

ARABS,
TURKS,
AND
PERSIANS

Arabs, Turks, and Persians
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ARABS, TURKS, AND PERSIANS

**Geopolitics and Ideology
in the Greater Middle East**

SVANTE E. CORNELL

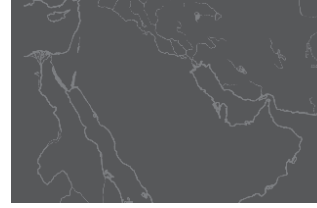


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INTRODUCTION

For decades, the Greater Middle East has been a leading challenge to American foreign policy. This vast region – ranging from North Africa in the west to Afghanistan in the east, and from the borders of Central Asia down to the Horn of Africa in the south – has been a cauldron of turmoil that has affected not just American interests, but generated threats to the American homeland.

Reasons for U.S. engagement in this region have been plentiful. Part of World War Two was fought in North Africa, and the U.S. soon after identified the Gulf's oil reserves as crucial to America's interests. The region was the scene also for America's confrontation with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. From the 1970s onward, Islamist ideology began to play a key role across the region. At times, the U.S. benefited from this to counter communism as in Afghanistan; but increasingly the U.S. found itself a target of the more extreme forms of Islamist ideology.

The multitude of challenges in this region has led to some confusion. What should be the focus of U.S. policy in the Greater

Middle East? Opinions vary. Some adamantly claim that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Arabs is the cauldron that determines the future of the region and should take precedence. Others focus on the ambitions of the Islamist regime in Iran to assert hegemony over the region. Still others contend that Sunni extremism of the Al Qaeda or ISIS variety is the leading threat. At different times, these and other approaches have all dominated U.S. foreign policy. After 1979, the challenge posed by the Iranian regime and its millenarian ideology loomed large. But Iraq's invasion of Kuwait led to the policy of "dual containment" of the two powers. Meanwhile, the U.S. continued to rely on close ties with Saudi Arabia, even though the Kingdom was a chief source of the Salafi-Jihadi extremism that would give birth to Al Qaeda. The September 11 attacks on the United States understandably led Washington to focus primarily on the Sunni Jihadi threat. However, this led to some confusion regarding Iran: Increasingly, some began to argue that since Iran also opposed Sunni extremism, perhaps America and Iran could find an accommodation of sorts.

Lately, the case has been made that the U.S. has focused too much on this region, to the detriment of other priorities. In this view, this is a region that only embroils America in arcane conflicts in which the U.S. has no stake. The U.S. gets manipulated by highly problematic partners and gets pulled into Middle Eastern conflicts. Its presence in turn helps create resentment that fuels the very threats it then has to waste finite resources to confront. Furthermore, since America is increasingly energy-independent and some believe the world is moving away from a reliance on fossil fuels, the region will not matter as much to America in the future as it did in the past. As a result, the U.S. should seek to

extricate itself from a central role in the region and help create an order in which the regional powers of the Greater Middle East can themselves manage the region.

The region certainly needs management. In the past few decades, major shifts have taken place that have rearranged the geopolitics across the Greater Middle East. Some of these shifts have resulted from U.S. action, and others from processes internal to the region. In sum, key Arab powers have seen their role as regional powers collapse, while the power of non-Arab states has risen. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 obliterated the regional standing of one of the main Arab military powers, turning it into a client state in which America and Iran fought for influence. Then, the Arab upheavals of 2011 led to the downfall of Egypt and Syria, also major Arab powers. In the Arab world, this allowed Saudi Arabia and small but infinitely wealthy Gulf monarchies like the UAE and Qatar to emerge as power-brokers in the Arab world.

Meanwhile, the region's traditional non-Arab powers – Turkey and Iran – stepped in to fill the void. Iran had initially been seriously alarmed by the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001-2003, fearing that it would be next in line. But as America's fortunes in both countries declined, Iran gradually stepped in to take advantage of the turmoil in Iraq. Tehran also came to see the benefit of the U.S. removing neighboring governments that were threatening to Iran's interests and putting U.S. forces in a place Iran could attack through its proxies. Following the Arab upheavals, it intensified its efforts to build what we will call an “Arc of Domination” across the region, ranging from Yemen in the east to Syria and Lebanon in the west – providing the Iranian regime

with direct access to the Mediterranean and a vantage point to strike at Israel from southern Syria.

Turkey's entry into Middle Eastern geopolitics was an equally significant factor. The Ottoman Empire had been the overlord of large parts of the Arab world, but from the 1920s onward the Turkish republic had oriented itself westward, vowing to avoid entanglement in the "backward" Middle East. Certainly, Turkey had been part of the American alliance system and thus a core part of the Baghdad Pact and CENTO. But its key interests lay elsewhere. With the end of the Cold War, however, Ankara gradually began to involve itself in Middle Eastern affairs, mainly as a result of perceived threats emanating from the region. The rise of Islamist politics to the fore with Recep Tayyip Erdogan would change the calculus, however. Following the Arab upheavals, Ankara made an aggressive bid for influence across the Middle East and North Africa, involving itself in many of the region's conflicts, including military deployments in Syria, Iraq and Libya as well as the opening of military bases in Qatar and Somalia.

The geopolitics of the Greater Middle East have, like elsewhere, been determined greatly by realist calculations of national interest, coupled with age-old prejudices and personal relations among regional leaders. But it is the contention in this book that ideological elements have been particularly important in this region, alongside these factors. Iran's regime has been the prime mover in the region since 1979, remaking the region's geopolitics by its bold assertion of a revolutionary Islamist agenda that deliberately ignored national boundaries. Everyone was put on the defensive, reacting to Iran. The Saudis promoted their own

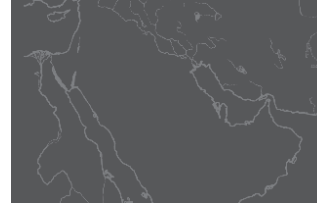
Islamism as an answer to Tehran, focused on the Salafi Sunni tradition of the Arabian Peninsula. In Turkey, the ruling military administration of the early 1980s launched the notion of a “Turkish-Islamic” synthesis, which over time would empower Turkish Islamism, itself influenced by the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood.

If Iran is the “prime mover,” the response of the Sunni powers to the Iranian threat is key to the stability of the region. Ironically, they went in opposite directions. The Saudis and most Gulf Emirates had come to realize that their support of Salafism had spiraled out of control, generating forces that threatened their own internal stability. They therefore sought to move toward moderation. But Turkey went the other way: under Erdogan, its foreign policy was animated by an ideologically colored view of the region and an ambition to remake the region in its own image. Predictably, this caused a deep rift in the Sunni world that only benefited Iran.

In recent years, uncertainty concerning America’s commitment to the Greater Middle East combined with continued relentless Iranian pressure to lead to a realignment. Turkey and Arab powers appeared to bury the hatchet. While a positive development, it does not change the fact that the stability of the Middle East depends, for the foreseeable future, on the trilateral relationship among Turks, Arabs and Persians.

This book explores this state of affairs and its implications by delving deeper into how the current geopolitics of the Greater Middle East came to be. A first few chapters look back to the history of the region and the historic rivalries among Turks, Arabs

and Persians up to the end of the Cold War. Next, we examine the main current power centers of the region – beginning with Iran, followed by Saudi Arabia and Turkey. The book then turns to the geopolitical competition of recent years – looking into Iran’s efforts to build an “Arc of Domination” across the region and Turkey’s attempt to create a “Brotherhood Axis.” We then move to how things have played out as a result – the advance of Islamists following the Arab Upheavals, the civil war among the Sunnis from 2013 to 2018, America’s pendulum swings with regard to Iran policy, and the reshuffle of the region following Turkey’s turn in a more nationalist direction. The book ends with an attempt to draw out implications for America’s approach to the geopolitics of the Greater Middle East.



1.

ARABS, TURKS AND PERSIANS AND THE DIVIDED *UMMAH*

In the politics of the Muslim world, the past is very much present, as it is taken as reference to an extent surpassing most other civilizations. The reason lies in a simple but troubling dichotomy. Muslims see Islam as the culmination of the monotheistic tradition, and Muhammad as the last prophet. Furthermore, soon after the prophet's death, Muslims conquered enormous swathes of lands, and gave birth to a civilization that rapidly came to lead the world in terms of the advancement of science. In the past several centuries, by contrast, the picture has been very different. The core Muslim lands – understood here as those dominated by Arab, Persian and Turkic peoples – experienced a long decline that put them at a disadvantage compared to European powers, whose dominance was followed by America's ascendancy. The result has been a dissonance between a supposedly golden past and a more disappointing present. Not surprisingly, a key focus of debate has

centered around two questions: what went wrong, and what to do about this predicament?

To an extent greater than elsewhere, religion plays an important factor in the identification of many Muslims. It is easy for outsiders to dismiss the notion of an *Ummah*, a Muslim community, given the amount of bloodshed Muslims committed against each other virtually from the moment Muhammad died. Still, this notion remains a strong factor in the lives of many Muslims, who tend to see foreign co-religionists as brethren to a much larger degree than Christians would. Even living in secular Turkey, the first question strangers most frequently asked this author was, quite simply, “are you Muslim?” When Muslims think of the *Ummah*, they think of an idealized notion of a Muslim community that never existed. But like any imagined community, this ideal has political relevance.

The past has also guided the different approaches to dealing with the predicament of Muslim societies. On one end, some have sought emulate the success of the West by embracing the secular nation-state. On the other end, others have rejected this notion entirely, arguing instead for the recreation of the idealized Caliphate that briefly existed after Muhammad’s passing. In between, all kinds of ideas of the shaping of state and society have come and gone.

If mythical unity is a factor, so is also the divisions among Muslims. Arabs gradually lost control of the Muslim world, and political and economic power over territories they conquered shifted to Persian and Turkic peoples. The process of conversion took centuries; and the new converts put their own mark on Islam, developing understandings of the religion that were

truly Turkic and Persian. In fact, it would be accurate to say that these peoples developed theologies that were suitable to their own national traditions and values – and sometimes their narrow interests. For example, the sixteenth-century Iranian ruler Shah Ismail in large part made Shi'ism the state religion in order to differentiate his realm from the Sunni Ottomans to the west and Uzbeks to the north.

Geopolitical History in the Muslim World

It is a paradox that the rapid expansion of the early Arab empire led it to become progressively less Arab. This was not yet a significant issue during Muhammad's lifetime, because his realm remained limited to the Arabian Peninsula. His four successor caliphs, however, oversaw the conquest of Iraq and the Levant, Iran, eastern Turkey, the Caucasus and Egypt. During the early Umayyad dynasty, this was followed by the conquest of Central Asia including Afghanistan, Pakistan up to the Indus, as well as the Maghreb. Suddenly, Arabs were a small minority of the population. They initially remained a majority of the *Muslim* population, but this soon changed as a result of conversion. Aside from whatever appeal the new religion may have had, conversion was convenient because it absolved the population from the payment of the *jiziyah* tax imposed upon the conquered peoples, and led to higher social status. Within a relatively short time, the Arabs became a minority even among the Muslims of the empire. At least initially, most of these non-Arab Muslims were of Persianate stock. They were originally treated as a separate class of "clients" of the Arab clans, but gradually demanded to have

equal status to the Arabs and found ammunition for this view in the religion of Islam.

This helped spur the Abbasid revolt, led by an Arab family that drew support among disgruntled Arab clans, the Shi'a faction, as well as the non-Arab Muslims. By 750, the Abbasids had routed the reigning Umayyads and moved to establish a new capital at Baghdad. Two centuries later, the Abbasid Caliphate was effectively taken over by the Buyids, a Shi'a Persian dynasty, which nevertheless left the Abbasid Caliph as a religious figurehead. Thus, Arab control over the Muslim empire essentially ended by the end of the first Millennium AD. The shape of the modern Greater Middle East then began to take shape, because the Persian rule of the Buyids collapsed in the mid-eleventh century as the Turkic Seljuks swept in and established control over Baghdad and the empire. Following the example of the Buyids, the Seljuks left the Abbasid Caliphate in place. It would only formally expire with the Mongol invasion of 1258.

The Mongols ruled over much of the Middle East and Iran, and the Seljuks retreated into Anatolia. There, they would soon be replaced by a new powerful dynasty, that of the Ottomans. Meanwhile, further south, another Turkic dynasty – the Mamluks – ruled over Egypt and the Levant. While the Mamluks maintained the status of the Arabic language, the ruling class retained their separate ethnic identity and continued to speak Turkish among themselves. Mamluk rule would continue until they were defeated by their fellow Turkic cousins, the Ottomans, in the early sixteenth century. Iran also fell under the rule of various Turkic dynasties following the collapse of Mongol rule, culminating in the emergence of the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century.

Turks appeared on the ascendant everywhere, but were a minority ruling over multinational empires.

After the Ottomans disposed of the Mamluks, the Ottoman Sultans laid claim to the Islamic Caliphate. Although the Mongols had killed the last Abbasid Caliph, the Mamluks had found an escapee relative they placed as Caliph in order to shore up their religious legitimacy. The Ottomans then claimed the title on the theory that it belonged to them after their conquest of Egypt. This was part of a claim of legitimacy over the leadership of Sunni Islam. Meanwhile, the similarly Turkic Safavids differentiated themselves by making the Shi'a branch the state religion of Iran. For several centuries, the Sunni Turks and Shi'a Iranians would struggle for supremacy over the mainly Arab lands of the core Middle East; control over these lands mainly remained with the Turks, with brief interludes of Iranian rule.

Until well into the twentieth century, thus, there was no independent Arab state. In Arabia, the antecedents of the present Saudi dynasty staged a first rebellion against the Ottomans in 1801, but only lasted for a decade before being put down. Egypt would also assert its autonomy from Ottoman rule in the early nineteenth century; but this happened under the rule of Muhammad Ali, an ethnic Albanian originally appointed by the Ottoman Sultan. Egypt then fell under British rule. Only in the early twentieth century did Arab nationalism begin to become a factor. Following the Ottoman defeat in World War one, some Arab lands finally gained statehood. The Saud dynasty began to put together the Saudi Kingdom, a process that was completed by 1932. Meanwhile, the British granted Egypt independence in 1922. Other Arab lands fell under French and British mandates,

and gained independence during the 1930s or after the second world war.

This history created considerable resentment among Arabs, both against Western powers and Turkish and Iranian overlords. The Turks and Iranians had their own resentments as well: both empires were in serious decline by the eighteenth century. The Ottoman realm shrank gradually following Mehmed IV's siege of Vienna in 1683, and by the early nineteenth century the empire began to lose many of its European possessions. Not staying at that, western powers forced the Ottomans to provide privileges to their citizens living within the empire, through contracts known as "capitulations." This downward trend culminated with the Treaty of Sèvres of 1920, which aimed to partition the Empire into a number of European-controlled sectors, and to create Armenian and Kurdish states in its eastern portions. While this treaty was never implemented because of the Turkish war of independence, it has remained a profound grievance among Turks to this day. It is frequently used to remind Turks of the alleged designs of western powers upon their country. Yet compared to Turkey, Iran fared worse: in the nineteenth century, the country was effectively partitioned into a Russian sphere of interest in the north, and a British one in the south. Russia even incorporated the South Caucasus, large parts of which had been Iranian, into its empire. Russian and Iranian designs on Iran would continue up until the second world war.

In the twentieth century, Turkey and Iran both emerged as functional nation-states and took up their place as regional powers. The Arab world, by contrast, came to be divided into almost two dozen different states, meaning that no true Arab nation-state

has come into being. Perhaps this was never a realistic possibility given the broad geography of Arab-speaking peoples and the many significant differences between them. In the absence of a unified Arab nation, several candidates emerged for leadership in the Arab world. An obvious candidate was Egypt, by virtue of its history and large population. Saudi Arabia built its claim on being the custodian of the holiest sites of Islam, and subsequently on its financial wealth. Iraq and Syria sought leading roles based on radical Arab nationalist ideology and military might. Other Arab countries were too weak and small to contend. Thus emerged the setting for the geopolitical rivalries in the Greater Middle East during the twentieth century, featuring two large non-Arab powers as well as several contenders for Arab leadership. We will return to this geopolitical rivalry in the next chapter. For now, let us turn to the overlap between ethnic division and religious divisions in the Muslim world.

The Divided Ummah: Hanafi, Shia, and Hanbali

Divisions within Islam are a sensitive topic. Muslims tend to stress the unity of the *Ummah*, playing down divisions among them. Islamic theologians have campaigned hard over the past several centuries to downplay differences between the different theological traditions. The argument is that they are all essentially similar, and that divisions among them are exaggerated by foreigners intent on pitting Muslims against each other.

But in fact, these religious divisions are real. They inform the varying perspectives taken by the leading Muslim nations, and very much undergird the prejudices they hold against each

other. They also inform their particular claims to leadership of the region. The divide between Sunnis and Shi'a is the best known of these religious differences, but the multiple divides within the Sunni world are no less significant.

The Sunni-Shi'a divide was not, initially, theological but political: The Shi'a argued that the Prophet's son-in-law Ali was the legitimate leader of the *Ummah*. Sunnis disagreed, arguing that the Prophet's companions were equally worthy. Ali, who claimed that Muhammad had anointed him as his heir, was passed over for leadership, and instead the three first caliphs were Muhammad's companions Abu Bakr, Omar and Uthman. When Ali was finally named the fourth Caliph, he faced stiff resistance from within the community, not least from Muhammad's youngest wife Aisha and the governor of Syria, Muawiyah. A civil war among Muslims erupted, known by the euphemism the first "strife" or *fitna*. Ali's standing weakened, and he was eventually murdered in 661, putting an end to the original caliphate. In his place, Muawiyah had himself anointed caliph. He is widely seen to have transformed the Caliphate into a worldly and hereditary kingship, which is why he is not acknowledged among the so-called *Rashidun*, or rightly-guided caliphs, even by Sunnis. Shi'as, on the other hand, revile him and even more so his son and successor Yazid, whom they hold responsible for the killing of Husayn, Ali's son and Muhammad's grandson, at the battle of Karbala in 680. Shi'as commemorate that murder every year by the self-flagellation rituals of *ashura*.

Over time, the political divide came to be religious and to some degree ethnic as well. The biggest difference between Sunnis and Shi'as lies in the organization of the community: Sunni Islam

is famously averse to hierarchy, something that has prevented the emergence of unified doctrine; it lacks a formal priesthood. By contrast, even though it lacks a central authority like the Catholic Church and has several centers of authority like Qom and Najaf, Shi'a Islam is organized in a distinctly hierarchical way compared to Sunni Islam, with a dedicated priesthood. Grand Ayatollahs or *marjabs* are at the top, followed by regular Ayatollahs and under them *Hujjat-ul-Islams*. While there were originally few doctrinal differences between Sunnis and Shi'a, multiple minute differences emerged as the two sects developed separately of one another for over a thousand years. The Shi'a further subdivided into several distinct categories, but here we will use the term Shi'a, except when otherwise specified, to refer to the *Jafari* or "twelver" form of Shi'a prevalent in Iran and Iraq, termed thusly because of the belief in a succession of twelve Shi'a imams.

The first Shi'a Muslims were Arabs, and Shi'a communities exist across the Arab world. They form the majority only in Iraq and Bahrain, but minorities persist in practically every Arab country, as well as far beyond in countries like Pakistan and Indonesia. But the dominance of the Shi'a branch in Iran has, in modern times, led to a strong identification of the Shi'a with that country. Particularly after the 1979 revolution, Iran has become the political and theological center of Shi'a Islam globally, notwithstanding the objections and reservations of Iraqi Shi'a clergy. This overlap of national and sectarian divides has become significant in modern-day geopolitics, particularly as Iran has sought to exploit Shi'a minorities in its project to create a sphere of influence in the Greater Middle East.

Meanwhile, the majority Sunnis over time split into distinct

schools of jurisprudence and theology. The divisions between these schools in great part follow geographic and ethnic lines that have strengthened the separate identities of Turks and Arabs. The differences may appear arcane, but have considerable relevance for the relative openness of Muslim societies to interaction with the modern world.

The theological divisions concern rather fundamental questions: should holy scripture be followed literally, or should believers be able to interpret the language of the Qur'an according to current societal realities? Do humans have free will, or is their every action predetermined by God? Could humans discern good from evil without the aid of divine revelation? Different answers to these questions have important implications for the outlook on life that prevails in a society.

The debates on these questions in early Muslim history were fiery. Early on, a strongly rationalistic sect called the *Mu'tazilites* developed in the late eighth century. To them, it was obvious that scripture should be read allegorically rather than literally, that humans had free will, and that human reason could tell good from evil without the need of any scripture. They promoted advanced theological arguments to debate a large variety of religious questions. But the *Mu'tazilites* saw heavy pushback from a more austere understanding of the religion. Proponents of the *athari* school of thought, which is the antecedent of today's Salafis, posited that scripture should be accepted in its literal meaning without asking questions. As a result, they opposed the very idea of theology: to them, the very act of engaging in theological debates and reasoning was harmful, because it led believers to depart from the text of scripture. Their answer was simple: read the text. When in doubt,

consult the *Sunnah* of the prophet, that is, the recorded sayings and deeds of Muhammad.

Over time, most Muslims came to see both of these extremes as unpractical. The *atharis* were too strict and unreasonable; but the *mu'tazilites* appeared a little too removed from religion. Independently of each other, two ninth century theologians emerged to develop a middle ground. While they opposed the liberal *mu'tazilites*, they used reason and logic to refute *mu'tazilite* theological arguments, as well as those coming from other sects and non-Muslims. These theologians were Mansur al-Maturidi of Samarkand (853-944) and Hasan al-Ashari of Basra (874-936), and they came to be the founders of the two accepted schools of Sunni theology.

Muslim theologians have tried to paper over the difference between these theologians in the interest of promoting "Muslim unity." Yet these two gentlemen took different positions on questions of key importance, for example on the concept of reason and human ability to discern right from wrong independent of divine revelation. Al-Ashari outright rejected such a possibility because he saw it as a direct affront to God's omnipotence. He argued that something is right or wrong only because God ordered it to be so. If humans could decide what is right, that would violate God's omnipotence. Following this logic, Ashari argued that all acts undertaken by men are created by God. Consequently, there are no laws of nature, because that notion would, again, deny the omnipotence of God. To illustrate, the highly influential eleventh-century Asharite scholar Hamid al-Ghazali stated that fire does not cause cotton to burn. That may appear to humans to be a natural law but in fact, it is only God that leads the cotton

to burn; and if God decides that it will not happen, it will not. Needless to say, the implications of this type of thinking are far-reaching. As Robert Reilly has argued, the Ashari belief in the total omnipotence of God essentially led his many followers to deny reality, causation, and the meaning of any scientific inquiry. The wide spread of these essentially nihilistic ideas goes a long way to explaining the decline of scientific inquiry in the Muslim world, which Reilly puts as the title of his book: *The Closing of the Muslim Mind*.¹

Maturidi, by contrast, accepted the notion of man as a rational being, the only created being “who reflects on and understands” the wisdom of God.² While Maturidi acknowledged that God is omnipotent, he also argued that God holds himself to the norms he has himself created, and therefore there is a stable and intelligible system of norms. Because God has established such a system, and humans have the capacity to understand God’s wisdom, humans can also learn to understand that system. This perspective, unlike the Ashari view, is fully compatible with the pursuit of modern science and rational inquiry.

These theological distinction are replicated in the divergence among the Sunni schools of jurisprudence, which became quite important given the importance of *Sharia*, Islamic law, in Muslim societies. The key question is the extent to which there are other sources of law than the Qur’an and the Sunnah. The more austere interpretations, preferred by the *atharis* and the modern-day Salafis, essentially deny this. Their view came to

1 Robert R. Reilly, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind*, Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2011, p. 85.

2 Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Maturidi and the Development of Sunni Theology in Samargand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem, Leiden: Brill, 2015, p. 297.

dominate the Hanbali school of jurisprudence, prevalent in the Arabian Peninsula.

Others are less definitive, because the Qur'an hardly provides clear guidance on every matter. Leading Islamic jurists therefore accepted other sources of law. Among them were the consensus of scholars, analogical reasoning, as well as in a subordinate role, local customs and the discretion of jurists. The boldest in embracing such subordinate sources of law is the Hanafi school, founded by Abu Hanifa, an eighth-century scholar of Persianate origin. The Hanafi school – which mostly follows Maturidi's theology – cautions not to focus too rigidly on the strict and literal application of texts, and urges instead consideration for the spirit of the teachings of the religion, and maintains concern for the public interest. Abu Hanifa introduced the notion of the discretion of jurists, in order to ease hardship and apply tolerance and moderation to rulings. (Abu Hanifa did not go as far as the Shi'a, who formally include reason as a specific source of law.)

While the Hanbali and Hanafi schools are two extremes, the Shafi'i and Maliki schools lie somewhere in between. However, the Shafi'i school, which follows Ashari's theology, tends to be in agreement with the Hanbalis on key matters, although it does not take literalism to the same lengths.

Thus, it is possible to identify three basic traditions within the Sunni Islamic world today. A fourth, the rationalistic *mutazilite* school, is out of favor. Unfortunately, their archnemesis, the purist *atharis*, stand strong in the shape of the modern-day Salafis, who have dominated the Arabian Peninsula and made inroads across the Muslim world and in immigrant Muslim communities in the West. The restrictive Ashari theology and the Shafi'i school of

jurisprudence dominates most Arab lands outside the Arabian Peninsula. By contrast, the Maturidi theology and its companion, the more liberal Hanafi school of jurisprudence dominates in present-day Turkey, the Balkans, and Central Asia – roughly speaking, the areas historically dominated by Turkic peoples. This is also where esoteric forms of Islam known as Sufism, which emphasize a mystic communion with God, are the most widespread. It should be noted, however, the Sufism – although inherently heterodox – is not a friend of rationality. Quite to the contrary, the effort to seek mystical knowledge stand in bright contrast to resorting to reason. The aforementioned Ghazali – who spearheaded the Asharite rejection of reason – in fact ended up seeking solace in mysticism.

These differences in how various peoples understand Islam have had profound influence on the development of societies. The greater appreciation for the capacities of the human mind led to the greater scientific and cultural advances of Persian and Turkic civilization, while the rejection of such led the Arab world, and particularly the Arabian Peninsula, to remain an intellectual backwater. It also means that for all the talk of common Muslim identity, it does not take a long stay in Muslim countries to see that how Turks, Arabs and Persians practice their religion varies greatly; nor does it take long to appreciate that deeply held prejudices and suspicions of each other continue to exist, informed in great part by religious differences.