

## WHO ARE THE SHIITES?

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The rise of Shiite Islam in the modern world has surprised many people today. This is due to the average American's unfamiliarity with the whole subject of Islam. Furthermore, the problem is complicated by our secular culture's refusal to seriously consider the religious emphasis of Islam. Christians have also been so preoccupied with many other issues that they have not given adequate attention to the resurgence of Islam. Since the end of the Second World War, most of our attention has been focused on the challenge of Communism. It is important that we do not minimize the dangers of Marxist ideology especially as we consider its impact on the minds of many people in Latin America and the rise and spread of Liberation Theology. But Marxism is not the only challenge facing the free world.

### **Our Political Involvement with Islam**

Islam is another serious challenge today. We must not forget its growing role in our world ever since the birth of the State of Israel in May 1948. Most Americans, including Christians did not seem to notice the rise of Islamic power until late in 1973 during the Arab oil embargo against the USA. But Shiite Islam came to the fore only in the last days of the Shah when the people of Tehran revolved against him and brought about the end of his autocratic rule. The name of Khomeini became familiar in the American homes as people watched on their televisions the followers of this charismatic leader hurl themselves against the tanks of the Shah's army. Then came the seizure of the U.S. embassy. For the next 444 days, the radicals of Tehran known as the Islamic guards held captive not only the staff of the U.S. embassy, but millions of Americans as well, thanks to the excessive television coverage given to that tragic event.

No sooner had the problem of the U.S. embassy in Tehran been solved than the U.S. got directly involved in another area of the world where Shiites live – Lebanon. The civil/international war had been raging for almost seven years when Israel invaded southern Lebanon and attempted to crush the fighters of the PLO. The summer of 1982 was filled with chaotic events. The attempts to save the PLO in Beirut (besieged by the Israeli Army), the election of a new president of Lebanon, Beshir Gemayyel, his assassination before he could take the oath of office, and the resultant massacre of around 300 Palestinians in the camps of Sabra and Shatila near Beirut brought the U.S. Marines into the conflict. The United States entered into peace-keeping arrangements with France, the United Kingdom and Italy in order to guarantee the safety of the Palestinians of Beirut.

For various reasons, the U.S. forces were confined to the Beirut International Airport area, a location which could hardly be justified from a military point of view. The Americans became an easy target to the various Muslim militias which were in the mountains just to the east of the airport. Then came the tragedy of the car-bombing of the Marines' compound which

killed hundreds of our men on a Sunday morning in October 1983 and the eventual evacuation of the area by the U.S. forces.

It should not be forgotten that Khomeini sent some of his revolutionary guards to eastern Lebanon where they set up a camp for the radicalization of the Shiite population of Lebanon. He hoped that this move would eventually radicalize not only his followers, but bring about a revolutionary change in the Arab lands of the Middle East.

Furthermore, Syria, under the Assad regime, had developed close ties with Iran for two reasons. Both Assad and Khomeini are non-orthodox Muslims. And then, Assad had become a powerful and bitter foe of Saddam Hussein, the president of Iraq whose forces had invaded Iran in the early years of the Khomeini regime. So it became advantageous for the rulers of Iran and Syria to drive out the Americans from Lebanon. The U.S. was perceived by them as friendly to the Iraqi regime. Finally, the radical Islamic guards in the Beqaa valley of eastern Lebanon succeeded in teaching their fellow Shiites in southern Lebanon the “art” of martyrdom as they sacrificed themselves in car-bombing the Israelis and driving them out of their land.

It is needless to remind ourselves of the recent trauma which we all underwent during the high jacking of the TWA plane on its regular flight from Athens to Rome on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, 1985. It was as if the whole episode of the embassy in Tehran was being re-run on some giant television screen. A new name came to the forefront: Nabih Berri, the Shiite leader of a militia named Amal. His role in the whole affair puzzled Americans and others as well. Many people are still confused. Just what do the Shiites want and why are they so mad at the world?

## **Shiite Origins**

Here we must be ready to learn a bit of Islamic history. Muhammad, the founder of Islam, died in 632 A.D. He did not make any arrangements for a successor. The word for successor in Arabic is khalifa. In English, the word has been transliterated caliph. The elite, among his followers in the city of Medina in Arabia chose a caliph, Abu Bakr. Two years later, he died a natural death. The second caliph, Omar, was assassinated ten years later. Uthman, the third caliph, ruled for 12 years and was also killed by a renegade. The fourth caliph, Ali, had the distinction of being both the cousin and the son-in-law of Muhammad. Unfortunately for him, his election to the office of caliph was not unanimous. One of the wives of the prophet withheld her blessing, as did also Muawiya, the powerful governor of the newly conquered land of Syria.

Ali came to his position during times of excitement and confusion. The governor of Syria, Muawiya, claimed that Ali was implicated in the death of Uthman. War broke out between the two factions of Islam and, even though Ali's forces were prevailing, he accepted an arbitration of the conflict and lost out. He was murdered by some of his followers who had not accepted his resort to the arbitration. Islam, as a result, split into three parties: those who followed Ali were called in Arabic: Shiite Ali, i.e., the followers of the partisans of Ali. The followers of Muawiya, came to be known as the Sunni Muslims. The third party were called the Khawarij. They were the ones who went out of the camp of Ali. They became the ultra-radicals and committed horrible crimes against other Muslims for years to come.

These early divisions within the household of Islam played a big role in the violent changes which occurred at various periods of Islamic history. But no matter who seemed to be the caliph, the followers of Ali, i.e., the Shiites, remained in the opposition camp. They functioned underground and attracted especially the Persians within the Islamic empire. Most likely, it was not so much the beliefs of the Shiites which attracted the Persians, as their strong feeling that the Arabs had not given them their full rights when they embraced Islam. This is why they chose to support the opposition party within the household of Islam.

It is not my intention to get into the details of Shiite history, but the regular party among them believes in 12 successors to the Prophet Muhammad, beginning with the first lawful caliph, Ali. Most of his successors like his son Hussein, died as martyrs for their faith. When the 12<sup>th</sup> caliph or imam (This word became more accepted among Shiites than caliph) was put to death by the Sunni caliph in Baghdad, his followers refused to believe that their imam had died. They propounded the theory that he had simply disappeared only to return at the end of time and restore the world to a purified form of Islam. In the meantime, the powers of this hidden imam are delegated to a lesser imam on earth. In Persia, the word Ayatollah is substituted for the Arab word imam. This explains the name of the present-day spiritual guide and leader of Iran: Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Shiite Islam became the “state” religion of Persia. The lower clergy known as mullahs, work under the guidance of an ayatollah. Using their privileged position, they began to wield great power over the people. They often clashed with the Shah and forced him to bow to their demands. Here one must add that early in this century, the rulers of Persia began to use the word Iran as the name for their country and their people came to be known as Iranians.

### **Shiites in Lebanon**

Lebanon became a safe haven for many Shiites throughout history. Both the regular brand of Shiism and some ultra types such as the Druze, took to the strongholds of Mount Lebanon. Here they tried to maintain their independence from the Ottoman Turkish authorities which began to rule the Middle East since the early years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Being part of the opposition party, the Shiites of Lebanon were among the disadvantaged. When the French took over Lebanon in 1918, the plight of the Shiites did not improve. Most of the power and wealth among the Muslims of Lebanon remained in the hands of the Sunnis in such centers as Beirut, Tripoli, Tyre and Sidon.

There are many people who fault the Lebanese Christians for not doing much to help the poor Shiites of the Beqaa valley and the south. After all, the argument goes, the president of Lebanon had been a Christian since independence in the forties. Why did the Christians do very little to help the poor and disadvantaged Shiites? It is easy to level such charges against the successive governments of Lebanon, but one must realize that in a free society with a free economy changes cannot be brought about in a hurry. One must remember that the Christians in Lebanon had to deal with the Sunnis (Orthodox Muslims) who had inherited their privileged position from the past, a past which had always been dominated by Sunni powers. In 1958, when these Orthodox Muslims came under the spell of president Nasser of Egypt, they revolted

against the president of Lebanon, Camille Chamoun. It took the landing of the U.S. Marines during the Eisenhower era to bring about the equilibrium in Lebanon. That lasted until April 1975.

Certainly, both the Christians and the Sunnis of Lebanon did not always act wisely between 1946 and 1975. But the explosion of the Shiite community in Lebanon could not have happened without the following factors:

1. The rise of Khomeini in Iran.
2. The interference of Syria in the affairs of Lebanon.
3. The PLO presence in Lebanon.
4. The Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon.

All these external factors have contributed to the disintegration of what used to be “the Switzerland of the Middle East!” What should the Christians of the West do about all these things? Their first point is to stress the religious nature of the Middle East problem. A secularized worldview such as we have in our Western world does not give us the tool to properly understand the Muslim world and its many problems. For example, the refusal of the Arabs to accept Israel is grounded in the conviction that the birth of this Jewish state in the heartland of Islam negates the very finality and superiority of this religion. This is the deep conviction of the Arabs and their 600,000,000 neighbors in the household of Islam. The resurgence of militant Shiism in Iran and in Lebanon is not due merely to economic reasons. (If we adopt this economic view, we act as Marxists who see economics as the only important aspect in the life of human beings.) When we examine the situation from within the world of Islam, we must conclude that Muslims in general, and Shiite Muslims in particular, are not going to settle for the materialistic worldviews which have been exported by the West and the East. Even though Muslims may not be aware of the biblical text that “man does not live by bread alone,” they are unconsciously dramatizing the truth of this biblical teaching. Important as bread is, man needs more than material things. Man truly lives by the Word of God. The oil rich Arab countries have recently learned the bitter lesson that they cannot rely on the uncertainties of the world oil markets.

Christians in the West should be heralding the biblical truths about the true needs of man and the initiative which God took in the sending of Jesus Christ to be the Savior of the world. We must lovingly and boldly spread the Good News which alone is adequate to reconcile the warring factions of the Middle East. We must testify to our representative governments that it is their duty to act justly and fairly with all the nations of the world. This also includes the nations of the Muslim world.

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