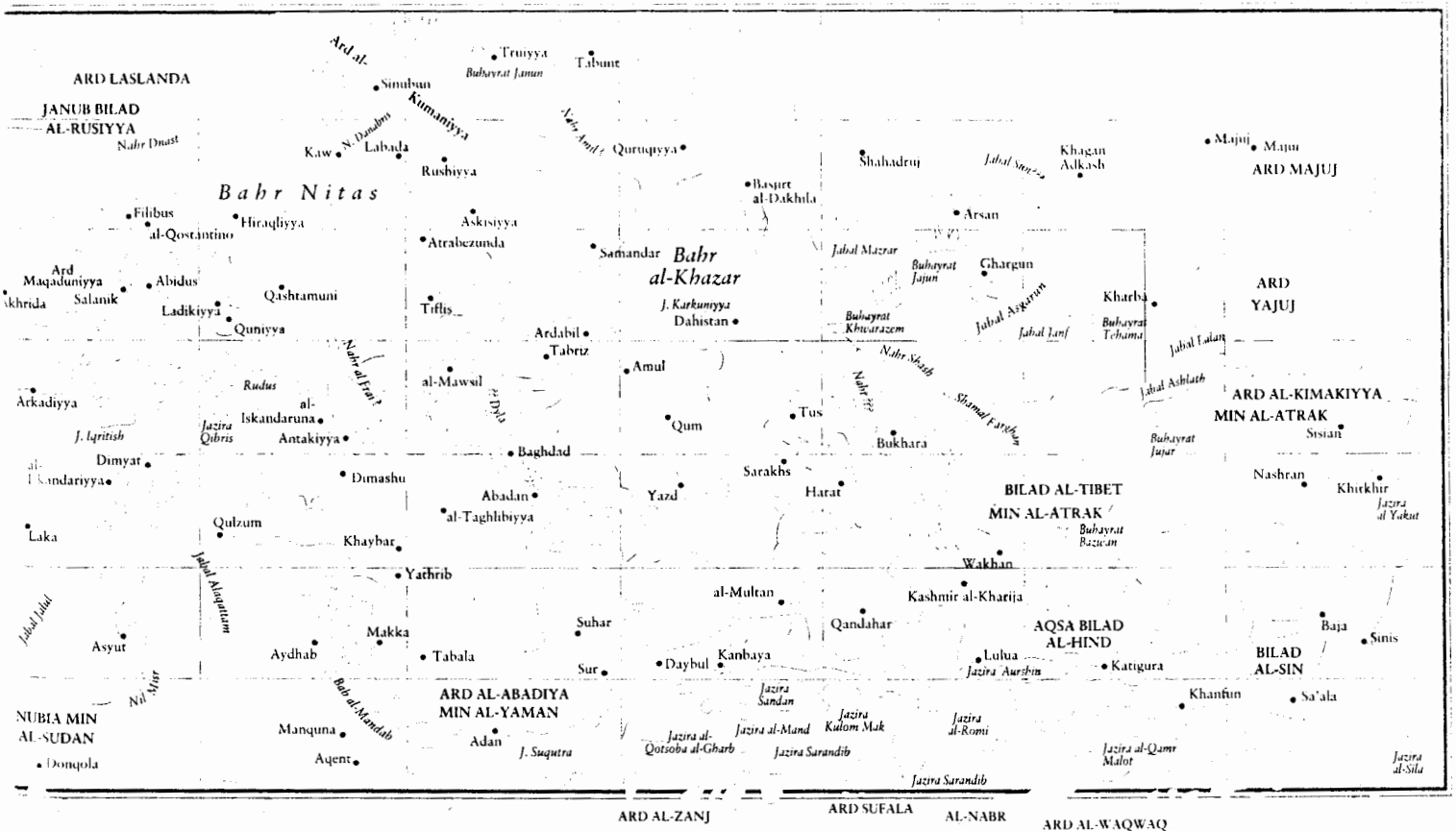
(to God) is etymologically related to the word salam, meaning peace. The standard greeting most Muslims use when joining a gathering or meeting strangers is “as-salaam alaikum”—“Peace be upon you.” Westerners who accuse Islam of being a violent religion misunderstand its nature. Attaching the label “Muslim” or “Islamic” to acts of terrorism is grossly unfair. When a right-wing Christian fanatic like Timothy McVeigh blew up a US federal building in Oklahoma City, the worst atrocity committed on American soil before 9/11, no one described him a “Christian” terrorist. In the view of many of Islam’s adherents, “Westerners” who have abandoned their own faith, or are blinkered by religious prejudice, do not “understand” Islam. Certain hostile media distort Western viewpoints, prejudicing sentiments and attitudes with Islamophobia—the equivalent of anti-Semitism applied to Muslims instead of Jews. Some scholars, trained in western academies,

are accused of viewing Islam through the misshapen lens of Orientalism, a discipline corrupted by its associations with imperialism, when specialist knowledge was placed at the service of power.

This is fraught, contested territory and the writer who ventures into it does so at his or her peril. As with other religious traditions, every generalization about Islam is open to challenge, because for every normative description of Islamic faith, belief, and practice, there exist important variants and considerable diversity. The problem of definition is made more difficult because there is no overarching ecclesiastical institution, no Islamic papacy, with prescriptive power to decree what is and what is not Islamic. (Even protestant churches define their religious positions in contradistinction to Roman Catholicism.)

Being Muslim, like being a Jew, embraces ancestry as well as belief. People described as

**The World according to al-Idrisi 549–1154**



Muslims are religiously observant in different ways. One can be culturally Muslim, as one can be culturally Jewish, without subscribing to a particular set of religious prescriptions or beliefs. It would not be inappropriate to describe many nonreligious Americans and Europeans as “cultural Christians” given the seminal importance played by Christianity in the development of Western culture. The fact that the term is rarely, if ever, used is revealing of western cultural hegemony and its pretensions to universality. The Christian underpinning of Western culture is so taken for granted that no one troubles to make it apparent. At the same time the term “Christian” has been appropriated by protestant fundamentalists who seek to define themselves in contradistinction to secular humanists or religious believers with whose outlook they violently disagree.

Similar problems of definition apply in the Muslim world. Just as there are theological disagreements between Christian churches over all sorts of questions of belief and ritual, within the Islamic fold there are groups who differ from themselves ritualistically or in terms of their respective tradition of interpretation and practice.

Among the major groups in Islam, historically, the two most significant are the Sunni and Shia.

The Shia maintain that, shortly before his death, the prophet Muhammad (c. 570–632), designated Ali, his first cousin and husband of his daughter Fatima, as his successor. They further believe that this succession continued in a line of Imams (spiritual leaders) descendent from Ali and Fatima, each specifically designated by the previous Imam. The larger body of the Shia, the “Twelvers” or Imamis, believe that the last of these leaders who “disappeared” in 873 will reappear as the Mahdi or messiah at some future time.

The Sunnis, on the other hand, maintain that the Prophet had made an indication favoring

one of his companions, Abu Bakr (r. 624–632), who was accepted as Caliph or successor by agreement of the main leaders in the community after the death of the Prophet. He, in turn, appointed Umar (r. 634–644), who on his deathbed designated Uthman (r. 644–656), after consultation with leading Muslims. Uthman was succeeded by Ali (r. 656–661), again with the consent of leading Muslims of the time. In the view of the Sunni majority the four caliphs constitute a “rightly guided Caliphate.”

Over time the Shia and Sunni both developed distinctive community identities. They are divided into various branches and organized into different movements and tendencies. While these, and other groups, differed with each other and often fought over their differences, the general tenor of relations, in pre-modern urban societies, tended to be based on mutual coexistence and intellectual debate.

In recent times, however, there has been a tendency for extremist sects and radical groups to anathematize their religious opponents, or to declare those ruling over them to be outside the pale of Islam. This narrow perspective may be contrasted with a growing awareness among the majority of Muslim peoples of the diversity and plurality of interpretations within the Umma.

Currently, the climate of religious intolerance manifested in some parts of the Muslim world has complex origins and may be symptomatic, like the puritan extremism that flourished in Europe in the seventeenth century, of the dislocating effects of economic and social changes. As will become clear from the maps and essays that follow, modernity came to the Muslim world on the wings of colonial power, rather than as a consequence of internally generated transformations. The “best community” decreed by God for “ordering the good and forbidding the evil” has lost the moral, and political, hegemony it held in what was once the most civilized part of the world, outside China. When

Islam was in the ascendant, so was the climate of tolerance it engendered. Muslim scholars and theologians polemicized against each other but were careful not to denounce those who affirmed the shahada—the declaration of faith—and who prayed toward Mecca. As the American scholar, Carl Ernst observes, “In any society in the world today, religious pluralism is a sociological fact. If one group claims authority over all the rest, demanding their allegiance and submission, this will be experienced as the imposition of power through religious rhetoric.” [Carl Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (London and Chapel Hill, p, 206)]

In principle, if not always in practice, a Muslim is one who follows Islam, an Arabic word meaning “submission” or, more precisely, “self-surrender” to the will of God as revealed to the prophet Muhammad. These revelations, delivered orally over the period of Muhammad’s active prophetic career from about 610 until his death, are contained in the Koran, the scripture that stands at the foundation of the Islamic religion and the diverse cultural systems that flow from it. A few revisionist scholars working in Western universities have challenged the traditional Islamic account of the Koran’s origins, arguing that the text was constructed out of a larger body of oral materials following the Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent. The great majority of scholars, however, Muslim and non-Muslim, regard the Koran as the written record of the revelations accumulated in the course of Muhammad’s career. Unlike the Bible, there are no signs of multiple authorship. In contrast to the New Testament in particular, where the sayings of Jesus have been incorporated into four distinct narratives of his life presumed to have been written by different authors, the Koran contains many allusions to events in the Prophet’s life, but does not spell them out in

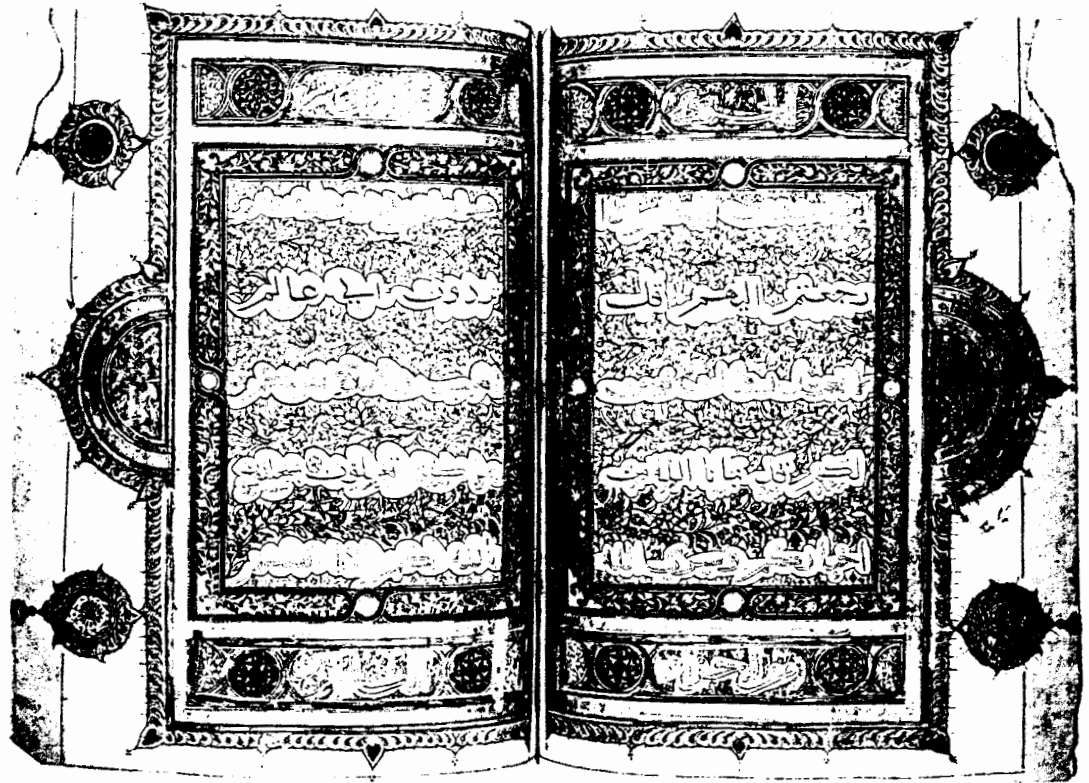
detail. The story of Muhammad’s career as Prophet and Statesman (if one can use a rather modern term for the leader of the movement that united the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula) was constructed from a different body of oral materials. Known as Hadith (traditions or reports about the Prophet’s behavior), they acquired written form after Muhammad’s death.

The Koran is divided into 114 sections known as suras (rows), each of which is composed of varying numbers of verses known as ayas (signs or miracles). Apart from the first sura, the Fatiha, or Opening, a seven-verse invocation used as a prayer in numerous rituals, including daily prayers or salat, the suras are arranged in approximate order of decreasing length, with the shortest at the end and the longest near the beginning. Most standard editions divide the suras into passages revealed in Mecca (which tend to be shorter, and hence located near the end of the book) and those belonging to the period of the Prophet’s sojourn in Medina, where he emigrated with his earliest followers to escape persecution in Mecca in 622, the Year One of the Muslim era. Meccan passages, especially the early ones, convey vivid messages about personal accountability, reward and punishment—in heaven and hell—while celebrating the glories and beauty of the natural world as proof of God’s creative power and sovereignty. The Medinese passages, while replicating many of the same themes, contain positive teachings on social and legal issues (including rules governing sexual relations and inheritance, and punishments prescribed for certain categories of crime). Such passages, supplemented with material from the Hadith literature came to be the key sources for the development of a legal system known as the Sharia. Different scholars of Muslim thoughts added other sources to create a methodology for the future systematization and implementation of the Sharia.

For believing Muslims, the Koran is the direct speech of God, dictated without human editing. Muhammad has been described by some modern Muslim scholars as a passive transmitter of the Divine Word. The Prophet, himself, is supposed to have been ummi (illiterate), although some scholars question this as he was an active and successful merchant. For a majority of Muslims, the Koran, whose text was written down and stabilized during the reign of the third caliph, Uthman (r. 644–656), was “uncreated” and coeternal with God. Hence, for believing Muslims, the Koran occupies the position Christ has for Christians. God reveals himself, not through a person, but

Islam beyond Arabia occurred on the basis of the Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent and lands further afield in the century or so following the Prophet’s death in 632. Faith in Islam and the Prophet’s divine calling—as well as the desire for booty—united the Arabian tribes into a formidable fighting machine. They defeated both the Byzantine and Sasanian armies, opening part of the Byzantine Empire and the whole of Persia to Muslim conquest and settlement. At first Islam remained primarily the religion of the “Arab”. Muslim commanders housed their tribal battalions in separate military cantonments outside the cities they conquered, leav-

*The illuminated double page from the Koran in the Bibari script. This copy was completed in 1399, the year after Timur’s conquest of Delhi. The passage, from the Al-Tawba (Sura of Repentance), refers to the Prophet’s bedouin allies who are not to be excused for failing to join one of his campaigns.*



through the language contained in a holy text. Other religious traditions, including Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Sikhism, and Zoroastrianism, privilege their foundational texts as sacred. Muslim rulers recognized this common principle by granting religious toleration to the ahl al-kitab (Peoples of the Book).

In its initial phase the rapid expansion of

ing their new subjects (Christian, Jewish, or Zoroastrian) to regulate their own affairs so long as they paid the jizya (poll-tax) in lieu of military service. The process of Islamization occurred gradually, through marriage, as the leading families of the subject populations sought to join the Muslim elites. It also occurred as impoverished or uprooted sub-

jects found support in the religion of their rulers, or as people disenchanted with their former rulers finding a congenial spiritual home in one that honored their traditions while representing their teachings in a new, creative synthesis. The role of early Muslim missionaries was also crucial in this process.

Muslim theology, however, did have one dynamic cultural dimension, which may help to explain its evolution of an "Arab" religion into a universal faith. As the quintessential "religion of the Book," which represented the divine Word as manifested in a written text, Islam carried with it the prestige of learning and literacy into illiterate cultures. The cult of the book, like Voltaire's definition of hypocrisy, was the compliment, not of vice to virtue, but of illiteracy to learning. The prophet himself is supposed to have been illiterate (although some scholars question this, since he was an active and successful merchant). His epiphany came in the form of language. Time and again the nomadic peoples on the fringes of the Muslim empires would take over the centers of power, and in so doing civilize themselves, becoming in turn the bearers of Muslim cultural prestige. After the disintegration of the great Abbasid Empire, the dream of a universal caliphate embracing the whole of the Islamic world (and, indeed, the rest of humanity) ceased to be a viable project. The lines of communication were too long for the center to be able to suppress the ambitions of local dynasts. But the prestige of literacy, symbolized by Koran and its glorious calligraphic elaborations on the walls of mosques and other public buildings, as well as in the meticulously copied versions of the book itself, was powerful. Even Mongol invaders, notorious for their cruelty, would succumb to the spiritual and aesthetic power of Islam in the western part of their dominions.

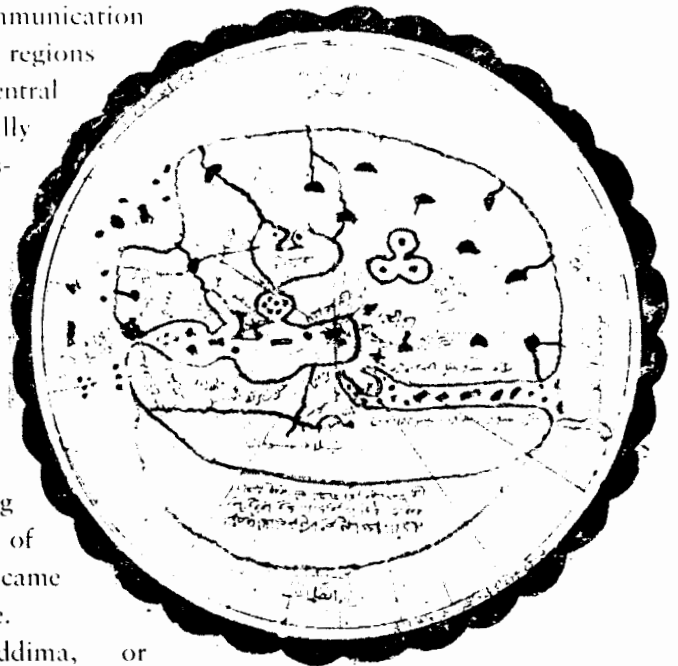
The maps in this book do not aim to provide a comprehensive account of the shifting patterns of state and religious authority that

prevailed during the case sweep of Islamic history from the time of the Prophet to the present. But it is hoped that the will illuminate important aspects of this history, by opening windows into significant areas of the distant and recent past, thereby helping to explain the legacy of conflicts—as well as opportunities—the past has bequeathed to the present. Geography is vital for the understanding of Islamic history and is problematic relationship with modernity.

As the maps in this Atlas illustrate, the central belt of Islamic territories stretching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indus Valley were perennially at the mercy of nomadic or semi-nomadic invaders. In premodern times, before gunpowder weapons, air power, and modern systems of communication brought peripheral regions under the control of central governments (usually under colonial auspices), the cities were vulnerable to attack by nomadic predators. The genius of the Islamic system lay in providing the converted tribesmen with a system of law, practice and learning within a foundation of faith to which they became acculturated over time.

In his *Muqaddima*, or "Proglomena" to the History of the World, the Arab philosopher of history, Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), developed a theory of cyclic renewal and state formation, which analyzed this process in the context of his native North Africa. According to his theory, in the arid zones where rainfall is sparse, pastoralism remains the principal mode of agricultural production. Unlike peasants, pastoralists are organized along the "tribal" lines (patrilineal

*A world map drawn in 1571–72 by the al-Sharafi al-Sifaqsi family in the town of Sfax, Tunisia.*





kinship groups). They are relatively free from government control. Enjoying greater mobility than urban people, they cannot be regularly taxed. Nor can they be brought under the control of feudal lords who will appropriate a part of their produce in return for extending protection. Indeed, in the arid lands it is the tribesmen who are usually armed, and who, at times, can hold the city to ransom, or conquer it. Ibn Khaldun's insights tell us why it is usually inappropriate to speak of Muslim "feudalism," except in the strictly limited context of the great river valley systems of Egypt and Mesopotamia, where a settled peasantry farmed the land. In the arid regions, pastoralists move their flocks seasonally across the land according to complex arrangements with other users. Usufruct is not ownership. Property and territory are not coterminous, as they became in the high rainfall regions of Europe. Here feudalism and its offshoot, capitalism, took root and eventually created the bourgeois state that would dominate the countryside, commercializing agriculture and subjecting rural society to urban values and control. In most parts of Western Asia and North Africa, in contrast, the peoples at the margins continued to elude state control until the coming of air power. Even now the process is far from complete in places like Afghanistan, where tribal structures have resisted the authority of the central government.

Urbane Moroccans had a revealing term for the tribal regions of their country: *bled al-siba*—the land of insolence—as contrasted with *bled al-makhzen*, the civilized center, which periodically falls prey to it. The superiority of the tribes, in Ibn Khaldun's theory, depends on *asabiya*, a term which is usually translated as group feeling or social solidarity. This *asabiyya* derives ultimately from the harsher environment of the desert or arid lands, where there is little division of labor and humans depend for their survival on the bonds of kinship. City life, by contrast, lacks

a common or corporative *asabiyya*. The absence of bourgeois solidarity, in which the corporate group interests of the burghers transcend the bonds of kinship, may partly be traced to the operations of Muslim law. Unlike the Roman legal tradition, the *Sharia* contains no provision for the recognition of corporate groups as fictive "persons."

In its classic formulation, Ibn Khaldun's theory applied to the North African milieu he knew and understood best. But it serves as an explanatory model for the wider history of Western Asia and North Africa, from the coming of Islam to the present. The key to the theory is the dialectical interaction between religion and *asabiyya*. Ibn Khaldun's concept of *asabiyya*, which is central to his theory of Muslim social and political history, can be made to mesh with modern theories of ethnicity, whether one adopts a "primordial" or "interactive" model. The key to Ibn Khaldun's theory may be found in two of his propositions singled out by the anthropologist and philosopher, Ernest Gellner: (1) "Leadership exists only through superiority, and superiority only through group feeling (*asabiyya*)" and (2) "Only tribes held together by group feeling can live in the desert."

The superior power of the tribes vis-a-vis the cities provided the conditions under which dynastic military government and its variants, royal government underpinned by *mamlukism* or institutionalized *asabiya*, became the norm in Islamic history prior to the European colonial intervention. The absence of the legal recognition of corporative bodies in Islamic law prevented the artificial solidarity of the corporation, a prerequisite for urban capitalist development, from transcending the "natural" solidarities of kinship. In precolonial times the high cultural traditions of Islam constantly interacted with these primordial solidarities or ethnicities: they did not replace them.

Formally the ethic of Islam is opposed to local solidarities, which privilege some

believers above others. In theory there exists a single Muslim community—the *umma*—under the sovereignty of God. In practice this ideal was often modified by recognition of the need to enlist *asabiya* (tribal ethnicity) in the “path of God.” Islamic orthopraxy ritualizes *communitas* through regular prayer, and pilgrimage, and other devotional practices, and given time, generates the urban scripturalist piety of the high cultural or “Great” tradition. But it does not of itself, forge a permanent congregational community strong enough to transcend the countervailing dynamic of local ethnicities. Be they secular, based on the tribal, village, or even craft-based ethnicities of urban migrants, or sectarian-religious, based on divisions between the different Sunni *madhabs* (schools of jurisprudence), the various Sufi orders (which tend to be structured, not “communally” but along kinship or parakinship lines) or Sunnis and Shiites.

Like Baptists in the United States, Islam (especially that of the Sunni mainstream, comprising about 90 percent of the world’s Muslims) is a conservative, populist force, which resists tight doctrinal or ecclesiastical controls. While Muslim scripturalism and orthopraxy provide a common language which crosses ethnic, racial, and national boundaries—creating the largest “international society” known to the world in pre-modern times—it has never succeeded in supplying the ideological underpinning for a unified social order that can be translated into common national identity. In the West the institutions of medieval Christianity, allied to Roman legal structures, created the preconditions for the emergence of the modern national state. In Islamdom the moral basis of the state was constantly undermined by the realities of tribal *asabiya*. These could be admitted *de facto*, but never accorded *de jure* recognition. This may be one reason why a civilization that by the tenth and eleventh

centuries, far ahead of its Christian competitor, eventually fell behind, to find itself under the political and cultural dominance of people it regarded—and which some of its members still do regard—as infidels.

The Islamic system of precolonial times, embedded in the memory of contemporary Muslims, was brilliantly adapted to the political ecology of its era. Even if the strategy of “waging jihad in the path of God” were adopted for pragmatic or military reasons, Islamic faith and culture were the beneficiaries. The nomad conquerors, Mamluks (soldier-slaves), imported from peripheral regions to keep them at bay, became Islam’s foremost champions, defenders of the faith-community and patrons of its cultures and systems of learning.

The social memory of this system exercises a powerful appeal over the imaginations of many young Muslims at this time. This is especially true when the more recent memory of modernization through colonization can be represented as a story of humiliation, retreat, and betrayal of Islam’s mission to bring universal truth and justice to a world torn by division and strife. The violence that struck America on September 11th, 2001, may have been rooted in the despair of people holding a romantic, idealized vision of the past and smarting under the humiliation of the present. While those who planned the operation were, almost certainly, educated, sophisticated men, fully cognizant with the workings of modern societies, it does not seem accidental that most of the fifteen hijackers were Saudi citizens, and came from the province of Asir. This impoverished mountainous region close to the modern borders of Yemen was conquered by the Al Saud family in the 1920s, and still retains many of its links with the Yemeni tribes. Like all decent people, Ibn Khaldun would have been horrified by the indiscriminate slaughter of 9/11: but it is doubtful that he would have been surprised.