

Is Islam Arab Imperialism?

An Occasional Paper for the
Center for Security Policy



By Harold Rhode

9 September 2019

Introduction: The Boundaries Between Arab And Muslim

There is a vibrant debate on the Internet and elsewhere over whether Islam constitutes Arab imperialism, or alternatively, whether it is an attempt to make non-Arab Muslims into Arabs. Participants in this debate are mostly Muslims, and some are even Arabs. Some claim to be former Muslims. Can this debate help us in our battle against the terrorists and states which support them?

What is this debate all about? If Islam is really Arab imperialism, can non-Arab Muslims retain their ethnic and national identities?

Islam requires its adherents to accept the Quran as God's revealed word to his final prophet Muhammad. The Quran was revealed in the Arabic language, the language of the Arabs of Arabia. Muslims believe that Muhammad was the model Muslim whose behavior was without fault.¹ Muslims are required to model their behavior after his, i.e., imitate him in all areas of life. Muhammad was an Arab from the Hijaz. Since he is the model, is there room in Islam for non-Arabs, or must non-Arabs completely suppress their past identities and become Arabs?

The Nobel Prize-winning, Indo-Trinidadian writer V.S. Naipaul, after extensive travel in non-Arab Muslim lands, observed, "There probably has been no imperialism like that of Islam and the Arabs.... Islam sees as an article of faith to erase the past; the believers in the end honor Arabia alone, they have nothing to return to."²

Are All Muslims Equal?

Islam claims to be egalitarian, meaning that all Muslims are equal. That appears to mean that there would be no discrimination among Muslims, irrespective of national, ethnic, or tribal origin. In practice that was not the case.

¹ This concept is known in Arabic as *Ma'sum al-Khata*.

² See <http://www.indiastar.com/wallia15.htm>.

From 634 to 712, Muslims conquered today's Middle East, large portions of Central Asia, and reached Sindh in the Indian subcontinent. They conquered all of North Africa. In 712, only 80 years after Muhammad's death, Muslims crossed the Straits of Gibraltar and started their conquest of Iberia, i.e., today's Spain and Portugal.

What happened to the cultures they conquered? Within 100 years, the cultures of today's Arab Middle East had largely been islamified and arabized. Most had been Christian and spoke Semitic languages related to Arabic, but still distinct languages. Local cultures were devastated as people abandoned their previous languages and religions in favor of Islam and Arabic. In order to be equal to their Arab conquerors, these new Muslims often developed associations with Arab tribes and families which offered them a semblance of acceptance, though not really the equality that Islam promised them.³ The Arabs from the Hijaz in today's western Saudi Arabia – the original Muslims – were still regarded as a higher class than these new adherents of Islam. So much for the equality of all Muslims.

Some of these newer adherents invented genealogies which showed them as descendents of Muhammad or his associates. It was relatively easy for people to invent genealogies as time went on.⁴ By doing so, they wiped out their non-Arab past.

Islamic scholars invented the concept of *Jahiliya*, i.e., the period of ignorance. Accordingly, everything that happened before the advent of Islam was of no use and was to be abandoned. So, the languages and cultures of the newly converted Muslims were to be abandoned in favor of an Islam which was heavily defined by its Arabness.

Over the centuries, as more and more non-Arabs converted to Islam, many new Muslims invented Arab ancestries, to give themselves higher social

³ In Arabic, they were known as Mawali.

⁴ There is a DNA study in process where some people who claim to be descendants of the prophet are having their DNA analyzed. The analysts believe that they might be closing in on the DNA of Muhammad. This might have interesting consequences for the large number of people who now claim to be descended from the prophet, but whose DNA does not match that of members of Muhammad's clan.

standing among their fellow Muslims. That is why many Pakistani and Indian Muslims today carry the name Qureishi – Qureish is the name of the Arab tribe to which Muhammad belonged. Given the large number of people using this name, it is hard to imagine that all of them are truly descended from Muhammad and his tribal companions.

Clearly many of the people who did not have Arab ancestries felt a sense of being left out by those who claimed Arab origins. Many resented and still do resent the fact that even if Islam means that all Muslims are equal, some (i.e., Arabs) are more equal than others.

Linguistic Arabization Of Persian, Turkish, And Other Languages Spoken by Non-Arab Muslims

For various reasons, Iran, India, and Turkic Central Asia, though conquered by the Muslims, managed to maintain their languages. But as more and more of the peoples living in these lands converted to Islam, they adopted the Arabic script to write their languages. This led to two consequences: (1) An enormous influx of Arabic words into their languages and (2) the inability to educate large numbers of people in their languages because the Arabic script is unsuited to their languages.⁵ Moreover, these non-Arabs maintained the Arabic spellings of borrowed Arabic words as they were written in Arabic. This made the process of learning to read and write all the more difficult.

⁵ For example, Arabic has four letters which the Persians and Turks pronounce “z,” and three letters for the sound “s.” (Each of these letters is pronounced differently in Arabic.) So how are Persian-, pre-Turkish Republican Turkish-, Pashto- or Urdu-speakers who want to learn to read and write their languages well going to know which one to use? This requires a huge effort on their part.

Few people who spoke these languages could write their languages well. Those who did had to learn Arabic and Arabic grammar in order to write correctly.⁶

Turkey solved this problem by adopting the Latin alphabet in 1928. Turkish thereby became phonetic and easy to learn to read and write. Moreover, since the written language was now totally phonetic, Turks no longer needed to learn the Arabic language and grammar to write correctly. Literacy improved dramatically. Simultaneously, the Turkish language academy started a campaign to remove Arab and Persian words from Turkish.

By adopting Latin letters (understood then as Christian letters), and by removing Islam as Turkey's state religion, Turkey thus embarked on a path to disassociate itself from the Arabs. Many asked themselves whether they could remain Muslims after they stopped writing in the holy Arabic script and lived in a secular – and not Islamic – country.

Turkey, The Arabs, & Islam

Since the early 20th century, many Turkish nationalists have held the Arabs in total contempt. They blamed Turkey's backwardness on Islam. Turkish nationalists ask: Why should Turkey associate with the Arabs who have constantly stabbed the Turks in the back, and whose primitive religion has kept the Turks from being all that they could be. Some Turkish nationalists actually have blamed Ataturk – their hero who founded the secular Turkish Republic on the ashes of the Muslim Ottoman Empire – for not having forced the Turks to become Christians as well.

⁶ Even under the Shah, Arabic was a required subject from eighth grade on, because it is impossible to write Persian well without knowing Arabic, even though both languages belong to different language families. (Arabic is a member of the Semitic language family; Persian belongs to the Indo-European family.)

Ataturk saw his country's crushing Islamic cultural legacy as Arab hegemony. In the 1920s and 1930s, Ataturk enacted many reforms to separate his country from its Islamic/Arab cultural legacy. He abolished the caliphate – thereby giving up any claims to the leadership of the Muslim world. He expended much effort to secularize Turkish society. Ataturk and his followers wanted to relegate Islam to the realm of the private, to be solely a source for morals and ethics. Traditional (i.e. Arab) Islam does not recognize the separation of state and religion.

Many Turks, including many devout Turkish Muslims, label Islamic fundamentalism as Arab imperialism. These Turkish Muslims claim that Anatolian Islam is completely different from Arab Islam. They believe that today the Wahhabis and other Arabs are trying to use their “primitive” brand of Islam to arabize Turkey.

Ataturkist religious Turks feel particularly threatened by the Arab-oriented fundamentalists. It is therefore not surprising that these religious Turks are often very pro-American and pro-Israeli.

The jury is still out on whether Islam or Western culture will win the day in Turkey. Given the nature of traditional Islam, it is hard to imagine how Turkey could keep its Western orientation and still be part of the Islamic world. Turkey will either move closer to the Arabs, which means it will abandon Ataturkism, or it will create a new type of Islam which has nothing to do with traditional Arab-oriented Islam.

Iran, Islam, & Islamic Fundamentalism

Iran has always maintained a love-hate relationship with Islam. Over the centuries, many Persians have argued that Islam is an Arab imposition on Iran. Some have argued that Iran would have been much stronger and greater, had Iran not become Muslim.

Is Shi'ite Islam actually an Iranian religion? When in the early 1500s Shah Isma'il of Iran adopted Shi'ism as the state religion, his religious leaders felt the need to show that there was a direct connection between Muhammad's family and the Iran. "Miraculously," they discovered genealogical evidence according to which the mother of the 4th Imam – Zain al-'Abadayn the great-grandson of Muhammad – was the daughter of the last pre-Islamic ruler of the Persian Empire Yazdegerd III. This "discovery" meant that that all of the imams after the 3rd imam were in fact Iranian, making Iran and Muhammad's family inseparable, and make Islam, at least partially, Iranian.

Over time, people in the Sunni-ruled lands on Iran's borders charged that Shi'ism was an Iranian religion – and not Islam. Arab Shiites who had no historical ties to Iran were called *Farsis* (i.e., Persians) or *Safawis* (i.e., from the dynasty which established Shi'ism as the ruling form of Islam in Iran). Each of these labels was used to denigrate the Persians and also the Arab Shi'ites because they followed the prevailing religion in Iran. The inference was that they were not real Muslims like the Arab Sunnis were.

Iranians have never had a concept of *Jahiliya*, an Arabic term which defines the period before Islam as a period of Ignorance. Iranian are proud of their pre-Islamic past and do not consider it a period of ignorance.

Many Persians have lamented the fact that the Arabs defeated Iran and imposed Islam - an Arab religion - on them. Persians look down on Arabs, even though they do share a form of the same religion. Even so, the Persians clearly are conflicted because almost all still see themselves as Muslims.

So where do Khomeini and his Islamic Republic fit in? Some Iranians and most Sunnis see this as revenge against the Arabs (Sunnis). For many Sunnis, Shi'ism isn't really Islam, and the Islamic revolution was Iran's way of getting back at the Arabs. When Khomeini returned to Iran in 1979, he announced

that he had come to rectify a wrong that had occurred 1,400 years ago, i.e., the victory of the people who would later be known as Sunnis over the Shi'ites. Many Arab Sunnis understood this as Khomeini wanting to impose Persian culture on them, just as they themselves had imposed their Arab culture and religion on the entire Muslim world.

Iran is therefore of two minds regarding Islam and Arab culture and language. On one hand, Iranians are Muslims. However, Iranians deeply resent the fact Islam had been imposed on them by the Arabs. How this dichotomy will play itself out will depend on whether the Islamic Republic of Iran still exists in the future.

The Arab World Today

In today's Arab world, freedom of conscience is an alien concept. Individuals do not have the right to think for themselves. They are required both by the societies in which they live and by their rulers to acquiesce to the dictates of their political and religious leaders. Freethinking or even challenging existing norms often land them in jail. In practice, that means that all non-Arabs and non-Sunni Muslims must be careful at all times to keep their thoughts on Arabism and Islam to themselves.

The following two examples about Arabism and Islam in Egypt and the Maghreb (i.e., central and western North Africa) illustrate this point.

Egypt

Before the Islamic conquest of Egypt in the seventh century, the overwhelming majority of Egyptians were Coptic Christians.⁷ In 639 AD/CE, 4,000 Muslim Arabs swept into Egypt's Nile Delta from today's Israel and within a short time became the rulers of the country. From then onward, Egypt's native Christians were guests in their own country. Over time, most converted to Islam and abandoned their ancient Coptic language in favor of

⁷ The word "Copt" is a corruption of the word "Egypt".

Arabic. All vestiges of their pre-Islamic identity were disparaged. The ancient glories and monuments of Egypt were forgotten or defaced.⁸



Great Sphinx of Giza by Barcex/ Licenced under CC-by-SA-2.5

Today, about one tenth of Egypt's population remains Coptic Christian and suffers from legal and political discrimination. Very few Copts are allowed to work in government. Conversion to Islam is encouraged both by the predominant culture and the regime. Conversion from Islam to Christianity is illegal and can be punished by death. Christians in Egypt are extremely hesitant to discuss their beleaguered situation with outsiders out of fear they will be charged with treason by both the government and by the general Muslim population. History has taught them that when they open their mouths, they risk pogroms.

⁸ The reason the Sphinx near Cairo has no face is that, until the British took over Egypt in the early 18th century, Muslim military units used it for target practice, because depiction of facial images is not allowed in Islam. Local interest in Egypt's pre-Islamic past has largely resulted from the ability of the government and individuals to earn revenue from the tourists who flock to Egypt to see the pyramids and other remnants of ancient Egypt. Other than as a source of revenue, these monuments mean next to nothing to the overwhelming majority of Egyptian Muslims.

Notably, in a landmark case decided by Egypt's Supreme Court, individuals who had converted from Coptic Christianity to Islam were allowed to return to Christianity.⁹ But it remains to be seen whether these individuals can remain in Egypt or the Muslim world and not be murdered. This is due to the fact that Muslims know that, according to the Shari'a, one cannot leave Islam. The punishment for doing so – for committing apostasy - is death.¹⁰

This story is indicative of the constant challenges and dangers native Egyptian Christians confront in maintaining their identities in the face of Arab-Islamic imperialism. That is why so many Egyptian Christians strive to leave the land of their ancestors and start new lives in the West. They have been able to express themselves freely only when they and their families no longer live in Egypt and are then no longer afraid to speak out about the plight of their co-religionists in their ancestral homeland.

In general, some Muslims only began to take some interest in their pre-Islamic pasts when Western explorers and archeologists began their treks to the Muslim world in search of past history. Since then, for most Muslims, these ancient ruins and finds have become sources for locals to make money selling these finds to those who were willing to buy them. Until the modern era, the Muslims did not think twice about letting the strange foreigners come and take their ruins to be placed in Western museums and private collections.

The Berbers In North Africa: Their Long Struggle Against the Arab Rulers to Retain Their Berber Identity

Before the Arab Muslim conquests of North Africa in the seventh century, most of those living there were Christians. Ethnically, they were largely Berber along with a smattering of residents of Phoenician origin (i.e., today's eastern Mediterranean Coast) and others who arrived under Roman rule.

⁹ This is after an Egyptian Judge ruled that no one can ever leave Islam. He cited Islamic religious law in rejecting a request from a Muslim convert to Christianity to be allowed to change his religious affiliation on his national identification card. For this ruling, see http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=59985.

¹⁰ See, <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20080211/egypt-supreme-court-allows-return-to-christianity.htm>.

Over the centuries, the Arab rulers of these lands have done their best to eliminate all vestiges of non-Arab culture, hoping to Arabicize the locals. Almost everyone besides the Jews converted to Islam, but most retained their Berber identity.

It is therefore not surprising that when, in the 1830s, France conquered today's Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, many of the Berbers worked with the French. At times, France even promoted Berber culture and language.

In the 1950s and early 1960s, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco became independent. Their new leaders, largely ethnic Arabs, imposed the Arabic language on all their citizens. That meant replacing French as the dominant language of education. The problem they faced was that they had almost no teachers capable of teaching Arabic and no local instructional texts on which to rely. Moreover, their local spoken dialects of Arabic were very distant from the standard written Arabic of the Middle East. Linguistically, one could even argue that North African (called Maghrebi) Arabic is a separate language with its own dialects spoken throughout the region.

In order to Arabicize education, the rulers of these newly independent countries therefore had no choice other than to import textbooks and teachers from the Arab world. (Mostly from Egypt and the Levant). These foreign teachers foisted Egyptian and Levantine Arabic language and culture on the locals, whose culture and history were very different.

In reality, this amounted to replacing one foreign culture –French – with another foreign culture –Arabic Middle Eastern and Egyptian. In both instances, the local North African, Berber-dominated cultures were suppressed in favor of foreign cultures.

Since the French and Middle Eastern cultures were both alien, why was it acceptable to replace the so-called imperialist French culture with another alien culture? The answer: Arabic language and culture are Islamic, and cannot, according to Arab Muslims, be labeled imperialist, because, for these North African Arab rulers, Arabo-Islamic culture was understood as liberation from Jahiliya, the period of ignorance. Foreign domination by Arab

Muslims was, in Arab eyes, “liberation.” Foreign domination by the non-Muslims (in this case the French) was unacceptable.

In reality, all the new North African rulers did was substitute one unacceptable foreign-imperial culture, (the French) with an acceptable foreign-imperial culture (the Arabo-Islamic). The Berbers, though Muslim and constituting the majority of the population, must constantly fight for their survival against Arab domination.

Arabs Living Under Muslim Non-Arab Rule

How do Arabs view other Arabs living in non-Arab Muslim countries? Why are Arabs more concerned about non-Muslims ruling what the Arabs perceive to be the Arabo-Islamic world than they are about their fellow Arabs living in non-Arab Muslim countries? Is Islam the answer?

The Turkish province of Hatay belonged to Syria until 1939. Its inhabitants are largely Arabs; most still speak Arabic. For political reasons, that province was ceded to Turkey in 1939.

Arabs also constitute the dominant ethnic group in central- and southwestern Iran. Both the Turkish and Iranian governments have done their utmost to “turkify” and “persianize” the Arabs living in these areas.

These Arabs in Turkey and Iran have not been allowed to study Arabic, nor are they allowed to post signs on stores and in streets in their own language. In Turkey, they must write in Turkish; in Iran, they must write in Persian. Moreover, in all government matters, they are required to use either Turkish or Persian, depending on whether they live in Turkey or Iran. The Arab world rarely mentions the attempts to de-arabize their co-ethnics in these countries. Yet it never misses an opportunity to rail against Israel for “*judaizing*”¹¹ Palestine. But unlike Turkey and Iran, where Arabs cannot either be educated in their own language or use it freely, Israeli Arabs are educated in Arabic, read and write Arabic, and have created a vibrant Arabic literature.

¹¹ Understood as the destruction of Arab villages and culture in today’s Israel.

They do so with the official encouragement and funding of the Israeli government. Moreover, the Arabic language has special status in Israel, is used on nearly every road sign, and on national monuments. Arabs members of the Israeli parliament are free to give speeches in their language; Arabs may also use their mother tongue when dealing with any government institution, something which is illegal of in either Turkey or Iran.

From a Western point of view, it makes no sense that it is easier to remain an Arab in Israel than in either Turkey or Iran. Clearly it is easier to remain an Arab in Israel than in either Turkey or Iran. In Israel, no one tries to “judaify” Arabs into Jews, but while Turkey and Iran go to great lengths to de-arabize their Arabs.

What appears to be the difference here is that Israel is a non-Muslim entity on land that Muslims believe belongs to the Muslim world.¹² Perhaps on a subconscious level, what appears to be at play here is that Israel is viewed as an unnatural non-Muslim-ruled entity in the middle of the Muslim world, whereas Turkey and Iran are Muslim countries. It is therefore more important from a Muslim point of view to dislodge this foreign (i.e., non-Muslim) entity than it is for Arabs to concern themselves with the fate of their fellow Arabic-speakers in non-Arab Muslim lands.

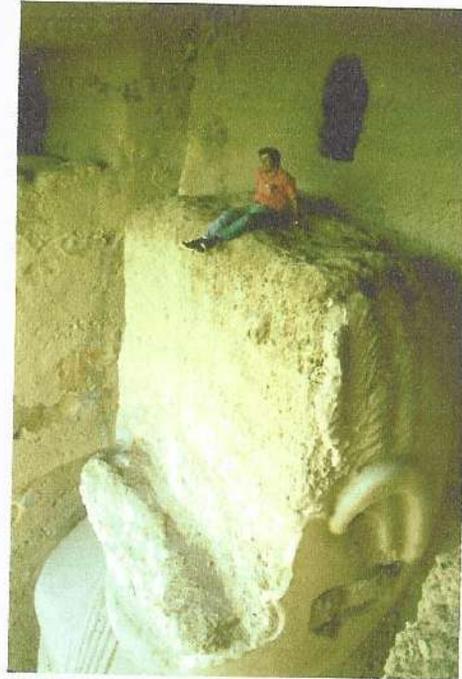
This suggests that the Arabs, who brought Islam to both the Turks and the Persians, care more about Islam than Arabism. Oddly, the greatest gift the Arabs gave to the world – Islam – has become the vehicle through which Arabs are becoming de-arabized. In these cases, Islamic imperialism leads to de-arabization.

The Taliban’s Destruction of The Statue of The Buddha In Central Afghanistan

¹² Understood by Muslims as the “Dar al-Islam,” or the territory where Muslim rule or used to rule. That would include today’s Israel, southeastern Europe, Sicily, Spain, and India.

Before today's Afghanistan became Muslim,¹³ many of the locals had been Buddhists. In central Afghanistan, these Buddhists had carved a huge statue of Buddha into a mountain. This was a formidable accomplishment and must have taken many years. As the area became Muslim, it became unacceptable to have statues with facial images, so the local Muslims destroyed the face of the huge statue built by their ancestors. This too was clearly a difficult and dangerous task to perform, but their new religion demanded that they eradicate their previous culture.

In the mid-1990's, the Taliban took over the country. Their form of Islam was heavily influenced by the Saudi Wahhabis, whose fundamentalism became their model for Islam. For both the Saudis and the Taliban, the statue itself constituted blasphemy and therefore had to be demolished. Unfortunately, given modern technology, the Wahhabi-influenced Taliban had little difficulty destroying the entire statue.



Photos: Harold Rhode, Bamiyan, Afghanistan, Summer, 1978

¹³ Its islamification began in the 8th century.

This huge carving was certainly one of the greatest achievements of ancient mankind, but Arab Wahhabi Islam dictated that it must be destroyed, just like the Wahhabis are destroying Islamic monuments and graves they deem un-Islamic in Mecca and Medina, and in the Islamic reconstruction projects they have been tasked with in Bosnia and Kosovo. In destroying the statue of Buddha and thus erasing their ancient heritage, the Afghan Taliban tried to be more (Saudi) Arab than the Arabs.

Indo-Pakistani Muslims, Arabic Culture, & Islam

In the 1950's an Indian-born Pakistani Islamist theologian named Mawdudi strongly admonished Western academics to stop spending so much time studying Arab Islam. He argued that sub-continental Muslims were more numerous than the Arabs and had made far more important contributions to Islam. Even though he strongly advocated what we today call Islamism (Islamic fundamentalism), he saw the Pakistanis and Indian Muslims as the central players in this movement and the Arabs as marginal. Nevertheless, he believed in establishing an Islamic state where his philosophy, not an Arab one, would be the law of the land.

Sub-continental Muslims also make up the largest constituency among the Muslims in the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. In all three places, we hear constant complaints from them about how the Arab Muslims are trying to dictate to them what Islam is, berating their non-Arab identities, and trying to force Arab culture down their throats.

The Arabs repeatedly tell them that the only real Muslim is an Arab. This becomes very confusing for the younger generation of Muslims in these Western countries. They wonder whether their sub-continental Muslim ancestors were true Muslims, since they weren't Arabs. Many ask themselves whether they can be real Muslims if they do not adopt Arab habits and modes of dress which had been totally alien to their ancestors.

The younger generation in the West and in their ancestral homelands feels even more confused because most of the mosques in their countries are

Wahhabi-Arab funded and controlled, and those who go to pray are subjected to Wahhabi Saudi-Arab cultural imperialism.

Most Muslims from the Indian sub-continent do not want to become Arabized, but feel helpless in combating this Saudi-Arab onslaught. They ask themselves, “Are we true Muslims? And who, anyway are these Arabs to tell us what we are not? “

The Indian Muslim does not identify with the traditional culture of the land of his birth and lives in a state of denial of his authentic roots. According to Salman, a Pakistani journalist: “We have all, sub-continental Muslims, invented Arab ancestors for ourselves. Most of us are *sayeds*, descendants of Muhammad through his daughter Fatima and cousin and son-in-law Ali. There are others – like my family – who have invented a man called Salim al-Rai. Everyone has got an ancestor who came from Arabia or Central Asia. I am convinced my ancestors would have been medium to low-cast Hindus.”

Lately, a new phenomenon has occurred that is typified by an ex-fundamentalist U.K. Muslim whose grandparents immigrated to the UK from Pakistan. He no longer believes in a united Islam, in large part after having spent five years in an Egyptian jail on charges of being involved in fundamentalist activity there. He now claims that there isn't just one Islam, but many ethnic and national islams which are unique and unrelated. For him now, one certainly does not have to be an Arab or become one to be a Muslim. This approach is very new and it remains to be seen whether it can survive.

Trends Among Indonesian And Malaysian Muslims Regarding Arab Culture & Islam

Islam is thought to have been brought to today's Indonesia and Malaysia by Muslim traders from India in the 12th century. The Islam that emerged in these lands was a tolerant cultural amalgam of traditional Islam and local beliefs.

Indonesia developed its own Islamic schools where they educated their own religious leaders. Locals wore local clothes and did not adopt Arab culture as their own. In fact, they held Arabs in low esteem. About twenty years ago, senior Indonesian Islamic leaders told a visiting Western scholar of Islam that Indonesia's religious leaders feared that an Arab militant imperialist Islam was spreading like a cancer throughout the Muslim world. Their view of the Arabs was as follows: "In order to demonstrate the absolute truth of his message, God revealed it in the worst place and among the worst people on earth."

Imagine how these religious leaders feel today when they see the enormous quantity of money that the Wahhabi Saudi Arabs are investing in mosques and schools in both Indonesia and Malaysia. These schools and mosques are turning out militant Muslims who dress like Arabs and propagate Arab culture in their countries. These new Arab-oriented Indonesian leaders reject the traditional Indonesian mystical and tolerant version of Islam in favor of the Arab Islam brought in by the Wahhabis.

Traditional Indonesian scholars fear Arab imperialism is overwhelming and destroying their local form of Islam. The only way to stop this, they argue, is to have their indigenous future Muslim leaders educated in the West. But given the current state of Islamic studies here in the West, this effort seems futile.

Will Wahhabi Saudi Arab Islam finally triumph in these lands or will traditional Indonesian and Malaysian Islam survive? If things continue as they are, Arab Wahhabi Islam will win and Indonesians will culturally end up like their co-religionists in the lands dominated by the Wahhabis.

Muslims In the U.S., Canada, and the U.K.: Can They Remain Muslim In Their New Homelands and Not Adopt Arab Culture?

In the U.S., Canada, and U.K., the majority of Muslims are of Indian or Pakistani origin. The culture they brought with them was not Arab; it is Indian sub-continental Islam. When they arrived, many either established or joined existing Muslim communities which then welcomed additional newcomers from their homelands.

Over time, however, the vast majority of the mosques in these three countries have come to be dominated by the Saudis who propagate their brand of militant, and intolerant, anti-Western Islam. The Saudis have provided almost unlimited funding for mosque construction, provided Wahhabi-trained imams, and disseminated beautifully published editions of Wahhabi propaganda at these mosques either free or at incredibly low prices.¹⁴ These books glorify Arab-Wahhabi culture and denigrate those of other origins.

Young Muslims in these countries are now exposed to an anti-Western militant version of their religion which was by and large alien to the Sufi- (mystically) oriented cultures of their homelands.

Conversations with North American and British Muslims reveal the sense of inferiority they often feel at the hands of their Saudi-minted preachers whose message can be boiled down to: “The only real Islam is our Arab Islam.” If you want to be a good Muslim, then you must follow our Arab ways.” This leaves a large portion of these non-Arab Muslims frustrated and confused. They want to remain Muslims, yet they are told that the type of Islam their ancestors brought with them from the Indian sub-continent is not authentic.

This is also the reason why so many American-, Canadian- and British-Muslims feel alienated from Islam in their new homelands. How will the next generations of North American and British Muslims react to attempts to Arabicize them? Will they leave Islam? Will they try to become more Arab

¹⁴ For more on the Wahhabi take over of mosques in the U.S., see the Freedom Houses report “Saudi publications on Hate Ideology Invade American Mosques,” http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/special_report/45.pdf. On Wahhabi penetration of mosques in the U.K., see “The Hijacking of British Islam, <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/Publications.aspx?id=430>

than the Arabs and therefore be more susceptible to performing terrorist acts to prove that they are true Muslims? Only time will tell.

Counter-Trends: Iraqiness Vs. Arabism

Since the liberation of Iraq, Iraqis have been able to speak their minds freely, and have been exploring their own identity. The Iraqi media and the Internet are filled with passionate discussions about what it means to be an Arab, a Muslim, and an Iraqi. Kurds, especially those living in the Kurdish-dominated areas of northern Iraq are asking themselves the same questions: "Who are we, and where do we fit in?" Should we identify as or remain Iraqis? Can we be independent? How shall we maintain our identity as Kurds yet not succumb to Arabization?"

Even Arab Sunnis are ruminating on these questions. As Arab Sunnis and thus part of the dominant cultural group in the Arab world, their Arab Sunni identity had almost always superceded their Iraqi identity. But even many of them suffered greatly under Saddam, who was an Arab Sunni.

Interestingly, it is common today in Iraq to hear Iraqi Arabs, most notably even Sunnis, claiming that they are Iraqis and not Arabs. Westerners often find this puzzling, because these Iraqis speak dialects of Arabic and often have relatives in neighboring Arab countries. They ask their Iraqi interlocutors how this could be. After all, Arabic is their native language. How can they not be Arabs? The Iraqis respond: "You Americans speak English, but you are not English. We speak Arabic but we are not Arabs! The Arabs supported Saddam when he oppressed us. We have no use for them. We want nothing to do with the Arabs!"

Moreover, many of these people want nothing to do with the Islamic religious establishments. "We are Muslims," they say, "but we decide what it means to be Muslim, not the preachers and teachers in the mosques."

One cannot tell where these discussions will lead. However, they represent glimmers of hope that there may be other solutions to the Arabo-Islamic problem facing the world.

Conclusion

What will the future bring? Could democracy and freedom take hold in Iraq? Could the Iraqi experiment signal a new future for the broader Muslim world? It is unlikely that we will know the answer to these questions in the near future. But given how the Arabs, Turks, and Iranians, and other Muslims are faring, the future does not look particularly bright.

Sadly, given the enormous amount of money the Saudi and other Persian Gulf Wahhabis have at their disposal, it appears that Arab imperialistic Islam – with the possible exception of Iraq – is winning. Will 1.3 billion Muslims across the globe all become Arabicized? Will they completely lose their previous identities? Let us return to V. S. Naipaul, quoted at the outset of this paper. Perhaps two of Naipaul's observations best summarize the problem as it appears today:

“Islam has had a calamitous effect on converted peoples. To be converted you have to destroy your past, destroy your history. You have to stamp on it, you have to say ‘my ancestral culture does not exist, it does not matter’....”¹⁵

“Islam is in its origin an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert's worldview alters. His holy places are in Arab lands. His sacred language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own: he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his.”¹⁶

¹⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/oct/04/afghanistan.terrorism9>

¹⁶ Summary of the arguments made in Naipaul's book, *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted Peoples*