

Conflicting Ideologies in the Middle East

Directions: Read and annotate the documents and answer the questions.

Don't Blame the Borders

There's plenty to criticize about the legacy of colonialism, but dwelling on colonial borders only increases the risk that our future interventions in the region will further undermine its already fragile states...

The idea that better borders, drawn with careful attention to the region's ethnic and religious diversity, would have spared the Middle East a century's worth of violence is especially provocative at a moment when Western powers weigh the merits of intervention in the region. [In reality,] no commission, no matter the good intentions, could have been expected to find the magic line that got all the Sunnis on one side, the Shiites on the other, and the oil right in the middle...

Our collective fixation with the Middle East's borders has, however, drawn attention away from the truly pernicious policy of divide-and-rule that the French and British used to sustain their power. In Syria, the French cultivated the previously disenfranchised Alawite minority as an ally against the Sunni majority. This involved recruiting and promoting Alawite soldiers in the territory's colonial army, thereby fostering their sense of identity as Alawites and bringing them into conflict with local residents of other ethnicities. The French pursued the same policy with Maronite Christians in Lebanon, just as the Belgians did with Tutsis in Rwanda and the British did with Muslims in India, Turks in Cyprus and innumerable other groups elsewhere.

The militarization of these ethnic and religious identities, rather than the failure of perfectly placed state borders to alleviate tension between them, explains much of violence in the Middle East today.

Source: Stop Blaming Colonial Borders for the Middle East's Problems, Nick Danforth, The Atlantic, 2013

1. Why did Britain and France ally themselves with and empower minority groups in their colonies? What lasting problems did this create?

The Ba'ath Party in Syria

The al-Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party is a political party founded upon the Arab political philosophy known as Ba'athism, which promotes secular Arab nationalism, Arab socialism, pan-Arabism, and militarism. Ba'athism developed in resistance to European colonialism in the Arab world, and understood colonialism as the root cause of problems in the Arab world. The Ba'athist movement gained prominence in Syria in the 1940s, championed by Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din Bitar. The Ba'ath Party was officially founded in Damascus in 1947. A 1963 Ba'athist coup established the Ba'ath Party as the only legal political party in Syria. Ba'athist General Hafez al-Assad seized power in a military coup in 1970.

In the early years of Hafez al-Assad's rule he declared that the Ba'ath party has unique status as "...the leader of state and society" which has served to virtually outlaw all other political parties. The slogan of the Ba'ath party is "unity, freedom and socialism" and represents well its early aspirations to shape an explicitly secular pan-Arab movement that is independent from the West. Diverse religious and ethnic communities

found the secular emphasis compelling, particularly after their experience of sociopolitical marginalization under the Ottoman Empire, and economically vulnerable groups were hopeful that the socialist platform would lead to a more equitable distribution of wealth, goods and services. Hafez al-Assad initially embraced dimensions of the socialist platform but following the fall of the Soviet Union and the subsequent diminishment of the credibility of Marxism, he adopted economic liberalization in a piecemeal fashion through the 1980s and 1990s. When Bashar al-Assad rose to power in 2000 he promoted full-scale neoliberal reform without any welfare balances which led to an increase in poverty, unemployment, and income disparity. Protestors of the regime are calling for both economic and political reform.

In the early years of his presidency, Hafez al-Assad successfully resisted pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood and other Sunnis to declare Syria an Islamic Republic. He did, however, include a constitutional requirement that the president be a Muslim. (Some Islamists challenged his legitimacy as a “heretical” Muslim but a fatwa declaring that Alawis (the minority sect followed by the Assad family) are Shi’a issued by influential Shi’a cleric Musa al-Sadr in 1973 settled that controversy)

Source: The Ba’ath Party in Syria, Harvard Divinity School Religious Literacy Project

2. What are the core values of Ba’athism?
3. How did the Ba’ath Party come to power in Syria?
4. In what way is Ba’athism a response to Western Imperialism?
5. Despite the secularism of the Ba’ath party, why do you think it might have been important for the Assad regime to show its commitment to Islam to stay in power?

The Roots of “Islamism”

So, when I use the term 'Islamism', I mean something very specific. For me, Islamism is the idea that Islam can be the basis of government, it's not the same as fundamentalism, although it's often related to it. And it's certainly not the same thing as Islam, which is a diverse and complicated and world-wide religious tradition. Now, Islamism is a potent political force, but it's a relatively recent one, and in many ways, it developed as a response to our old friend, Western-style nationalism...

[So what is a caliphate, and what do Islamists mean when they talk about bringing it back?] a caliphate is

an Islamic state modeled on the original Islamic community that was founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. Now Muhammad was not a caliph, because the word means 'successor', and they were the successors to Muhammad, but the first four political leaders who led the community and turned it into an empire have come to be known as the four rightly guided caliphs. And when groups like ISIS that are trying to re-establish this kind of government look back on it, they see it as being kind of the golden age. That this was the time of not just growth for the Islamic empire, but also of political stability and unity. Which, as it happens, it really wasn't. Like, even under the four rightly guided caliphs, the Islamic world was tremendously diverse and had huge disagreements. I mean, of the four rightly guided caliphs, three were assassinated. But anyway, the ideal version of that type of state is what ISIS and some other Islamists mean when they talk about reconstructing a caliphate

...[I]n at least one way, the caliphate can be thought of as enshrining republican, with a little r, values: Islamism emphasized the rule of law and that even the caliph is subject to it, since ultimate sovereignty belongs only to God, men, to quote Michael Cook, "are not entitled to exercise lordship over each other." And the much talked about Sharia law, coming from a source outside the political process, whether that's God or religious scholars, acts as a huge check on rulers becoming dictators. Right, like Iran's government has many problems, but its president is not a dictator.

But that same complete sovereignty of God over the people makes it difficult for Islamists to embrace democracy because it's based on the idea that the people themselves are sovereign. And the most radical Islamists like Ayman al-Zawahiri of al-Qaeda really do hate democracy. He called democracy "a new religion that deifies the masses," and the completely extreme and absolutely horrifying Boko Haram in Nigeria have exclaimed that they will "never accept any system of government except for one stipulated by Islam" and have stated that they will "keep on fighting against democracy, capitalism, socialism, and whatever." Yes, the "and whatever" is a quote. If you belong to a group that is fighting blank, blank, blank, and whatever, you need to leave that group.

So it's easy, and relatively common, for people in the West to say that Islam is inimical (incompatible) to political values like freedom and equality and democracy, and when we talk about certain groups of radical Islamists, that's true. But in the West, we also really, really struggle to see the other complexly and to understand the incredible diversity in response to the revelation of the Qur'an

In my opinion, the clash of civilization's models oversimplifies the world into this group and into that group and imagines that this group sees the world only that way and that groups sees the world only this way. In fact, it's complicated. For one thing, modern Islamism itself is a very recent phenomenon and in large part it's a reaction to western imperialism and nationalism and it doesn't always reflect the ideas of Islam or Islamic history. Humans have a storied tradition of calling upon certain facets of our history to inspire us toward what we already kinda want, and those seeking to recreate the caliphate want a more powerful and unified Arab world, if not an Islamic world, and so they look toward history for inspiration, taking parts and leaving many others. What really happened is that for most part European-style nationalism took hold in the Islamic world at the same time it rose in Europe, as the creation of Turkey shows quite clearly. But in trying to understand the allure of the caliphate, it's important to understand that Islam is not just a religion--from the beginning, it was a civilization. As historian Tamim Ansary wrote, "Islam might just as validly be considered as one item in a class whose other items include communism, parliamentary democracy, fascism and the like, because Islam is a social project like those others, an idea for how politics and the economy ought to be managed, a complete system of civil and criminal law." But it's also a very diverse system that's shaped by everything around it and everything inside of it like any civilization.

Source: John Green, "Islam and Politics," *Crash Course World History*

6. What does Islamism mean? What does it NOT mean?

7. What does the term “caliphate” refer to? Explain its origins.

8. “Radical Islamists like ISIS have an inaccurately idealized vision of the historical caliphate.” Support this statement with evidence from the text.

9. In what ways does Islamism actually align with western political values?

10. Why do you think radical Islamists oppose democracy? What does it represent to them

11. Saddam Hussein, the president and dictator of Iraq until 2003, was a Ba’athist. Osama bin Laden, the leader of Al-Qaeda, the group responsible for the 9/11 attacks, was a radical Islamist. Based on their ideologies, would it make sense for these two to be working together? Why or why not?