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Beyond the Undifferentiated Mass
Diversity in Islam for Absolute Beginners
October 11, 2001

Retrieved on 17th May 2021 from www.anarkismo.net
This text is from the 'Against War and Terrorism' pamphlet, the rest of the pamphlet is available on the web

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This welfare system though is dependant upon attending the mosque and being integrated into the whole islamist system of ideological formation. The system provides not only material aid, but also meeting places, places to hear news from co-religionists from afar and abroad. In a sense the islamist mission amongst the urban poor corresponds to the institutions that workers across the world have built for themselves (friendly societies, meeting houses, public speaking and international correspondance, etc.), except that in this instance these institutions and spaces are not the autonomous products of workers activity. Rather they are funded by the bosses and the rich and controlled by a power that mediates between the two, usually antagonist classes and the state. This state of affairs is not due to some innate failing of political consciousness amongst the urban proletariat, rather it is a product of the economic enviroment of mass unemployment and regime of accumulation that has not yet reached the stage of accumulating through relative surplus value, but remains founded on the absolute exploitation of those in work. The mass of the urban proletariat in many islamic countries does not have enough spare cash to set up their own autonomous spaces and aid projects, compared to the resources the islamists can access, especially for comparitively expensive services like modern health care.

But the creation of autonomous spaces in the islamic world is what is desparately needed by local workers and radicals. It is in this area that international solidarity can play the most important role in the future. Solidarity can help build up the spaces for the proletariat of North Africa and the Middle East to find a libertory path between the devil of rotten despotic regimes and the deep blue sea of militant islamic capitalism.

Roughly 1 in 5 of the world's population is muslim — that's over a billion people. Yet for all the talk about a global society with the telecommunication revolution bringing knowledge to the masses, what most westerners from christian backgrounds know about Islam can be written on the back of a small postage stamp. So here then is a crash course.

Fundamentalism?

Islam, like christianity is an expansionist religion rather than the traditionalist beliefs of a closed community. Conscious of itself as a new initiative, it seeks to preach to and convert pagan and unbeliever. However, whereas christianity found itself growing within a pre-existing state system (the Roman empire) and made concessions to a separate political power, Islam, starting as a means of filling a political vacuum, was the creative force of a new state.

As such the tension (and eventual division) between church and state that marks christianity does not occur within Islam. Hence the "fundamentalist" label is misleading. In the modern western tradition the tension between church and state has come to be expressed as a belief in a "novus ordo seclorum" where life is separated into two spheres — a secular public sphere of politics and a private sphere within which the individual can divide his or her time to the worship of god or mammon as they see fit.

The term "fundamentalism" originated in the US from a political movement of anti-progressive christians who wished to abolish the secular independance of the state from christian beliefs. It is misleading to apply the label of "fundamentalist" in this sense, to muslims as it is a formal part of their belief that no such division between matters social, political and religious should exist. That doesn't mean that there aren't differences as to how this formal

unity between religion and politics should be put into practice, but the label fundamentalist only obscures the issue.

Religious or Cultural conservatism?

An important feature of the spread of Islam is the way it has accomodated itself to the pre-existing cultures it has come into contact with. Where pre-existing cultural practices are not explicitly in opposition to codified islamic practices, they have been adopted into the newly islamised culture. With the passage of time many of these pre-islamic cultural practices have retrospectively been labelled as sanctioned by islam by conservative forces in society.

Consequently it is often the case that what is claimed to be islamic practice is more often the pre-existing cultural and social traditions of a given ethnic society. Many of the declaredly islamic traditions of the Pashtuns of Northern Pakistan and Afghanistan, for example, have much more to do with Pashtun cultural norms than islamic law.

A Unified Ideology?

Like any ideology that emphasises unity as a primary aim, Islam has in practice suffered any number of splits. There is no room for a full history in a piece like this but we must realise that what exists today is the result of long dialectic histories of orthodoxy, heresy, struggle, repression and reform.

Sunni

The Sunni branch of Islam is the dominant one to which 90% of muslims belong. Although the split between the two branches that would become Sunni and Shia was originally a matter of who should succeed Muhammed, they later evolved more substantial

commodity production in return, in order to pay for the imported materiel. But starting from a level of industrial development unable to compete with the west, the only industry ready for conversion to commodity production was agriculture. Combined with strong tariff barriers protecting western food crop production, the "balance of payments" cash crop has played the major role in throwing the peasantry off the land.

This mass of newly landless peasants, drifting towards the shanty towns surrounding the urban centres, looking for wage work, is the sleeping giant of politics in the Islamic world. Any rising by this new proletariat would be an earthquake strong enough to shake the foundations of all the established powers, mostly despotic as they are, in the region. It is amongst this multitude that the islamists have worked hard to establish a base.

They have done so by setting up a religious based welfare system. Most of the post colonial states are too concerned about paying their debts to western banks and the IMF to spend any of their meagre tax revenues on social welfare. Further the standard IMF "structural adjustment" terms prohibit any such social spending, even were any of the regimes farsighted enough to consider them. Islam has a redistributive "social democratic" taxation system built into its foundations as zakat, one of the five obligations of the religion. Islamists are able to lean on the benificiaries of trade with the west, or oil rights, for money. In return they promise to keep a lid on popular revolt, particularly any socialistic or class war elements.

The current regimes, mostly being founded by people who themselves dallied with socialistic or national liberation politics in their struggle to depose colonial power, are all to aware of the destabilising potential of such politics, not too mention the interests of the local capitalists. So they are happy for the islamists to hold ideological sway over the urban proletariat, so long as their anger is diverted to handy external scapegoats, such as Israel or America.

(for much as the current Al Qa'eda demands include the dropping of sanctions against Iraq, we must remember that bin Laden was warning against Hussain's aggressive intentions from the late 80s onwards). Bin Laden wishes to see an independantly powerful islamic Middle East, and if that requires technological and economic development then he is all for it.

Beyond Al Qa'eda and Osama bin Laden's clothing of a industrialising developmental agenda in pre-modern clothing, we need to look at the social recruiting base and background of the footsoldiers of today's militant movements. In the time of Ibn Saud they were desert nomads from an essentially pre-capitalist existence. No more.

Material Foundations

Most of the islamic societies across North Africa and the Middle East were subjected to European colonialism or Ottoman rule at some stage from the 19th to the 20th centuries. Socially these regions, although containing some of histories great urban centres of civilisation, remained primarily subsistence economies for the majority of the inhabitants, whether settled farmers or nomadic herders. While colonial rule started the process of forcing the population off the land, this social transformation really got into gear under the rule of the post-colonial regimes after WW1 and, even more so after WW2.

The new post colonial regimes modelled themselves on their erstwhile colonizers, introducing a secular state and institutions, and often promoting western dress and culture. But many of the trappings of the new states, whether transport infrastructure, motor cars, telephones, etc. had to be bought from overseas. In the gulf states this could all be paid for by oil wealth without any need for the development of local industry or production. In the oil-less states the balance of payments pressure produced a need to go into

political and philosophical differences. As Muhammed failed to produce a son by any of his many marriages, the muslim community was left with no clear successor after his death.

The main body decided that the leadership (the Caliphate) should pass to whoever from within Muhammed's clan the muslim establishment best felt represented continuity. The Shias, in contrast, supported the claim of Ali, the husband of the prophet's favourite daughter. They insisted that the legitimacy of the Caliphate came only from god, not the religious establishment.

In time as those who had known the prophet and remembered his sayings and acts began to die off, this oral tradition of guidance supplementary to the Koran (the sunnah) was written down into several books, six of which became recognised as authoritative sources of guidance — the Hadith. For Sunnism then, society's laws must be determined through reference to the Koran and the Sunnah. For Shi'ites, however, the true path can only be found through the divinely appointed intermediaries — the true Caliphs or Imams.

Kharawaj — too radical by far

As well as Sunni and Shia there was originally a third force, since eradicated, whose negative influence has profoundly shaped Sunni political philosophy. These were the Kharawaji, radicals who held that any sufficiently worthy muslim could hold the position of Imam, whether a descendant of Muhammed or a member of his Quraysh tribe or not. They also held that people were responsible for the good or evil of their acts personally, and that anyone who did evil was no longer a muslim, regardless of what they or anybody else decreed. The effects of this political philosophy was to challenge all authority and encourage all, especially the poor and dispossessed, to see the struggle against injustice as being divinely sanctioned.

Since the time of the Kharawaj, the history of the rise and fall of various dynasties of Caliphs and different empires has lead the Sunni tradition to view orthodoxy as something that needs to be tempered with a pragmatism of tolerating differences between muslims and not being over hasty in determining who, of the people who identify as muslims, is or is not a muslim. This catholicity along with an emphasis on the established majority opinion as the source of religious authority has helped to mitigate some of the destabilising effects of radicalism while allowing economic prosperity to be parallelled by a flowering of cultural, scientific and philosophical diversity and enquiry. However, even within the Sunni mainstream, revivalist and puritan sects have arisen both in the past and in more modern times.

Sufi — It's not my Jihad if I can't dance to it

As well as the various sects of Sunnis and Shias as Islam developed, some came to be more interested in the personal spiritual aspect of religion. The struggle to achieve some kind of direct personal union with the divine. This tradition shows the influence of contacts with eastern traditions of the search for enlightenment whether Hindu, Buddhist or Daoist. The Sufi traditions, often seen as borderline heretical by the centres of authoritarian Islamic power, have historically prospered in remote and mountainous regions. Especially towards the east where similar mystical traditions have been strong.

The introspective struggle of the Sufis is, according to them, a form of Jihad (devout struggle), one against the false, earthly self — the Nafs. These strivings have produced some of Islam's most loved poetry, but is also most famously associated with ascetic disciplines such as physical exertions including music and wild dancing to induce visions and spiritual breakthroughs — something which has

It follows then, that despite the seeming radicalism of the demand to stop western powers propping up corrupt despotic regimes in the muslim world (or more particularly, the arab world, because for all its islamic internationalism this particular network remains very much in the tradition of arab-centric sunni thought), this network has no agenda for the destruction of capitalism and the extraction of profit. Indeed of all the demands number 4 is most suspect. Osama bin Laden was friendly with his family's traditional patrons, the Saudi royal family, right up until they invited the US forces into Saudi during the Gulf war.

These demands are framed as a religious struggle to "free the holy places of islam", pretty much the same slogan that Ibn Saud used to rally the original Wahhabi Ikhwan fighters for the conquest of Arabia. However, much as bin Laden would no doubt like to refer back to such historical precedents, we must not let the surface similarities blind us to the significant differences. The original Ikhwan, coming from a world which had, not only religiously but technologically remained almost unchanged since the time of Muhammed, were fighting against modern technology and industry. Ibn Saud's allowing telephones into the country was one of the grievances for their revolt.

Bin Laden, by contrast has his own satellite phones, a modern education in civil engineering and no aversion to setting up modern factories, construction businesses or making millions on the international financial markets. Of course these modern means are all justified by the ends of jihad. But whichever way you look at it, bin Laden is a member of the local industrialist bourgeoisie chafeing at the bit to build up commodity production in the Middle East, not knock it down.

For all the pre-modern language of his movement, the content is for more technological and industrial development, not less. The military airbases and command posts that the US troops moved into in 1990 were built by bin Laden for the Saudis to use to build an independant military force against the threat of Saddam's Iraq

In this way the US and Britain helped build up a veritable International Brigade of Islamist fighters, funded by the proceeds of Gulf oil, sheltered and trained by the Pakistani intelligence services of General Zia ul Haq's regime and Western special forces. It was this network that brought together Wahhabis and Deobandis to create an international Jihadi movement of which Al Qaeda and its brother organisations like Egyptian Jihad (formed from the Muslim Brotherhood mentioned above). So what motivates this network?

The Al Qa'eda Programme

Al Qa'eda's activities may be illegal, immoral and indefensible but they are neither motiveless nor mindless. They have a programme and this is it:

The demands are:

1. Troops Out Now — that is, US troops out of Saudi Arabia
2. End Israeli oppression of Palestinians
3. End sanctions against Iraq
4. End western support for corrupt regimes in muslim/arab countries — control of oil wealth

(5. Anti-Communism and Statism)

The fifth demand is not stated but it is the foundation of the campaign against the Russians in Afghanistan that gave the movement its birth.

The defence of private property is part of the sayings of the Prophet and the subsequent Caliphs. Anti-communism is a matter of doctrine for orthodox islamists. Secondly, the creation of a state to enforce islamic law — Sharia — is the defining demand of modern islamism and has, as we saw at the very beginning, always been central to islam as a whole.

always made them unpopular with those who believe that music, dancing and celebration in general is the work of the devil.

Shia or Shi'ite

The original underdogs, the Shi'ites today make up only 10% of the muslim world, they are a minority in nearly all muslim countries, except for Iran, where they are the state religion. They have at times been linked to a desire by non-arab muslims (e.g. Persians) to reject the tendencies for arab domination over islam that are sometimes expressed in the established sunni tradition with its power centres in arab lands. The Shia originated from a split amongst Muhammed's followers after his death with no male heir. The "traditionalist" Sunnis decided to appoint a leader (the Caliph). The "legitimist" Shias thought that Ali, the husband of Muhammed's favorite daughter, was the legitimate heir and Muhammed's privileged role, not only as earthly leader but spiritual too (the Imamate) was passed down this line. They are divided into:

Ithna 'Ashariyah (Twelvers) or Imamis

Who believe that there were twelve legitimate Imams after Muhammed and son-in-law Ali. They believe the twelth Imam disappeared in 873 and is thought to be alive and hiding and will not reappear until judgement day. The Imamis became the dominant Shi'ite form in the east, particularly in Persia where it became the official state religion in the 16th century. The Iranian revolution of 1979 was taken over by the Shia clergy and their followers who believed in the Imamate of Khomeini. The fact that Shi'ism is an oppressed minority in virtually all other states in the muslim world helped to isolate the Iranian Islamic Republic and limit their ability to export their 'revolution'.

Isma'ilite

After the sixth Imam there was a dispute over whether the legitimate successor was his elder son Isma'il or his younger son Musa al-Kazim. The majority supporting the young son went on to be the mainstream leading to the Twelvers. Of those who stuck with Isma'il they split into those who decided he was the last Imam (the Sab'iyah or Seveners) and those who believed the Imamate carried on in that line. Of these latter, various splits later left groups which still follow people today they consider to be the legitimate successor to Muhammed — the Aga Khan is one such (via, obscurely, Hassan e Sabah of Assasin fame). Other schisms led groups out of Islam proper, such as the Druze (of Lebanon fame) and the Baha'i.

We now move on to the two modern sects who have most influence on the story we are today interested in Afghanistan and related networks throughout the world.

Wahhabi — the only good innovator is a dead one

The peninsula of Arabia has since before Muhammed's time held two contrasting societies together. On the Red Sea coast trade routes from the south from Africa carrying gold, ivory, slaves and valuable crops meet routes from the east carrying spices and silks. Rich merchant settlements in Mecca and Medina have profited from the riches brought by these trade routes, travellers and pilgrims to holy relics such as the mysterious black rock of the Kaaba in Mecca. In the arabian interior harsh deserts and barren uplands have dictated a meagre semi-nomadic herding existence to the tribal peoples that inhabit the region.

A nomadic herding economy, with its main animal wealth being so easily carried off, lends itself to continual strife between tribes based around livestock rustling and struggles over access

have been constantly in struggle both against the Shi'ite minority in Pakistan and the other main Sunni community the Brelvis.

These latter are more influenced by Sufi traditions that have long persisted in the harsh mountains of the Hindu Kush that dominate Kashmir and Afghanistan as well as in the mountainous Caucasus regions including Chechnya. Although the Sufi muslims of Chechnya and Afghanistan have certainly shown that the "inner" jihad for enlightenment (Jihad bin Nafs) is no contradiction to the external jihad of the AK47, in Pakistan the "Jihadis" that have fought the Indians in Kashmir and the Russians in Afghanistan, are almost exclusively drawn from the Deobandis. It was their religious schools (madrassas) set up on the frontier that took in the orphans of the Afghan war, that no one else would feed, and turned them into Taliban soldiers. Since the end of the war in 1989 hostility between Deobandis and Brelvis and both against Shi'ites, has resulted in a rising number of bomb and riot attacks on rival mosques and assasinations in Pakistan.

The Afghan War 1979 — 1989

The current situation is above all the result of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent US proxy war fought there. This was fought both through Afghan factions and an international network of ideologically committed islamists ready to fight the Soviet forces in the name of Islam. The US State Department, wary of Iran's Shi'ite Islamic revolution, were more than happy to find their Saudi allies were able to mobilise, through Wahhabi networks, militant islamists who were as hostile to Iran as they were to the Russians. This would allow them, to fund the creation of a fighting force that would be strong enough to take on the Russians, yet were not in any danger of spreading the Iranian model, especially given the seeming loyalty many of the young radicals showed to the royal families of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.

Deobandis — back to basics

The Taleban, although a modern puritan Sunni sect, are not Wahhabis. They are part of a separate school that has its origin in the 19th century in India under British Imperial rule. After the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, which the British blamed primarily on muslims, muslims found themselves excluded from all institutions, including schools, of imperial society. Being excluded from official schooling meant exclusion from any role in the civil service which ran the country. In other ways too the mutiny forced a rethink on Indian muslim society.

In many ways the rising had been the last attempt to go back to the pre-colonial social order of India under the Mughal empire. The traditional leaders and ruling class had demonstrated incompetence or even refused to back the soldier-led mutiny at all. If Indian society was to escape from British clutches it would have to find a new way forward, rather than simply looking back.

Amongst muslims two main directions emerged. The first, intent on adopting some of the western methods, created new secularised schools where a similar education to the civil service schools could be provided to young muslims, so they would eventually be able to re-enter the administration of the country. The second approach was to create a revivalist islamic education that would return the power of their faith to young muslims and make them strong to reject the corrupting force of westernisation in preparation for throwing out the British oppressor. This second school took its name from the Indian town of Deoband where its leading religious juridical council (ulemma) was based.

Like the Wahhabis, the Deobandi's faith is a severe puritan one which bans music, dancing, worship of saints or holy relics and sees an external, physical Jihad (Jihad bis Saif) as a central pillar of the faith. They took part in the struggle for independance from the British and for the partition of Indian to create Pakistan. The Deobandis are one of the main Sunni communities in Pakistan and

to grazing land and limited watering holes. This existence has formed a population where impoverishment sits together with a high degree of mobility and martial experience. Throughout history those people who have been able to unite the warring tribes against an external enemy have been able to mobilise a highly effective military force for conquest of the outside world. This was Muhammed's achievement, in getting the merchants of the trading cities of Mecca and Medina to pay taxes (zakat) to buy off the raiding tribes and lead them in a campaign of conquest accross the middle east and North Africa. Although a great and wealthy empire eventually resulted, by the beginning of the 20th century conditions in the Arabian interior remained pretty much as impoverished and undevelopped as they had in Muhammed's time.

On January 15 1902 a tribesman from the interior in his twenties, accompanied by 15 hand-picked men, scaled the walls of the city of Riyadh in the dead of night. Taking the garrison of the regional governor of the Ottoman empire completely by surprise, this daring band of Bedouin warriors, overwhelmed the garrison and their leader, who the world would come to know simply as Ibn Saud, was proclaimed ruler by the townsfolk. Ibn Saud went on to unite the tribal leaders of the interior and lead them in the conquest of the rich cities and holy centres of Medina and Mecca. He did so not only in the name of the House of Saud, but in the name of a new puritan brand of Sunni Islam — Wahhabism.

Wahhabism is named after the religious reformer Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab who teamed up with the founder of the house of Saud for a plan of conquest back in the 18th century. This double act had managed to cause the ruling Ottoman empire serious grief beforehand and had been almost wiped out several times previously. Now with Ibn Saud the old plan would finally be put into action again. By 1911 Saud was putting into plan an ambitious scheme to forge the disparate and eternally warring Bedouin tribes of the interior into a united and ideologically committed force.

With the tribesmen having no common national identity beyond their tribe, the zeal of Wahhabism would act as the unifying glue that held the new state together in place of nationalism. In 1912 he founded the first Ikhwan (Brethren) colony with Bedouin from all tribes in new model settlements where they would undergo education and indoctrination by Wahhabi clerics along with military training. In time this would forge an unstoppable new military force that would sweep accross Arabia and conquer the holy cities. By 1921 this process was complete. However Saud now faced the usual problem of those who mobilise new radical forces to conquer political power — how to demobilise them before they started to destroy the very bases of political power itself.

The problems had already become apparent when the Ikhwan had taken Mecca. On hearing some unfortunate who had decided a welcoming blast on a trumpet should great the conquerors, the Wahhabis, for whom music is anti-islamic, rioted and mass destruction and slaughter ensued. Convinced that any innovation since Muhammed's time was anathema, they tore down minarets (developed, like much mosque architecture since Muhammed's time) and, believing that any worship of relics, saints, or tombs of holy men was an affront to the doctrine that only god can be worshipped, they went round smashing up many such pilgrimmage sites, much to the distress of those who made their living of the pilgrims that came to visit them. The wahhabi religious police (mutawa) led a reign of terror in the cities, crashing into people's homes and, if so much as sniffing the scent of tobacco, would thrash the unfortunates senseless.

More importantly for Ibn Saud, the Ikhwan wanted to continue military expansion, attacking the areas to the north occupied by the British and French since the end of WW1 and the collapse of the Ottoman empire. Saud wanted to avoid war with the British, both to keep what he had gained and also because he was rapidly running out of money for the payments to the tribal chiefs he needed to keep them in his grand coalition. The possibility of selling an

exploration concession to western explorers interested in looking for oil in Saudi Arabia was too interesting to pass up.

By 1927 the Ikhwan were denouncing Ibn Saud for selling out the cause and eventually rose in rebellion against him. The ensuing struggle was bloody, one ultra-zealous band nearly managing to destroy the tomb of the Prophet himself, but the radicals were eventually put down. Their leaders fled to Kuwait, only to be handed back over to Saud by the eager to please British. Thus ended the first phase of the Wahhabi's jihad.

Although the Ikhwan's military campaign was halted, the Wahhabis continued to export their religious revolution. The most successful first stop was across the Red Sea in Egypt, where they supported the formation of Hassan al Banna's Muslim Brotherhood (Al-Ikhwan Al-Muslimun). The Brotherhood was formed to combat Egypt's secular constitution of 1923. After the defeat of Egypt and other Arabs trying to stop the creation of Israel in 1948, they rose against the government and were part of the revolution that brought the secular pan-arab nationalist Nasser to power. Nasser's programme was for an anti-imperialist struggle against the western powers (he nationalised the Suez Canal in 1956) combined with 'socialist' industrial development and modernisation.

This latter part was heatedly opposed by the Brotherhood and the ensuing failed assasination attempt brought about their suppression by Nasser and the undying opposition between militant Islamism and pan-arab nationalism ever since. Nasser's "socialist" rhetoric and friendliness towards the Soviet union, panicked the western powers, particularly the US who were holding the ring for western imperialism since the British bowed out of the region after the 1956 Suez fiasco. The US involvement with the militant Islamists as a bulwark against Soviet influence in the Middle East dates from this period.