

On Americans On Islam

Americans, oh Americans. It seems that Americans today are in a frenzy over Islam – and what we hear is that either Islam is a great, peaceful, edifying religion with a few wingnut freaks (similar to Westboro Baptists, etc.), or that, say, something like one in three Muslims is teaching their 7 year-old how to wire C3 into their vest and scream “die infidels.”

This is all ridiculous.

Islam, like Christianity, has different denominations and confessional groups. In Christianity, as all sensible people know, there are decent groups, annoying groups, and groups that should be eliminated, and then there are groups like the Catholic Church which are so big that they contain within them all of the above types of groups.

Islam is similar. It has schools and branches, and schools and branches within schools and branches. So, if a Shadhili Sufi Center opened down the street from me and was actually attended by people from the Middle East (and thus not one of the hippy, new age, rich white people Sufi centers for middle aged doctors' wives who've read some Rumi), my neighbors, most of them the NASCAR type who still tear up when watching *Top Gun* for the 37th time, or the old *Red Dawn* for the 86th time, would be going apoplectic. But I would be trying to calm them down, telling them that these folks are harmless and might finally be able to teach these upper Midwesterners who are addicted to bland cuisine how to properly cook meat and vegetables. Though not pork.

If, on the other hand, a mosque opened up down the street that was of the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam, I would be at the very least concerned. And if after googling the imam I learned he had connections in the Salafist movement, then I would be helping the neighbors to organize an around-the-clock watch

and photograph every move in and out of the place.

So here is my take, in a very basic outline, on the threat of the various Islamic schools.

The various Shia groups don't have much of a history of exporting violence to the West. Yes, they blew up our embassy in Beirut, but it was in large part provoked by U.S. intervention in the region. The thing with Shias is that if you don't mess with them and the geopolitics of their space, and their borders, and the countries that border them, they tend to leave you alone.

Sufis, a minuscule portion of Islam, have a few episodes of violence in their history. There have been Sufi militias, but Sufis ain't after us, and as conversion to Sufi Islam by Sunnis has been happening in some places, like Yemen, where dominant Sunni groups (in this case the Saudis) have been bombing the shit out of poor Yemeni Sunnis, well, maybe we should look to Sufis as a potential cultural helper of sorts in certain Islamic regions. That doesn't mean I want the CIA promoting them, as the CIA messes everything up.

The forms of Islam that strike me as "problematic" are the [Maliki](#), [Shafi'i](#), [Hanbali](#) and the [Hanafi](#) schools of Sunni Islam. Especially the Hanbali as most Salafists come from that school. The Hanbali are the most conservative or "fundamentalist" of the Sunni schools. Each of these four schools of Sunni Islam considers the others more or less legitimate expressions of Islam, a view they do not hold for other schools of Islam. The tiny [?ahiri](#) school of Sunni Islam is considered heretical and thus is harmless (as far as Westerners should be concerned), which is no surprise as it is a minority form of Islam in every country it exists in and the potentially dangerous (in terms of Western realpolitik) Sunni schools are all dominant somewhere.

For many decades now, the U.S. has been a great friend of

Sunni hegemony in the Middle East, promoting and protecting Saudi interests and constantly vilifying and at odds with Shia interests. The Shia control of the post-Saddam Iraqi government was not intended, and followed the complete incompetence with which we engaged in that "liberation." Saddam, and Ba'athism in general, didn't fit into the House of Saud Sunni schema of domination and regional hegemony because of his and its history of working with non-Sunni groups and individuals. Saddam may have done horrible things to Shia and Kurds and Christians, but he also had them (well, not Kurds) within his organizations, and the earlier Ba'athist vision for one united Arab state transcended mere Sunni interests, particularly Sunni religious interests.

So, basically, in my mind, it would be best for the U.S. to reverse sides in the Middle East, and act to suppress Sunni hegemony and pursue a nominal friendship with Shia groups in the Middle East, including Iran and Hezbollah. This will never happen because the U.S. is a puppet state of the House of Saud, but a boy can dream.

But another word – we can't simply state that Muslims who come from the four Sunni schools noted above are potentially dangerous without some major caveats. Most Kurds are from the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam, and there is nary a Kurd joining ISIS. Indeed, most of them would be quite willing to put a bullet in the head of anyone pursuing Sunni hegemony in the region. Or take Albania, wherein half the population is Sunni, most of them originally Hanafi. Today 65% of all Albanian Muslims are [non-denominational Muslims](#), which means that like non-denominational Christians, they don't care about dogma much. It is safe to say non-denominational Muslims are completely not an issue when it comes to security threats.

All this is to say that if conservative pundits were intelligent, and actually conservative, they would stop painting with a broad brush regarding immigration of persons from countries in which Islam is the dominant religion. To be

efficient and cost effective (don't conservatives love these things?), and to still be able to bring in as much needed talent and skilled labor as possible (and the corporations who pay for our politicians, both conservative and liberal, very much want this), it would be prudent to be most restrictive with prospective immigrants coming from the Hanbali school of Sunni Islam, which is the spiritual home to only 15% of all Muslims. Of the 9/11 attackers 16 of the 19 terrorists were Hanbalis. If you had to pick an "Islam" to deny entry into the U.S., Hanbali Islam would be your first reasonable choice, though of course that would not sit well with either the House of Saud or Israel. Screening for the other three dominant Sunni schools would be somewhat less restrictive, making distinctions between those who are from ethnic backgrounds that make their Sunni background inconsequential (Albanians, Kurds, other groups persecuted by hegemony seeking Wahabi/Salafist Sunni whackjobs – and there are a lot of them). Those Shia and Sufi and other "heterodox" and "heretical" Muslims would then face no stricter immigration regulations than, say, your average Swede. But I don't expect conservative pundits to do a few hours of reading regarding variations on the theme of Islam.

The point is this – in any large macroscale system, you will have people who really suck, and people who are meh, and people who are truly decent souls. And more often than not, birds of a feather tend to flock together. Some cultures and subcultures, especially when it comes to religion, are better than others (I'm an old leftist at heart so yeah, this pop multiculturalist, "we're all good and all expressions of human culture are equal" shit where every culture/ideology/religion has something grand to give and to learn from every other is nonsense). If you are going to fear a major world religion, at least have the good sense to know which of its parts make sense to fear, and which do not.

And let's not get too caught up in these arguments about how

ISIS is not really religious in terms of its average militant. That is both true and not true. I spent formative years around a lot of Christian fundamentalists who were also very pro-military American nationalists. And let me tell you, most of the folks from that background who enlisted in the U.S. military were not the ones who had a lot of the Bible memorized. Muslims who get caught up in ISIS are often not particularly pious Muslims with a competent knowledge of their faith. But they typically identify with certain schools of thought within Islam, and they are caught up in the militant and apocalyptic rhetoric native to certain schools of Islam (well, really, schools within schools, for the most part). Piety is not an indicator of a proclivity toward violence. Indeed, an extremely pious Muslim within perhaps all but one (Hanbalis) of the major schools of Islam is not likely to support jihadism in the West. Impious Muslims, just like impious Christians, make the far better soldiers in our modern context of cross-cultural killing, with its astounding lack of codified restrictions.

Back in the 90s, I took a course on Sufism co-taught by a Ni'matullahi Sufi from Iran. One of my fellow classmates was a Shafi'i Sunni from Egypt. The contempt for the Sunni against the Sufi was palpable. This contempt was not reciprocated by the Sufi. It is best, of course, to stay out of the conflicts within religions that are not one's own. But sometimes they can't be avoided. And in backing the Hanbali Sunni interests in the Middle East, we, the U.S., have picked the worst side possible in Islam. Those who preach a general fear of Islam never note this. Hating Islamic cultures and peoples makes about as much sense as hating the world's 2 billion+ Christians, or hating the working class, or hating all humans. But, having a contempt for certain Christian groups, and certain Christian subcultures, is certainly valid. The same can be said for Islam. Restrictions of the movement and public expression of certain types of Christianity are, in my opinion, permissible. I would say the same with regard to

Islam, always with the allowance of caveats.

*N.B.: The views of authors do not necessarily reflect the views of Intellectual Takeout.
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