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POLITICAL ISLAM: BEGINNINGS

The Oath at al-'Aqaba; the *Coup* at the Colonnade

By Paul Stenhouse

This is the fourth in a series of seven articles

IF SOMEONE around 628 AD had dared to prophesy that within a decade some unheralded, unforeseen power from the hitherto barbarous and little known land of Arabia was to make

its appearance, hurl itself against the only two world empires of the age, seize by force of arms the one – the Persian/Sasanid – and strip the other – the Byzantine Eastern Roman – of its fairest provinces, he would undoubtedly have been declared a lunatic. Yet that was exactly what happened.¹

In this article, and in the articles to follow, we shall attempt to describe how this happened. Especially do we hope to show that the 'Islam' that is being spread and publicised by al-Qa'eda, ISIS and the Muslim Brothers – the object of much controversy today – is the political face of Islam. The leader of the first 'Islamic State' was of course, Muḥammad, prince-prophet of Medina.

We are not treating here of Religious Islam – even though its foundational texts undoubtedly have

an impact on its political *persona*. Religious Islam is routinely presented to us as the *only* face of Islam by Islamic polemicists as well as by many Western journalists and politicians via the print and electronic media. Granted this, it seems timely to explore

in-law, from Mecca to Medina which took place in September 622 AD – to a clandestine visit that seventy-two Muslim pilgrims from Medina paid to Muḥammad in Mecca after they had completed the Hajj.

The seventy men² and two women appear to have been the only Muslims who were part of a group of around five hundred³ pilgrims that came to Mecca for the Hajj.⁴ One of their number was the Emir of the Banu Kazraj, Sa'd bin 'Ubadah.

They met Muḥammad and his uncle al-'Abbās bin 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib at night in a ravine near al-'Aqaba. There they took an oath of allegiance [the Arabic word *bai'a* literally means 'giving your hand'] to Muḥammad not unlike the oaths of allegiance that numerous Sunni terrorist organisation have recently taken to the bloodthirsty self-declared Caliph of Iraq and the Levant Abū Bakr al Baghdādī.⁵

Before the pilgrims from Medina took the oath, Abū al-Haytham asked Muḥammad 'will you perhaps return to your own people and leave us?' if they give him their allegiance and he was victorious over his enemies. Muḥammad smiled and replied 'You are of me and I am of you. I shall fight whomever you fight and make peace with whomever you



the historical background to Islam's largely unacknowledged political face.

The Oath [*bai'a*] taken at al-'Aqaba

We need to go back to a time shortly before the Hijra – the flight of Muḥammad and Abū Bakr, his father-

make peace with.' In a few words Muḥammad severed hitherto sacred tribal bonds, and accepted the role of ruler of Medina.

One of their number, al-'Abbās bin 'Ubādah, then asked the pilgrims from Medina:

' "People of the Khazraj,⁶ do you know what you are pledging yourselves to in swearing allegiance to this man?" "Yes," they said. He continued, "In swearing allegiance to him you are pledging yourselves to wage war against all mankind." ... They answered, "We shall take him even if it brings the loss of our wealth and the killing of our nobles. What shall we gain for this, O Messenger of God, if we are faithful?" He answered, "Paradise." "Stretch out your hand," they said. He stretched out his hand, and they swore allegiance to him."⁷

It is said that Muḥammad never touched the hands of the two women who took the oath.⁸

The Islamic 'State' that emerged after this oath was taken at al-'Aqaba, and after Muḥammad had fled Mecca and had been welcomed in Medina by the Kazraj and Aws tribesmen as their king, brought in its train *holy war* [jihad], *poll tax* [jizya], *land tax* [kharaj], tax imposed on nomadic tribes [*sadaqah*]⁹ and income and wealth tax [*zakar*]; tax collectors ['ummāl / ashāb as-sadaqāt], envoys [rusul], dispatches [kutub] and governors ['ummāl]. It was a well-planned and well-organised move.

The above forms of tribute, and other taxes not listed here, along with the immense booty in money, valuables and slaves obtained from skirmishes and war, and the complex bureaucracy of tax collectors – who visited every town and encampment – and governors of provinces, and other officials set in place by Muḥammad before his death, offer a crucial key to unlocking the significance of events that are about to be described.

The Thaḳīf tribe gives its 'Islām'

In 631 AD reports by Nabataean merchants of a large Byzantine force – numbers vary from 40,000 to 100,000 – near Tabūk in northwestern Arabia,

Declaration

THIS SERIES of articles on Islam is offered by *Annals* to our readers, as throwing light on a significant part of the background to the tragic events unfolding as we write, throughout the Middle East, Africa, Pakistan, and Central and South-East Asia. In the spirit of Egyptian President Al-Sisi's appeal to Muslim leaders for religious reform and an end to support for extremism, it is our hope that this series will contribute to a greater understanding, by all concerned, of the politico/religious nature of the complex reality we know as 'Islam' or 'Submission'. And that this will lead all to renewed efforts to bring about harmony and lasting peace between the branches of Islam, and between the Islamic and non-Islamic worlds.

just south of present day Jordan, were circulating in Medina.

These reports prompted Muḥammad to lead an army of 30,000 Muslim tribesmen to Tabūk to fight the army of Heraclius. They found no sign of a Byzantine army in the region and after waiting a few days Muḥammad and his force returned to Medina.

Even if, as some claim, the story of the Byzantine army was a myth, and the whole exercise was a show of strength aimed at intimidating uncommitted Arab Tribes, the ruse worked. Muḥammad's leading this vast force to

Tabūk to confront Heraclius – an event not mentioned by Byzantine chroniclers – impressed and frightened many pagan and some Christian Arab tribes, and prompted them to desert the Byzantines and join the Muslims.¹⁰

Among the pagan tribes that made this prudent move was the Thaḳīf, the principal tribe in Ta'īf which is about 100 km southeast of Mecca.

As an example of the way the past haunts the present, it was this same locality of Ta'īf to which the surviving members of Lebanon's 1972 parliament came in 1989 to oversee the sell-out of Lebanon by the usual suspects under pressure from Saudi Arabia, the U.S. and Syria. Not only was Lebanon placed under Syrian 'guardianship,' the so-called *Ta'īf Accord* changed the original Lebanese power-sharing arrangement unique in an Arabic speaking country, and increased the power of the Sunni Prime Minister over the Maronite Catholic President.

The so-called Lebanese 'civil war' ended, but Prime Minister General Michel Aoun was forced into exile in France, and Syrian occupation and exploitation of war-weary Lebanon was to continue for another fifteen years, ending only in 2005.

To return to our topic: a deputation of Thaḳīf tribesmen – some of whose descendants are still to be found in today's Ta'īf – informed Muḥammad they were ready to offer him their 'Islam,' i.e. their submission, if they could keep Al-Lat, the idol of Ta'īf's principal goddess, for a further three years.

Still dithering nine years later

ISLAMISTS FOOLING the Establishment,' written with Sharon Chadha, examines in close detail CAIR: the *Council on American-Islamic Relations*, the most aggressive ... of American Islamist groups. Our exposé reveals CAIR's connections to terrorism as well as its efforts to stymie counterterrorism, its ties to non-Muslim political extremists, irregularities about its funding, its real goals, and its reliance on intimidation. Chadha and I conclude this 2006 analysis, "How long will it be until the Establishment finally recognizes CAIR for what it is and denies it mainstream legitimacy?" Nine years later, that recognition has yet to be conferred.

– From the Introduction to *Nothing Abides, Perspectives on the Middle East and Islam*, by Daniel Pipes, Transaction Publishers, May 2015.

Finally it was agreed with Muḥammad that the Thaḳīf did not need to pay the tithe, nor to take part in Jihad, nor to bow down at prayer, and could keep al-Lat for one year. Muḥammad began to compose the formal agreement, hesitating as he dictated. The scribe looked at Muḥammad seeking guidance.

‘Umar, Muḥammad’s father-in-law and destined to become second Caliph after Abū Bakr the father of Muḥammad’s favourite wife, when Muḥammad died, was a witness to this exchange.

He leapt up, drew his sword and protested at the conditions in the proposed agreement. The Thaḳīf leader replied ‘We are talking with Muḥammad’. Then Muḥammad said, ‘No, I won’t make this covenant. You must either embrace Islam unconditionally, and observe all its precepts, without exception – or prepare for war.’¹¹

The Thaḳīf opted for submission on Muḥammad’s terms, rather than war. This was a wise choice, for the implacable ‘Umar whose impassioned sword-waving circumvented the Thaḳīfs’ plans for a special covenant with Muḥammad, was more feared for his scourge¹² than for his sword. ‘Impetuous, cruel and of great bodily strength,’¹³ it was said of him that he had been known to weep once only: when he remembered how he had buried his baby daughter alive before he became a Muslim. While the grave was being dug, the little girl patted away the dust from his hair and beard. He never forgot.¹⁴

In the words of David Margoliouth [1858-1940], Laudian Professor of Arabic at Oxford for almost fifty years,

‘The experiences of the Prophet’s life, the constant bloodshed that marked his career at Medinah, seem to have impressed his followers with a profound belief in the value of bloodshed as opening the gates of Paradise. ... Those who had to deal with the Prophet or his immediate successors in Medina had to deal with an armed camp; with a fighting force as effective as has ever been organized when fighting depended not on brain power but physical force. The Prophet rightly claims to have set a good example in resolution and

The Wahhabi threat

WAHHABISM, the official religion of Saudi Arabia, is an exceptionally virulent, narrow and militant interpretation of Islam ... Over time, it has morphed into an all-encompassing politico-religious theology that considers all other faith groups deviant, has no tolerance for other cultures, no respect for human rights, no love for democracy and an abiding distaste of Western values. It is harsh, puritanical, unforgiving and violent. The ultimate goal of Wahhabism is one global community with one creed (Wahhabism) ruled by one Khalifah (ruler), presumably the House of Saud. It makes for a grand strategy not just for hegemony in the Middle East but for global domination. The Saudi-Wahhabi nexus has such a stranglehold on Sunni religious discourse that its views now predominate. ... The Saudi-based, Saudi-funded Muslim World League (MWL), founded in 1962, is one of the principal channels of Wahhabi infiltration, influence and control. It actively promotes Wahhabi doctrines, theology and practices on a global scale. The MWL has more than 56 offices and centres on five continents. ... Wahhabism also provides the theological underpinning for almost every violent jihadi group, is behind much of the impetus to replace secular democratic institutions with fundamentalist Islamic ones and is the main driving force behind the radicalisation of young Muslims in the world today. Unquestionably, the Saudi-Wahhabi nexus has become the greatest single threat to peace and stability in the world today.

– DENNIS IGNATIUS is a retired Malaysian diplomat. He was ambassador to Chile and Argentina, and High Commissioner to Canada. See *The Malaysian Insider*, March 30, 2015.

contempt of danger and fatigue. But that any of the gentler virtues were cultivated does not appear; and the vices that are associated with Asiatic despotisms seem to have displayed themselves from the time when the despotism of Medinah was founded. The Prophet’s successor and bosom friend, according to the best authorities, deprived the Prophet’s daughter of her property in order to avenge an insult which his own daughter had received some years before. And in general little love seems to have been lost between the Companions of the Prophet. ... the shedding of blood, indeed, became a passion.’¹⁵

The Death of Muḥammad

A number of tribes had already broken away from the Islamic State whose capital was Medina before Muḥammad, its ruler, died. Rumours of his failing health were all that it took to kindle revolts in Nejd [central Arabia] Yemama [east of the Nejd plateau] and in Yemen [southern Arabia]. Rival prophets had arisen in all three regions.

As Muḥammad lay dying – from the effects of eating poisoned lamb¹⁶ prepared by Zaynab bint al-Harith

after the battle of Khaybar, according to Muslim historian Al-Tabari [AD 839-923]¹⁷ – the network of tribes that had sworn allegiance to him, and of others who had submitted to *dhimmi* status within the Muslim State, was crumbling. Major bones of contention were immemorial tribal rivalries, heavy taxes, and loss of tribal authority and independence.

As well, there was hard feeling between some *Ansar* or ‘helpers’ – the Medinan tribes who welcomed Muḥammad and his teaching, especially the Kazraj and Aws, enemies of the Quraish, Muḥammad’s tribe – and the *Muhajirūn*, the Meccans, mainly Quraish including some of Muḥammad’s kin, who fled with Muḥammad to Medina and thought that they had special status because of that.¹⁸

The coup at the Colonnade [as-Saqīfah]

When Muḥammad died in 632, on the 8th of June,¹⁹ the *Ansar* met in a colonnade belonging to the Banū Sa‘ida bin Ka‘ab, a clan of the Kazraj. They unanimously decided to appoint Sa‘d bin ‘Ubāda to rule

Medina after Muḥammad. They saw themselves as ‘people of power and wealth, numerous and strong in resistance’ with others in their ‘shade and shadow,’²⁰ and were confident that the *Ansar* were most fitted to lead the complex State apparatus with its religious face, set in place by Muḥammad.

‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb got to hear of what the Medinans were up to, and went to Abū Bakr urging him to go with him to confront them because, as he said, ‘even the best of them is saying: “A leader for us and a leader for the Quraish”.’²¹

So Abū Bakr and ‘Umar hurried to the Colonnade, and Abū Bakr addressed the gathering. What he said to the *Ansar* was blunt and unequivocal: ‘You are the ‘helpers’ [wuzarā’] – we [the Meccans] are the leaders [umarā’].’²²

The Medinans, the *Ansar*, were not impressed. They insisted on having a leader from among their own number – letting the *muhajirūn* choose their own leader. ‘Umar’s response was ‘Then may God kill you,’ to which their spokesman replied: ‘Rather may he kill you’.

At this juncture, Abū Bakr intervened and pointed to ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and Abū ‘Ubayda and told the *Ansar* to choose which of the two *muhajirūn* they wanted.

They wanted neither, but sensing the threatening mood of the opposition, they indicated that they would – grudgingly – accept, instead, Abū Bakr as Muḥammad’s successor ruling from Medina. There seems little doubt that this outcome was the desired result of collusion between the triumvirate of Abū Bakr, ‘Umar and Abū ‘Ubaydah.

A show of strength by the Aslam, a tribe from southwest of Medina and among Muḥammad’s and the *muhajirūn*’s earliest supporters, turned the tide in favour of the Meccans. They packed Medina’s streets until they had given their allegiance to Abū Bakr as Caliph. They impressed all waverers by their formidable presence; and settled the matter. ‘Umar said: It was not till I saw the Aslam that I knew for sure we had won the day’.²³

The Problem

THE GRAVE predicament we face in the Islamic world is the virtual lack of approved, theologically rigorous interpretations of Islam that clearly challenge the abusive aspects of Shariah. Unlike Salafism, more liberal branches of Islam, such as Sufism, typically do not provide the essential theological base to nullify the cruel proclamations of their Salafist counterparts. ... for more than 20 years I have been ... working to establish a theologically-rigorous Islam that teaches peace.

– Tawfik Hamid, *The Wall Street Journal*, Tuesday, April 3, 2007. A onetime member of an Islamist terrorist group led by Ayman al-Zawahiri, Dr Hamid is a medical doctor.

Understandably, Sa’d bin ‘Ubādah – Emir of the Banu Kazraj, who had taken part in the secret pledge at ‘Aqaba, who had been tortured by the Meccans and was the unanimous choice of the *Ansar* for Caliph – was less than pleased at the manner of his defeat.

Abū Bakr and the other members of the triumvirate declared that if Sa’d did anything to disrupt the harmony of the community ‘we will strike off your head’.²⁴

Sa’d, the faithful Emir of the Banu Kazraj, and the first person in Medina to offer refuge to Muḥammad,

refused to recognize Abū Bakr as Muḥammad’s successor, and died during Abū Bakr’s caliphate.

Next month: The Apostasy Wars: Bloodbaths over ‘a camel’s hobble’

1. Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, Macmillan London 1968, p.142.
2. ‘Abd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, in his *al-Sirah al-nabawiyyah*, says that there were 73 men and 2 women. See the trans. by ‘Abd us-Salam M. Harun, published by the al-Falah Foundation, Cairo, 2000, p.86.
3. See *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir*, by Ibn Sa’d, vol.i, ix.
4. At this time, before Muhammad’s conquest of Mecca, there were still three hundred and sixty-five pagan idols in the Ka’aba.
5. Walid Shoebat, ‘ISIS will take over the most dangerous Muslim nation on earth,’ shoebat.com Nov 24, 2014
6. Actually the deputation was made up of people from the Khazraj and Aws tribes. It was customary to refer to the ‘*Ansar*,’ or ‘helpers’ as the supporters of Muhammad from Medina were called, as ‘Khazraj,’ probably because it was the most powerful tribe.
7. *The History of Al-Tabari*, trans. W. Montgomery Watt, and M. V. McDonald, State University of New York Press, 1988, vol vi, pp.133-134.
8. *Sahih al-Bukhari, Dar Ahya as-Sunnah al Nabawiya*, Medina, undated, vol. iii, cap. i, # 874, p.549. ‘He never touched the hand of any women while taking their pledge of allegiance and he never took their pledge of allegiance except by his words only’.
9. This was true of the age of which we write. Later, *sadaqah* became a ‘voluntary’ alms tax that was exacted from Muslims.
10. *Al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol. ix, pp.47ff. See also David Margoliouth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam*, reprint: Cosimo Classics, original edition 1905, pp.418ff.
11. Reinhart Dozy, *Spanish Islam*, Chatto & Windus, 1913, pp.18-19. See also *Al-Tabari* op.cit. vol ix, p.45, note²⁹, ‘The delegation asked that they be exempted from several other things, such as the interdictions on adultery, usury and wine.’
12. He is said to have scourged his son to death for drunkenness and immorality. See Husayn ibn Muḥammad Diyarbakri, 1558 or 1559: *Ta’rikh Al-khamīs*, Cairo ed., 1302 A.H. [1884 A.D.] quoted Hitti, op.cit. p.176..
13. Dozy, op.cit. p.19, note¹.
14. See Richard Burton, *The Book of the Thousand Nights and A Night*, printed by the Burton Club for subscribers only, 18 vols. 1885, vol. 2, p.158 note². See also p.159, note¹.
15. David S. Margoliouth, *The Early Development of Mohammedanism. The Hibbert Lectures, 2nd Series*, 1913, reprint: Simon Publications Inc. pp.58-59.
16. Some sources read ‘goat’.
17. *Al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol.viii pp.123-124.
18. *Al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol x, pp.1-18; Bertold Spuler, *The Muslim World Part I, ‘The Age of the Caliphs,’* p.18.
19. See J.H. Kramers, *Analecta Orientalia*, Leiden E.J.Brill, 1956, vol.ii, p.226
20. *ibid.* p.5
21. *ibid.* p.3
22. *Tarikh al-Tabari*, ed.cit., vol. 1, p.860.
23. *Al-Tabari*, ed.cit. vol. x, pp.5-8.
24. *ibid.* p.11.

Beyond Tolerance

WESTERN CULTURE has taken a step beyond tolerance — in the sense of grudging acceptance or putting up with the idiosyncrasies of a person or a minority group — to a conscious erosion of respect for normality. Normality is presented as a morally loaded concept ... For a growing number of people, absolute beliefs or norms indicate nothing but an inability to tolerate other people’s views and convictions.

– *Jesus Christ The Bearer of the Water of Life, an examination of New Age theory and practices*. Pontifical Councils for Culture, and Interreligious Dialogue, Rome. St Pauls Publications 2003, p.47