

[COVER STORY]

A World Without ISLAM

What if Islam had never existed? To some, it's a comforting thought: No clash of civilizations, no holy wars, no terrorists. Would Christianity have taken over the world? Would the Middle East be a peaceful beacon of democracy? Would 9/11 have happened? In fact, remove Islam from the path of history, and the world ends up exactly where it is today. | By Graham E. Fuller

Imagine, if you will, a world without Islam—admittedly an almost inconceivable state of affairs given its charged centrality in our daily news headlines. Islam seems to lie behind a broad range of international disorders: suicide attacks, car bombings, military occupations, resistance struggles, riots, *fatwas*, jihads, guerrilla warfare, threatening videos, and 9/11 itself. Why are these things taking place? “Islam” seems to offer an instant and uncomplicated analytical touchstone, enabling us to make sense of today’s convulsive world. Indeed, for some neoconservatives, “Islamofascism” is now our sworn foe in a looming “World War III.”

But indulge me for a moment. What if there were no such thing as Islam? What if there had never been a Prophet Mohammed, no saga of the spread of Islam across vast parts of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa?

Given our intense current focus on terrorism, war, and rampant anti-Americanism—some of the

most emotional international issues of the day—it’s vital to understand the true sources of these crises. Is Islam, in fact, the source of the problem, or does it tend to lie with other less obvious and deeper factors? For the sake of argument, in an act of historical imagination, picture a Middle East in which Islam had never appeared. Would we then be spared many of the current challenges before us? Would the Middle East be more peaceful? How different might the character of East-West relations be? Without Islam, surely the international order would present a very different picture than it does today. Or would it?

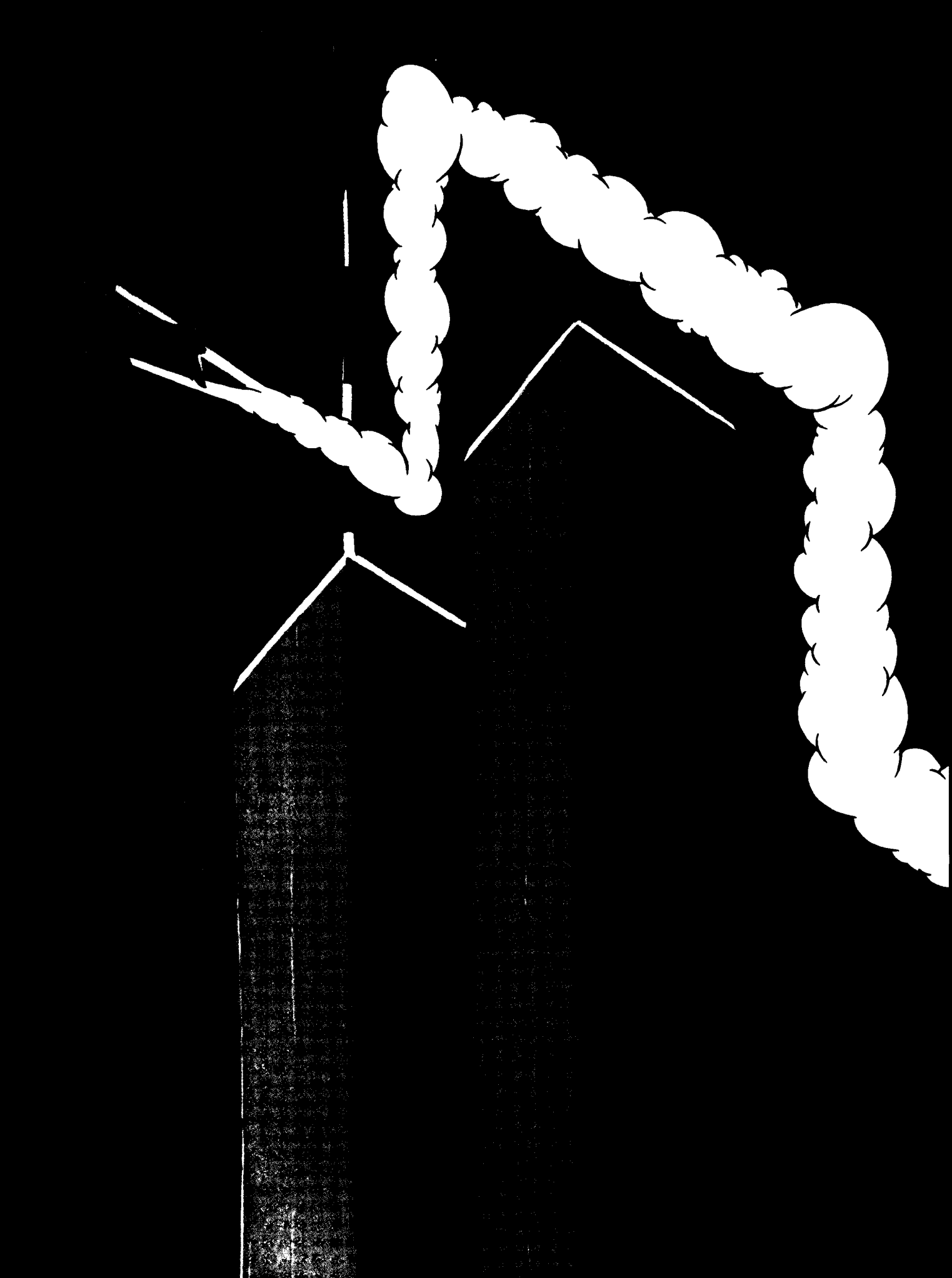
IF NOT ISLAM, THEN WHAT?

From the earliest days of a broader Middle East, Islam has seemingly shaped the cultural norms and even political preferences of its followers. How can we then separate Islam from the Middle East? As it turns out, it’s not so hard to imagine.

Let’s start with ethnicity. Without Islam, the face of the region still remains complex and conflicted. The dominant ethnic groups of the Middle East—Arabs, Persians, Turks, Kurds, Jews, even Berbers and Pashtuns—would still dominate politics. Take the Persians: Long before Islam, successive great

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Persian empires pushed to the doors of Athens and were the perpetual rivals of whoever inhabited Anatolia. Contesting Semitic peoples, too, fought the Persians across the Fertile Crescent and into Iraq. And then there are the powerful forces of diverse Arab tribes and traders expanding and migrating into other Semitic areas of the Middle East before Islam. Mongols would still have overrun and destroyed the civilizations of Central Asia and much of the Middle East in the 13th century. Turks still would have conquered Anatolia, the Balkans up to Vienna, and most of the Middle East. These struggles—over power, territory, influence, and trade—existed long before Islam arrived.

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Still, it's too arbitrary to exclude religion entirely from the equation. If, in fact, Islam had never emerged, most of the Middle East would have remained predominantly Christian, in its various sects, just as it had been at the dawn of Islam. Apart from some Zoroastrians and small numbers of Jews, no other major religions were present.

But would harmony with the West really have reigned if the whole Middle East had remained Christian? That is a far reach. We would have to assume that a restless and expansive medieval European world would not have projected its power and hegemony into the neighboring East in search of economic and geopolitical footholds. After all, what were the Crusades if not a Western adventure driven primarily by political, social, and economic needs? The banner of Christianity was little more than a potent symbol, a rallying cry to bless the more secular urges of powerful Europeans. In fact, the particular religion of the natives never figured highly in the West's imperial push across the globe. Europe may have spoken upliftingly about bringing "Christian values to the natives," but the patent goal was to establish colonial outposts as sources of wealth for the metropole and bases for Western power projection.

And so it's unlikely that Christian inhabitants of the Middle East would have welcomed the stream of European fleets and their merchants backed by Western guns. Imperialism would have prospered in the region's complex ethnic mosaic—the raw materials for the old game of divide and rule. And Europeans still would have installed the same pliable local rulers to accommodate their needs.

Move the clock forward to the age of oil in the Middle East. Would Middle Eastern states, even if Christian, have welcomed the establishment of European protectorates over their region? Hardly. The West still would have built and controlled the same choke points, such as the Suez Canal. It wasn't Islam

that made Middle Eastern states powerfully resist the colonial project, with its drastic redrawing of borders in accordance with European geopolitical preferences. Nor would Middle Eastern Christians have welcomed imperial Western oil companies, backed by their European viceregents, diplomats, intelligence agents, and armies, any more than Muslims did. Look at the long history of Latin American

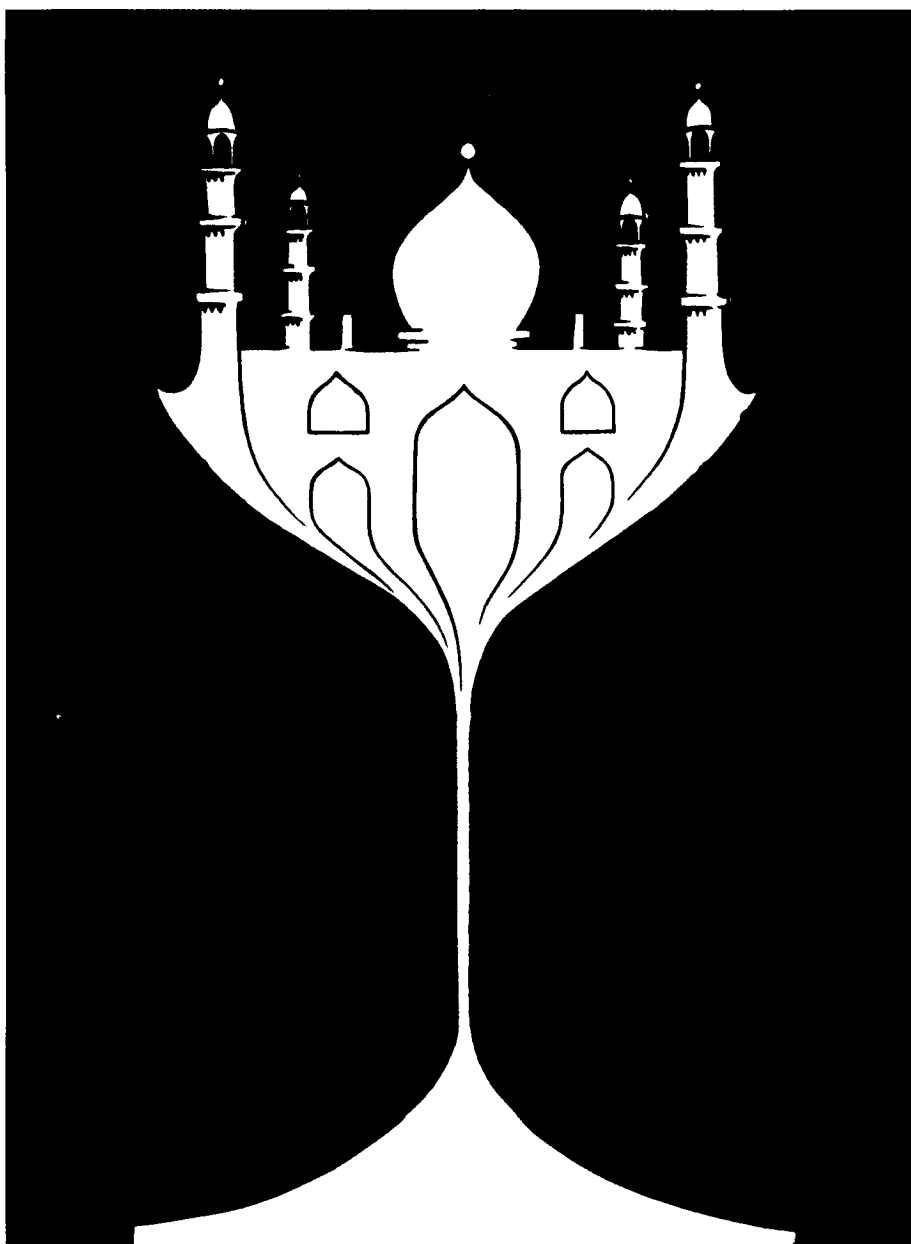
reactions to American domination of their oil, economics, and politics. The Middle East would have been equally keen to create nationalist anticolonial movements to wrest control over their own soil, markets, sovereignty, and destiny from foreign grips—just like anticolonial struggles in Hindu India, Confucian China, Buddhist Vietnam, and a Christian and animist Africa.

And surely the French would have just as readily expanded into a Christian Algeria to seize its rich farmlands and establish a colony. The Italians, too, never let Ethiopia's Christianity stop them from turning that country into a harshly administered colony. In short, there is no reason to believe that a Middle Eastern reaction to the European colonial ordeal would have differed significantly from the way it actually reacted under Islam.

But maybe the Middle East would have been more democratic without Islam? The history of

Ask the Author

Send questions for Graham Fuller to letters@ForeignPolicy.com by January 25, and we will post his answers on January 31 at ForeignPolicy.com/extras/fuller.



firmly rooted in Western Christian lands and culture. Jews would therefore have still sought a homeland outside Europe; the Zionist movement would still have emerged and sought a base in Palestine. And the new Jewish state would still have dislodged the same 750,000 Arab natives of Palestine from their lands even if they had been Christian—and indeed some of them were. Would not these Arab Palestinians have fought to protect or regain their land? The Israeli-Palestinian problem remains at heart a national, ethnic, and territorial conflict, only recently bolstered by religious slogans. And let's not forget that Arab Christians played a major role in the early emergence of the whole Arab nationalist movement in the Middle East; indeed, the ideological founder of the first pan-Arab Ba'th party, Michel Aflaq, was a Sorbonne-educated Syrian Christian.

dictatorship in Europe itself is not reassuring here. Spain and Portugal ended harsh dictatorships only in the mid-1970s. Greece only emerged from church-linked dictatorship a few decades ago. Christian Russia is still not out of the woods. Until quite recently, Latin America was riddled with dictators, who often reigned with U.S. blessing and in partnership with the Catholic Church. Most Christian African nations have not fared much better. Why would a Christian Middle East have looked any different?

And then there is Palestine. It was, of course, Christians who shamelessly persecuted Jews for more than a millennium, culminating in the Holocaust. These horrific examples of anti-Semitism were

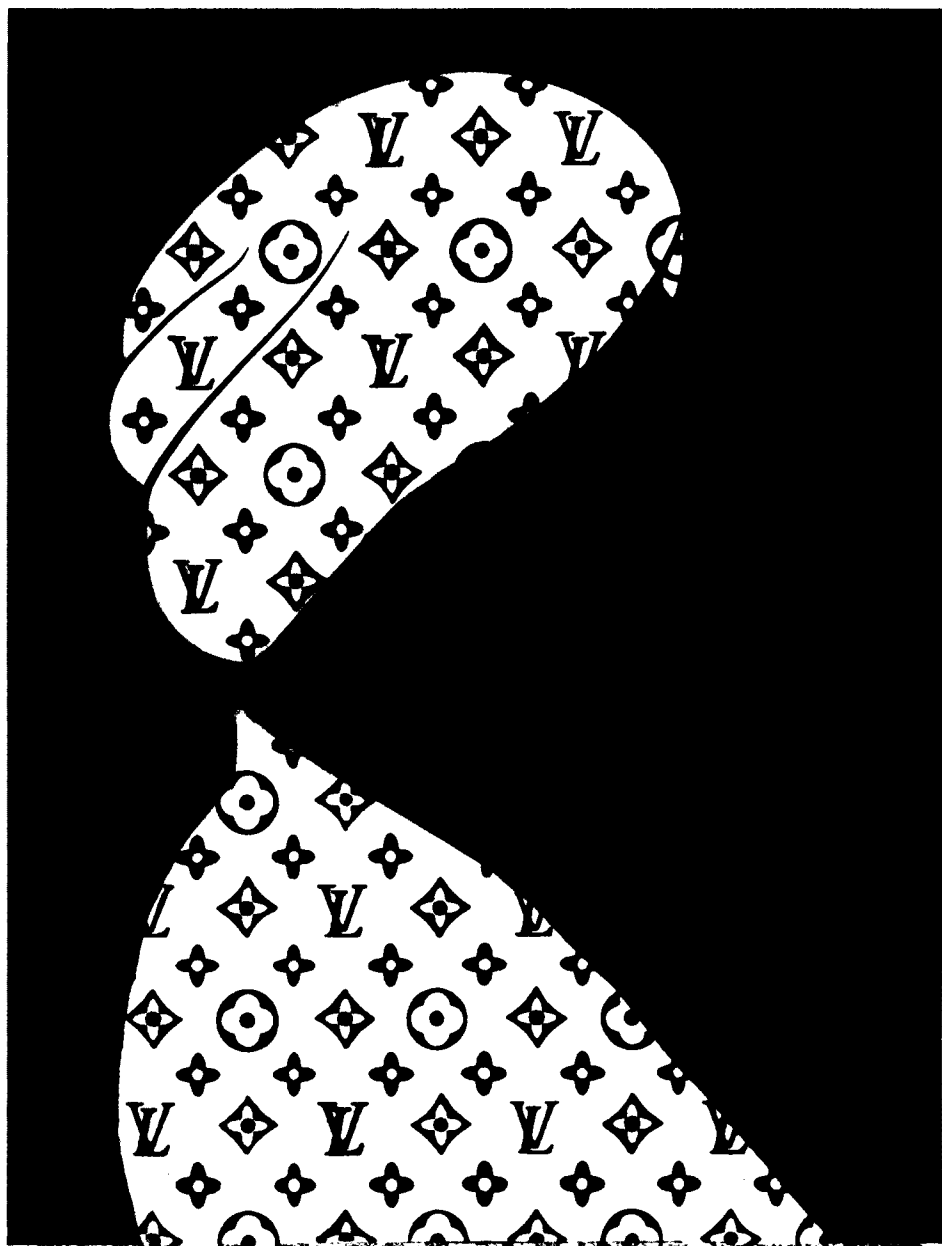
But surely Christians in the Middle East would have at least been religiously predisposed toward the West. Couldn't we have avoided all that religious strife? In fact, the Christian world itself was torn by heresies from the early centuries of Christian power, heresies that became the very vehicle of political opposition to Roman or Byzantine power. Far from uniting under religion, the West's religious wars invariably veiled deeper ethnic, strategic, political, economic, and cultural struggles for dominance.

Even the very references to a "Christian Middle East" conceal an ugly animosity. Without Islam, the peoples of the Middle East would have remained as they were at the birth of Islam—mostly adherents of Eastern Orthodox Christianity. But it's easy to for-

get that one of history's most enduring, virulent, and bitter religious controversies was that between the Catholic Church in Rome and Eastern Orthodox Christianity in Constantinople—a rancor that persists still today. Eastern Orthodox Christians never forgot or forgave the sacking of Christian Constantinople by Western Crusaders in 1204. Nearly 800 years later, in 1999, Pope John Paul II sought to take a few small steps to heal the breach in the first visit of a Catholic pope to the Orthodox world in a thousand years. It was a start, but friction between East and West in a Christian Middle East would have remained much as it is today. Take Greece, for example: The Orthodox cause has been a powerful driver behind nationalism and anti-Western feeling there, and anti-Western pas-

sions in Greek politics as little as a decade ago echoed the same suspicions and virulent views of the West that we hear from many Islamist leaders today.

The culture of the Orthodox Church differs sharply from the Western post-Enlightenment ethos, which emphasizes secularism, capitalism, and the primacy of the individual. It still maintains residual fears about the West that parallel in many ways current Muslim insecurities: fears of Western missionary proselytism, a tendency to perceive religion as a key vehicle for the protection and preservation of their own communities and culture, and a suspicion of the “corrupted” and imperial character of the West. Indeed, in an Orthodox Christian Middle East, Moscow would enjoy special influence, even today,



as the last major center of Eastern Orthodoxy. The Orthodox world would have remained a key geopolitical arena of East-West rivalry in the Cold War. Samuel Huntington, after all, included the Orthodox Christian world among several civilizations embroiled in a cultural clash with the West.

Today, the U.S. occupation of Iraq would be no more welcome to Iraqis if they were Christian. The United States did not overthrow Saddam Hussein, an intensely nationalist and secular leader, because he was Muslim. Other Arab peoples would still have supported the Iraqi Arabs in their trauma of occupation. Nowhere do people welcome foreign occupation and the killing of their citizens at the hands of foreign troops. Indeed, groups threatened

by such outside forces invariably cast about for appropriate ideologies to justify and glorify their resistance struggle. Religion is one such ideology.

This, then, is the portrait of a putative “world without Islam.” It is a Middle East dominated by Eastern Orthodox Christianity—a church historically and psychologically suspicious of, even hostile to, the West. Still riven by major ethnic and even sectarian differences, it possesses a fierce sense of historical consciousness and grievance against the West. It has been invaded repeatedly by Western imperialist armies; its resources commandeered; borders redrawn by Western fiat in conformity with its various interests; and regimes established that are compliant with Western dictates. Palestine would still burn. Iran would still be intensely nationalistic. We would still see Palestinians resist Jews, Chechens resist Russians, Iranians resist the British and Americans, Kashmiris resist Indians, Tamils resist the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, and Uighurs and Tibetans resist the Chinese. The Middle East would still have a glorious historical model—the great Byzantine Empire of more than 2,000 years’ standing—with which to identify as a cultural and religious symbol. It would, in many respects, perpetuate an East-West divide.

It is not an entirely peaceful and comforting picture.

UNDER THE PROPHET’S BANNER

It is, of course, absurd to argue that the existence of Islam has had no independent impact on the Middle East or East-West relations. Islam has been a unifying force of a high order across a wide region. As a global universal faith, it has created a broad civilization that shares many common principles of philosophy, the arts, and society; a vision of the moral life; a sense of justice, jurisprudence, and good governance—all in a deeply rooted high culture. As a cultural and moral force, Islam has helped bridge ethnic differences among diverse Muslim peoples, encouraging them to feel part of a broader Muslim civilizational project. That alone furnishes it with great weight. Islam affected political geography as well: If there had been no Islam, the Muslim countries of South Asia and Southeast Asia today—particularly Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia—would be rooted instead in the Hindu world.

Islamic civilization provided a common ideal to which all Muslims could appeal in the name of resistance against Western encroachment. Even if that appeal failed to stem the Western imperial tide, it created a cultural memory of a commonly shared fate that did not go away. Europeans were able to divide and conquer numerous African, Asian, and Latin American peoples who then fell singly before Western power. A united, transna-

Is it so hard to imagine that Arabs would be so angry at imperialism’s constant invasions, that they would resort to terrorism? The question might be instead, why didn’t it happen sooner?

tional resistance among those peoples was hard to achieve in the absence of any common ethnic or cultural symbol of resistance.

In a world without Islam, Western imperialism would have found the task of dividing, conquering, and dominating the Middle East and Asia much easier. There would not have remained a shared cultural memory of humiliation and defeat across a vast area. That is a key reason why the United States now finds itself breaking its teeth in the Muslim world. Today, global intercommunications and shared satellite images have created a strong self-consciousness among Muslims and a sense of a broader Western imperial siege against a common Islamic culture. This siege is not about modernity; it is about the unceasing Western quest for domination of the strategic space, resources, and even culture of the Muslim world—the drive to create a “pro-American” Middle East. Unfortunately, the United States naively assumes that Islam is all that stands between it and the prize.

But what of terrorism—the most urgent issue the West most immediately associates with Islam today? In the bluntest of terms, would there have been a 9/11 without Islam? If the grievances of the Middle East, rooted in years of political and emotional anger at U.S. policies and actions, had been wrapped up in a different banner, would things have been vastly different? Again, it’s important to remember how easily religion can be invoked even when other long-standing grievances

are to blame. Sept. 11, 2001, was not the beginning of history. To the al Qaeda hijackers, Islam functioned as a magnifying glass in the sun, collecting these widespread shared common grievances and focusing them into an intense ray, a moment of clarity of action against the foreign invader.

In the West's focus on terrorism in the name of Islam, memories are short. Jewish guerrillas used

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terrorism against the British in Palestine. Sri Lankan Hindu Tamil "Tigers" invented the art of the suicide vest and for more than a decade led the world in the use of suicide bombings—including the assassination of Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. Greek terrorists carried out assassination operations against U.S. officials in Athens. Organized Sikh terrorism killed Indira Gandhi, spread havoc in India, established an overseas base in Canada, and brought down an Air India flight over the Atlantic. Macedonian terrorists were widely feared all across the Balkans on the eve of World War I. Dozens of major assassinations in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were carried out by European and American "anarchists," sowing collective fear. The Irish Republican Army employed brutally effective terrorism against the British for decades, as did communist guerrillas and terrorists in Vietnam against Americans, communist Malaysians against British soldiers in the 1950s, Mau Mau terrorists against British officers in Kenya—the list goes on. It doesn't take a Muslim to commit terrorism.

Even the recent history of terrorist activity doesn't look much different. According to Europol, 498 terrorist attacks took place in the European Union in 2006. Of these, 424 were perpetrated by separatist groups, 55 by left-wing extremists, and 18 by various other terrorists. Only 1 was carried out by Islamists. To be sure, there were a number of foiled attempts in a highly surveilled Muslim community. But these figures reveal the broad ideological range of potential terrorists in the world.

Is it so hard to imagine then, Arabs—Christian or Muslim—angered at Israel or imperialism's constant invasions, overthrows, and interventions, employing similar acts of terrorism and guerrilla warfare? The question might be instead, why didn't it happen sooner? As radical groups articulate grievances in our globalized age, why should we not expect them to carry their struggle into the heart of the West?

If Islam hates modernity, why did it wait until 9/11 to launch its assault? And why did key Islamic thinkers in the early 20th century speak of the need to embrace modernity even while protecting Islamic culture? Osama bin Laden's cause in his early days was not modernity at all—he talked of Palestine, American boots on the ground in Saudi Arabia, Saudi

rulers under U.S. control, and modern "Crusaders." It is striking that it was not until as late as 2001 that we saw the first major boiling over of Muslim anger onto U.S. soil itself, in reaction to historical as well as accumulated recent events and U.S. policies. If not 9/11, some similar event like it was destined to come.

And even if Islam as a vehicle of resistance had never existed, Marxism did. It is an ideology that has spawned countless terrorist, guerrilla, and national liberation movements. It has informed the Basque ETA, the FARC in Colombia, the Shining Path in Peru, and the Red Army Faction in Europe, to name only a few in the West. George Habash, the founder of the deadly Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, was a Greek Orthodox Christian and Marxist who studied at the American University of Beirut. In an era when angry Arab nationalism flirted with violent Marxism, many Christian Palestinians lent Habash their support.

Peoples who resist foreign oppressors seek banners to propagate and glorify the cause of their struggle. The international class struggle for justice provides a good rallying point. Nationalism is even better. But religion provides the best one of all, appealing to the highest powers in prosecuting its cause. And religion everywhere can still serve to bolster ethnicity and nationalism even as it transcends it—especially when the enemy is of a different religion. In such cases, religion ceases to be primarily the source of clash and confrontation,

but rather its vehicle. The banner of the moment may go away, but the grievances remain.

We live in an era when terrorism is often the chosen instrument of the weak. It already stymies the unprecedented might of U.S. armies in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. And thus bin Laden in many non-Muslim societies has been called the “next Che Guevara.” It’s nothing less than the appeal of successful resistance against dominant American power, the weak striking back—an appeal that transcends Islam or Middle Eastern culture.

MORE OF THE SAME

But the question remains, if Islam didn’t exist, would the world be more peaceful? In the face of these tensions between East and West, Islam unquestionably adds yet one more emotive element, one more layer of complications to finding solutions. Islam is not the cause of such problems. It may seem sophisticated to seek out passages in the Koran that seem to explain “why they hate us.” But that blindly misses the nature of the phenomenon. How comfortable to identify Islam as the source of “the problem”; it’s certainly much easier than exploring the impact of the massive global footprint of the world’s sole superpower.

A world without Islam would still see most of the enduring bloody rivalries whose wars and tribulations dominate the geopolitical landscape. If it were not religion, all of these groups would have found some other banner under which to express nationalism and a quest for independence. Sure, history would not have followed the exact same path as it has. But, at rock bottom, conflict between East and West remains all about the grand historical and geopolitical issues of human history: ethnicity, nationalism, ambition, greed, resources, local leaders, turf, financial gain, power, interventions, and hatred of outsiders, invaders, and imperialists. Faced with timeless issues like these, how could the power of religion not be invoked?

Remember too, that virtually every one of the principle horrors of the 20th century came almost exclusively from strictly secular regimes: Leopold II of Belgium in the Congo, Hitler, Mussolini, Lenin and Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot. It was Europeans who visited their “world wars” twice upon the rest of the world—two devastating global conflicts with no remote parallels in Islamic history.

Some today might wish for a “world without Islam” in which these problems presumably had never come to be. But, in truth, the conflicts, rivalries, and crises of such a world might not look so vastly different than the ones we know today. **FP**

[Want to Know More?]

For more of Graham Fuller’s writings on the Islamic world and its political and cultural significance, see *The Future of Political Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

For two classic works on the relationship between the West and the Middle East, see Samuel Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) and Bernard Lewis’s *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

For an alternative view of the nature of Islam and its compatibility with the other major monotheistic religions, see Reza Aslan’s *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (New York: Random House, 2005). Five years after the September 11 attacks, William J. Dobson rethinks the popular notion that 9/11 ruptured East and West, in “The Day Nothing Much Changed” (FOREIGN POLICY, September/October 2006).

In “The True Clash of Civilizations” (FOREIGN POLICY, March/April 2003), Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris argue that the real divide between East and West is not religion, but sex. Finally, Josef Joffe imagines how different the Middle East—and U.S. foreign policy—would look if Israel had never existed, in “A World Without Israel” (FOREIGN POLICY, January/February 2005).

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