

Interview

RIDDLES OF THE BOOK

When is it likely that the Qur'an was composed, and how many strata of composition does it consist of?

THE TRADITION IS that the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of twenty-two years, between 610 and 632. Muslims believe that Muhammad was not literate, and so he could not himself have produced the Qur'an. He memorized it, and a few of his followers memorized some parts of it or wrote them down. So when he died in 632 there was no codex as such. Different disciples had variants written down, creating a need around 650 to produce a canonical version, because 'Uthman—the Caliph at the time—feared these differences might cause splits among Muslims. So he put together a committee to produce a standard text for the faithful. That's the traditional account of the origin of the written text, which was in circulation by the middle of the seventh century CE. We have scarcely any documentary evidence from the seventh century itself, only oral traditions whose authenticity is hard to verify, with many conflicting narratives, which makes the task of the scholar very difficult. A very few exceptions exist, such as the inscription inside the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (built in 692) which documents a few verses from the Qur'an (e.g. 4.171–172).

As a historian, when you start examining the Qur'an, you realize that this is a very difficult text. It is not like the Hebrew Bible, and can't be compared to the Gospels. It doesn't tell us the story of a person or a people.

The Hebrew Bible is the story of the Israelites; the Gospels record the story of Jesus's ministry. The Qur'an is not a story of the Arabs or of Muhammad's ministry. Its unique character as a narrative poses particular problems for the historian. If you only read the Qur'an, you would not know much about Mecca, Muhammad, and Arabia. Muslims have always read the Qur'an by using the books on the Life of Muhammad to help explain what the Qur'an intends. There is nothing like it, which actually is something that the Qur'an acknowledges. Aside from some verses that address legal matters, the Qur'an has a tendency to be brief and alludes to stories, events and issues with the assumption that its direct audience already knows them.

Some modern historians have postulated a human agent to have produced it, but was there one author or several authors? For a long time scholars in the field—the most influential was John Wansbrough—believed that the Qur'an was finalized at the end of the eighth century, or the beginning of the ninth. Since we have some early inscriptions and a recent discovery of partial manuscripts of the Qur'an that can be dated to the late seventh or early eighth century, that view is now discredited. The material and the type of script used tell us when these were produced. For example, the Muslim world was by and large using paper by the middle of the eighth century, or the early ninth. Leather, papyrus and parchment were abandoned because they were so much less practical. Script is also important. In the seventh century the principal script was Kufic, believed to have been invented in Iraq. Later, as Muslims started to develop new styles of writing, this was completely abandoned. So, by and large, anything written in Kufic script must come from the seventh or eighth century, especially if it is on papyrus or parchment.

Where was this new manuscript evidence found?

When the Great Mosque in Sana'a was being renovated in the early 1970s, a secret attic was discovered above a false ceiling, containing a mass of old manuscripts. The Middle Eastern tradition (which applies to Christians and Jews as well) is that if a manuscript has the name of God or the name of the Prophet on it, you can't simply destroy it. The best thing you can do is put it away, or bury it, as with the Dead Sea Scrolls or the Nag Hamadeh texts. You do so not to hide them for hiding's sake, but to keep them from getting corrupted and thus insulting God. That was the case in Sana'a. A German scholar was allowed to study the finds, but she

has published very little on them for fear of the political consequences of doing so; it seems the Yemeni government threatened Germany with repercussions if anything embarrassing appeared. But from a few of what are believed to be very early parchments in the cache, using Kufic script, we know that they date to the late seventh or early eighth century, and we can already see one significant difference with the canonical version of the Qur'an. The traditional story tells us there were no serious variations between the different versions assembled by Caliph 'Uthman around the year 650, though we know that down to the eighth century more popular versions of the Qur'an, without major discrepancies from the canonical text, were retained in certain regions—Iraq or Syria—out of local pride. The Yemeni manuscript, however, contains a very serious divergence. In the canonical Qur'an, there is a verse with the imperative form 'say' [*qul*]*—*God instructing Muhammad—whereas in the San'a text, the same verse reads 'he said' [*qala*]. That suggests some early Muslims may have perceived the Qur'an as the word of the Prophet, and it was only some time later that his reported speech became a divine command. There is also some serious variation with respect to the size of some chapters.

One other early variation is attested. In the Dome of the Rock, three sets of verses from different parts of the Qur'an referring to Jesus can be seen. In the original of one of these Jesus says: 'Peace on me the day I was born, the day I die, and the day I am raised from death.' The inscription in the Dome of the Rock, however, reads: 'Peace on Jesus the day he was born, the day he died, and the day he was raised from death.' Here the switch from the first to the third person isn't a major change, but could be a kind of variation from the official Qur'an.

What about internal layering in the canonical version itself?

This raises a larger problem about the composition of the Qur'an as text. There is a huge difference between the Meccan verses—those believed to have been revealed or composed in Mecca between 610 and 622—and those revealed or composed in Medina between 622 and 632. The same book contains two very contrasting styles. In the first, rhyme is key. Verses are short and rather ambiguous, with lots of references no-one really understands. Scholars have suggested that some of these verses, especially the very early ones that are now at the end of the Qur'an, may have had a liturgical function, since they seem to involve a priest saying

something and the community responding, ritualistically. One term you can use to describe the Meccan parts of the Qur'an is unitarian—they call for a strict monotheism that doesn't treat Christians and Jews as outsiders, invoking Abraham as the spiritual grandfather of all who worship one God. That's understandable, because when Muhammad was in Mecca, he had no position of leadership there. But he could win followers by railing against Arab-style polytheism—not paganism, of which the Qur'an is dismissive, but a polytheism where there is a main god (the God of monotheism) whose worship has been corrupted by the addition of other deities as intermediaries (lesser gods of Mecca) or partners (the Trinity). In this sense, the God of the Qur'an is an extremely Biblical God—a jealous deity who refuses to be associated with any others, insisting that if you were to worship him, you have to worship him alone, and if you do not, he is very vengeful.

When Muhammad gets to Medina, on the other hand, he is no longer an average religious person. He is now a Prophet and Statesman: the religious leader of his followers, and a political leader in a city that includes people who do not belong to his religious community. In Medina there were Jews, polytheists, and new immigrants from Mecca called Muslims. In Mecca, everybody was a cousin of everybody else—it was one tribe of Quraysh, and they had to settle their problems by the law of the tribe. In Medina, there were different tribes, unrelated to one another, different religions, different communities. So when Muhammad becomes head of all of them, the Qur'an suddenly assumes a different form. It becomes less poetic, more prosaic, focusing on legal boundaries and questions of jurisprudence, and increasingly aggressive against other monotheists and definitely very aggressive against polytheism.

The division between the two components of the texts is clear-cut?

Modern scholars accept the traditional scheme that parts are Meccan and other parts Medinan, though we are not always a hundred per cent sure which is which. For instance, we are told of several individual verses revealed in Mecca that were included in chapters that were revealed in Medina, and vice-versa. And because we do not have a clear chronology of the verses, no attempt to write the Qur'an in exact chronological order can succeed (the Orientalist Richard Bell tried it and only embarrassed himself). The language of the text is clearly evolving, some words dropping out completely, and new ones emerging. There are also some basic

grammatical mistakes in the Qur'an—sometimes a sentence starts in the singular and ends in the plural, some vowels go wrong in the declensions. This is from the viewpoint of the linguist; from the traditional vantage point, since the Qur'an is miraculous, these are not errors. It is important to point out here that when the official canonical text was put together around 650, the committee opted to arrange the Qur'an in decreasing order, starting with the longest chapters and ending with the shortest. They put a short opening chapter at the beginning, and scholars in the first few centuries debated whether this was actually part of the Qur'an or not.

Are there any anachronisms in the text—if not, would that confirm an early dating of it?

Yes, if the Qur'an were from the late eighth or early ninth century, there would be philological traces of that. If you look at the famous Apocalypse Tapestry at Angers, dating from the fourteenth century, which illustrates the Book of Revelation (in the New Testament), in one panel the figure of a lion with seven heads holding a fleur-de-lys (representing France) faces a dragon with seven heads (representing England): here the Hundred Years' War between France and England is being projected back onto a vision formed 1300 years earlier. If the Qur'an was a later production, it would reflect some of the bitter disputes that broke out among the faithful once the Prophet died—major theological splits and definitely political conflicts, revolving around his succession. But the Qur'an says nothing about the question of succession.

So there is no reason to doubt that the Qur'an we have today resembles very closely the Qur'an the Prophet Muhammad told his followers was the revelation he had received. There is, however, a caveat to keep in mind. In the Arabic alphabet, there are many letters that have the same shape—what differentiates them as sounds is either the vowel that they carry, or the dots. But this was not the case in the seventh century. They had not yet invented vowels and dots. For example, the three consonants *jim*, *ha'* and *kha'* (and likewise other pairs or triplets) were written using the same letter. Similarly, you have several other letters that are not consonantly related at all—the *ba'* would have a dot under; the *ya'*, two dots under; and the *nun*, one dot above—yet all have the same shape when you write them without dots, especially at the beginning and in the middle of a word. If you have a word of

four letters, and each one can have two or three ways of reading it, then we have a mess. Sometimes the context tells you the meaning, which makes it easier to guess how to read un-dotted letters. But often it does not. For example, a major difference between Sunnis and Shi'is revolves around a vowel and a hook. In one verse of the Qur'an, a word can be read either as *umma*, 'community', or *a'imma*, 'Imams', to form 'blessings on the umma' for the Sunnis, or 'blessings on the Imams' for the Shi'is—changing the whole dynamic of the chapter, which for Shi'is validates the institution of the Imamate, whereas for Sunnis it authorizes the community to decide who rules it.

After Muhammad's death, the Qur'an was being read by people who had learnt Arabic, but were not native speakers and did not know the oral traditions behind the Qur'an. Each was proposing different ways of reading certain words. So around the year 700 another committee was assembled—this was a contribution of the Umayyad dynasty—to put in the vowels and the dots, in order to fix the text firmly so that anybody who didn't know the oral Qur'an could pick it up and read it. So the *jim* is now written with a dot under the letter; the *ha'* carries no dot; the *kha'* comes with a dot above the letter.

But each side acquired a single agreed version of its own?

No, by the time of the Umayyad codification, many different ways of reading the Qur'an were already established and in circulation. So instead of causing a split among Muslims by insisting on just one reading, scholars decided in the eighth century to incorporate seven readings as canonical, and even tolerate other less important readings as well. Ever since, there have been several canonically sanctioned ways of reading many words in the Qur'an.

Does that mean an ardent young Muslim, reading the Qur'an and wishing to master it properly, requires an apparatus explaining what the variations are?

No and yes. To make things simpler for children, texts are produced according to one reading, which you memorize in a Qur'an school. But if you want to study and teach the text properly, you have to learn the field of exegesis, and there you are taught the variations. That became a science—any teacher of the Qur'an has to know them all. In the late nineteenth century, however, a committee in Egypt produced a Qur'an

for modern Muslims with the aim of unifying the world of Islam. With mass-production and distribution of Qur'ans, that version became pretty much used everywhere, killing off any general awareness that there are different readings of the Qur'an. In that sense, most contemporary Muslims are not practising their Islam correctly, because although some can read the Qur'an, they are not aware of the way it was revealed or is supposed to be read.

When you say they can read it, surely Arabic has undergone many modifications since the seventh or eighth century?

Absolutely. Very little of the Qur'an is intelligible to an ordinary Arabic speaker today. Nor is it classical Arabic. The language of the Qur'an is in part the dialect of Mecca, in part that of other tribes of the time. It has a lot in common with pre-Islamic poetry of the late sixth century—images, allusions, metaphors, idioms, brevity of words. This was a kind of poetry in which a horse could be invoked across a poem of ninety-four lines with a different word designating it each time—incredibly, the same word for the horse is never used twice. None of this was written down, but starting in the eighth century scholars began to commit such poems to writing as a way of explaining the Qur'an. Classical Arabic, by contrast, is a language fabricated in Iraq in the eighth century, predominantly by Persian clerics and bureaucrats who had to administer an empire ruled by Arabs. They needed to master the language, so they started writing the first grammar books and dictionaries, which didn't exist before then. So classical Arabic, because it was produced in a quite different milieu, doesn't give you all the knowledge that you need in order to understand the Qur'an. Modern standard Arabic is something entirely different again. It's another nineteenth-century invention, created by a committee in Egypt in the late 1800s, as a language designed to be taught in schools, with the aim of promoting pan-Arab—not Islamic—unity.

The Qur'an is often presented as the culmination of a monotheistic tradition, with a stratigraphy of Jewish layers and Christian layers that is extremely visible. Is that correct?

In a sense, that's correct—but it's necessary to understand in what sense. For a long time, scholars would say that the Qur'an is very close to this or that passage in the Bible or New Testament, but Muhammad was a bit confused, misconstruing his sources. But now that we know better

the traditions of Syriac Christianity and the Rabbinical lore, we can say that the Qur'an parallels what a Rabbinical commentator or a Christian exegete was expounding at the time on the Bible or New Testament. As I said earlier, it's wrong to compare the Qur'an to the Jewish Bible or the Gospels—you have to compare it to exegetical traditions around them in the world of Late Antique Christianity and Judaism. It's an engagement with living Christian and Jewish cultures, and 600 years of Christian reflection on the Jewish and Christian scriptures, or Rabbinical reflections on the Torah and Mishnah.

Muhammad lived, of course, in close proximity to Christians and Jews. But there was something particular about Mecca that can better explain the emergence of a new monotheistic creed there. This was a religious city, with a sacred shrine at its centre. But it was also a commercial city, in which the logic of trade had altered its original religious practices. The elders of Mecca took the line: why do we need to restrict worship in Mecca to our god? If we open it up and let everybody bring their own intercessory deities, or angels or saints, and put them here, then every year they'll come and this will generate a lot of trade and profit for us. That will make the city more important, and better able to compete with other religious centres in Arabia. This is why the Qur'an is obsessed with polytheism. Muhammad reflects the tensions of a society where religion is felt to have been corrupted. His preaching is a call to return to an original and pure monotheism, the monotheism of Abraham. But he eventually went a little bit too far with his preaching, and when his movement looked as if it might put the well-being of Mecca at risk, he was expelled.

Once he got to Medina, the whole context changed. In the Meccan parts of the Qur'an, there are lots of positive references to Christians and Jews. In the Medinan parts, animosity against Christians and Jews surfaces abruptly in the Qur'an, in verses that are often very aggressive against them. All of a sudden, you have to fight these people. Not only do you attack their theological positions, you must wage actual war against them. There were scarcely any Christians in Medina; they didn't pose any political or military threat to the authority of Muhammad. But Jews were numerous and the tradition makes clear they posed a religious and military challenge to him. That's why Muhammad ordered the massacre of one Jewish clan and expelled two others.

If one looks at two authorities on this period, Hugh Kennedy and Fred Donner, many aspects are common in their account of it.¹ But there is one point on which they appear to diverge. Kennedy says emphatically that the main form of monotheism among Arabs was Christianity, but Jews were the main enemy of Muhammad in Medina, whereas Donner says there were Jews in most parts of Arabia, but many more anti-Trinitarian passages in the Qur'an, directed against Christians, than objections to Judaism. He also observes that there is no trace of Christian asceticism in the Qur'an, whose attitude towards the pleasures and possibilities of this world is much closer to what he calls the common-sense righteousness of Rabbinical Judaism. What's your view?

To some extent, I think Donner's position is more tenable. But we also need to understand what Kennedy is saying. Christianity was widespread among the Arabs in the sense that the majority of the Arabs were actually not in what is today Arabia proper. They had spread to medieval Syria (modern Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Israel) and Iraq, and there they had converted to Christianity starting in the third century. The Arabs in Eastern Arabia (modern Kuwait, north-eastern Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE and Oman) were also predominantly Christians as well as many Arabs in Yemen and Najran (on the border of modern Yemen and Saudi Arabia). But in the Hijaz, where Islam emerged, there were very few Christians but lots of Jews, especially in Medina. There are many parallels to Rabbinical Judaism in the Qur'an: the need to live in observance of God's law, and enjoy what God gives you in moderation. There are also far more references to the Jewish Bible than to the Gospels in the Qur'an, echoing Rabbinical exegesis of it. If you compare the famous story of the binding of Isaac in the Qur'an with Genesis XXII, you see that in the Qur'an, Isaac is a very active participant in the whole episode—he pushes his father: 'You have to do exactly what God commanded you.' None of that is in the text of Genesis, but in the Rabbinical tradition of the period, influences from the Christian narrative of the crucifixion of Jesus were incorporated into the story of Isaac, making him much more active, as we find in the Qur'an. This isn't surprising. The few archaeological digs done in Saudi Arabia have pointed to the existence of Jews in many parts of the Hijaz.

¹ Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, London 2014, pp. 20, 36–7, and Fred Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, Cambridge, MA 2010, pp. 30–1, 67–8.

So far as Christianity is concerned, what was Muhammad's view of the Christian doctrine? The Qur'an attacks the idea of the Trinity, and takes Christians to task for deifying Jesus. But otherwise its construction of Jesus's ministry is exactly the mainstream Christian position. He is described as the Word of God (i.e. the *Logos*), and the Spirit from God. The Qur'an reproduces the canonical narratives of the Annunciation of Jesus, and adopts one of the earliest positions on Mary's Immaculate Conception. There is no reference to Jesus as the son of Joseph: Jesus has no father in the Qur'an. There are no traces in the Qur'an of the heretical versions of the story of Jesus. It draws the line only at his divinity. That's what the Qur'an doesn't tolerate.

What's your view of Donner's argument that Muhammad was addressing a community of believers that, in his mind, was defined simply by its faith in one god as against several—rather than preaching a new creed, which would come to be called Islam?

Although questions can certainly be raised about Donner's theory, there is a lot in the Qur'an that speaks to it. We need to understand the frame of reference. If you read the Gospel of John without knowing its historical context, you might think this was an anti-semitic text. Except that scholarship has found it came out of the most Jewish group of early Christians—a community that had just been kicked out of the synagogue, and was reacting in anger against its expulsion. Or if you looked at the books of the Prophets in the Hebrew Bible, without knowing that their authors were Israelites, you might think these people really hated the Jews. In the same way, if you go back to the Qur'an, and think of it as the writing of a monotheist who conceives himself as heir to these traditions, it's not that Muhammad is being specifically anti-Jewish here or anti-Christian there—if you are inside the tradition, and looking at what you consider transgressions against it, they will seem more pronounced than if you are an outsider. The message of the Qur'an, like that of Biblical prophets, is that your duty is to live according to God's law, and if you do not, God's wrath will fall upon you.

Still, a central tenet of Judaism is that the Jews are a chosen people—others are not. Does the Qur'an touch on this?

Yes, the Qur'an actually affirms that the Israelites were once the chosen people (most of Chapter 3 is exactly about that) but this changed

because they rebelled against God and violated his commandments. In this respect, it parallels the Christian notion that the Jews transgressed against God so many times that God decided in the end to open the covenant to everyone—the theology of Paul. Now it is the whole of humanity. There it falls in line with a Christian influence.

The Qur'an issues one specific, clear-cut rebuke to Christians: belief in the Trinity is a lamentable deviation from monotheism. Is there any comparable point of doctrine where the Qur'an takes issue with Jewish belief?

There is one—and nobody knows where it came from. The Qur'an attacks the Jews for saying that Uzayr is the son of God. Some scholars identify this with Ezra, but no one really knows the origins of the belief. Otherwise, Jews are simply reproached for not living according to the law—some work on the Sabbath, for example—and so disobeying the covenant they had with God. There is also something else at work, however. That is a re-centring of the tradition around Abraham, and thus a downgrading of Moses. This was perfectly logical. You are, in Mecca, starting a religious movement. What do you say if someone challenges your legitimacy as a true monotheist? You're not a Jew, you're not a Christian, you're an Arab—you have never been sent prophets from God before. So you have to think of a link to the Covenant. In the Jewish tradition all legitimacy descends from that moment when Abraham followed God and then was tested by being asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. Jewish exclusivity restricts the Covenant to a lineage: Abraham–Isaac–Jacob–Twelve Tribes of Israel. Christianity challenged this exclusivity of descent, and opened it up. So if you look at the genealogy of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, there you have two issues that early Christians were struggling with. On the one hand, Jesus's genealogy is traced back to Adam who, it is said, was the son of God, so the point is to say that all the children of Adam are the children of God. But there is something else, which in itself doesn't make any logical sense. This genealogy runs through Joseph, though he is not 'the father' of Jesus. The question is why early Christians were running the genealogy of Jesus through Joseph if they believed he was not his father. The answer lies in the issue of legitimacy: Jesus cannot be the Messiah unless he is from the house of David, and Joseph provides that link. Mary is not from the house of David. She is from the house of Aaron (the brother of Moses).

That's exactly what Muhammad needed, a lineage from Abraham in order to be part of the Covenant and thus have legitimacy as a prophet. Hence a genealogy is constructed that goes back to Ishmael, Abraham's son not by his wife Sarah, but his concubine Hagar. For the Rabbinical tradition, only Isaac and his son Jacob counted. If you were not a descendant of Jacob, you were not part of the Covenant (although some rabbis were interested in the fate of Ishmael and consider him in the Covenant). Now, a new scripture had come to a descendant of Ishmael, and the Qur'an seems to emphasize that it was sent to the Arabs. Even though its message is addressed beyond the Arabs to everyone else, God has now come to the Arabs, a people that he never fully engaged before.

Donner stresses that the term 'Muslims', meaning 'those who submit', is used very little in the Qur'an—the preferred term is 'believers'. He contends that for Muhammad submitting and believing were not the same thing. Submission was for polytheists, belief was for all monotheists, including Christians and Jews who already believed in one God. His implication is that Muhammad's project was not to create any separate religion, but simply to unify a community of believers.² Do you think that's correct?

I would agree, with some reservations. I think that Donner is right that at the outset Muhammad's project in Mecca was not to start something totally new. But in Medina, he confronted a need to define not only the rules governing his own followers, but also his own community's relationship with those who were not members of it. That's where you start seeing the first signs of a change. And once he died, it was easy for his followers to say, these are the teachings of a new religion. With the subsequent Arab conquests came direct confrontation with the world of Byzantine Christianity and the Zoroastrianism of the Persian Empire, which forced a more clear-cut doctrinal definition. But so far as we can tell, for at least half a century there was no eagerness to make or accept conversions in the territories conquered by the Arab armies. That fits with a sense that they were part of a community of believers already, not bearers of something new.

It's not until the reign of the fifth Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik (685–705) that serious steps were taken to make Islam something very distinctive. An example, which has received little attention from

² Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, pp. 70–2.

scholars, is the attestation of the faith—what in Arabic we call *shahada*. All the *shahada* that we possess from inscriptions, coins or papyri of the seventh century—even the inscription in the Dome of the Rock—read: ‘There is no God but God, one with no partners.’ No monotheist of any kind could object to that. ‘Abd al-Malik ordered new coinage to be issued that read ‘There is no God but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God’. No Christian or Jew would accept that. This was an Islamic credo intended to separate Muslims from other monotheists, and proclaim their superiority over them. Later, Shi‘is would develop their own *shahada*, which has three parts: ‘There is no God but God; Muhammad is the messenger of God; and ‘Ali is the friend of God.’ The formula identifies who is a Shi‘i and who is not.

Wasn't 'Abd al-Malik also seeking to create a new legitimacy for Umayyad rule, after the civil wars that had split the Muslim world in the preceding decades?

Absolutely. Coming to power as a counter-caliph in 685, with no legitimacy whatsoever, ‘Abd al-Malik championed a new project of Islam to gain acceptance of his rule. In Jerusalem—we often forget this—he deliberately built the Dome of the Rock on the site of the Temple of Solomon. This was a way of saying: we Muslims are now the more powerful, we are the heirs of Judaism, whose legitimacy reverts to Islam. His strategy was a combination of Arabization—making Arabic the language of the empire—and Islamization: creating an exclusive Islamic identity to make all Muslims follow the same patterns. He also sought to promote himself as God’s Caliph, rather than as a successor to the Prophet. The term caliph means ‘successor’, and before him, everybody used it to mean a successor of Muhammad, with a lesser theological implication. ‘Abd al-Malik hired poets to go around celebrating him as God’s Caliph in every sense.

This set in train a whole set of consequences, which tells us something about how far Muhammad perceived himself as starting a new religion and how far this was a subsequent development of his followers. If you look at the evolution of Islamic jurisprudence, the *Shari‘a*, you see a very striking phenomenon: the first four caliphs—this may sound a bit shocking—by and large didn’t give a damn what the Prophet said. They didn’t have to clutch their heads and say, I wonder what the Prophet thought about this? They would give their own rulings, and these would

often be in direct contradiction with what someone remembered the Prophet saying. Some Muslim jurists in the first two centuries of Islam did the same.

For example?

There is the famous case of whether all creatures of the sea are edible or not. The Prophet supposedly said they were, except for the frog. The first Caliph, Abu Bakr, said everything is permissible. Abu Hanifa (699–767), who established what became the Hanafi school of law, said only fish. No Muslim jurist would dare say that only what the Prophet said is *Shari‘a* and the other statements are not. Each has its place in the body of Islamic jurisprudence, so as an individual you have the choice of taking the word of the Prophet, Caliph Abu Bakr, or jurist Abu Hanifa. There are larger contradictions than this. For instance, the Qur’an tells us that marriage for pleasure—*mut‘a*—is acceptable. When warriors went out to fight, they could contract carnal unions with women for a period of a week, in a kind of formal marriage that was annulled after seven days. Caliph ‘Umar banned this practice. So Sunnis don’t practise it, because ‘Umar forbade it, even though the Qur’an allows it. Then there is punishment for adultery. The Qur’an says the penalty is stoning, in line with Jewish tradition, but it became a hundred lashes. If the Qur’an is a revealed text whose prescriptions Muslims should adopt, why is there so much in *Shari‘a* that is contrary to the Qur’an? The answer is that for Muslims, the Qur’an is actually not the number-one source of guidance for conduct. For Sunnis, it is the *Sunna* of the Prophet, which is spread across various massive compilations, and is complemented with an even bigger body of opinions by major early figures sanctioned by Sunnism. So even if a Qur’anic ruling contradicts the Prophet, it doesn’t matter—the corpus of *Sunna* is what you go by. The Shi‘is follow the teachings of their imams.

How does that square with the idea that the Qur’an is not the teaching of Muhammad, but directly the word of God? Don’t God’s pronouncements override any human word?

That’s not how it came to work within the Muslim world. Symbolically, the word of God is definitely what counts. Actually, however, it is striking that all the movements that rose to argue that the word of God trumps everybody else’s got marginalized in Islam—every single movement

of this kind was a failure. For Shi'is, what counts are the words of the Imams, of whom the Prophet is one. For Sunnis it is the larger body of sayings of the Prophet, his companions, their successors and a few later key scholars. So whereas the Qur'an can be treated quite flexibly, the Imams and the *Sunna* become untouchable—if you start questioning or doubting them, the whole system collapses. That's why the cartoons about the Prophet generated far more violence in the Muslim world than anything else.

All theological texts are rife with contradictions—the four Gospels don't agree with each other, the Pentateuch is a mass of discrepancies. How coherent is the Qur'an itself?

Coherence is a modern criterion. Any medieval text is full of contradictions. When a writer makes a case, he musters all the arguments needed to support it, and then he moves to another topic, using arguments to make a case that might contradict what he said a few pages earlier. So there are plenty of contradictions in the Qur'an, and in basic laws supposedly derived from it. Is alcohol banned in the Qur'an, or not? Ultimately, *Shari'a* says it *is* banned. But the Qur'an tells us that wine was created by Satan, and then in another verse (16.67) says God created dates and grapes to be enjoyed as alcohol or as food. So God is the creator of alcohol, and Satan is the creator of alcohol. Obviously the tradition tried to make sense of the contradiction, but its solutions are not always logical. Does the Qur'an preach predestination or free will? You can list verses in support of either position, and that goes for pretty much everything in it. The theology of the Qur'an speaks to the moment, rather than to one uniform position across twenty-two years of different experiences, different engagements. It reflects the circumstances of each situation in that span of time, and their contradictory requirements.

Looking at the overall religious message of the Qur'an, what are the fundamental tenets it passed to the faith that became Islam?

There are five pillars of Islam. The unity and singularity of God is the absolute touchstone. But you also cannot be a believer, and by extension a Muslim, without believing in angels. If you doubt angels, you are not a believer, for without angels there is no communication between God and humanity, and by extension the validity of scripture is in doubt. Nor can you be a monotheist without accepting the prophets who came

before Muhammad, and the messages they brought. You cannot be a monotheist without believing in the reality of the resurrection and Day of Judgement. All these are ‘musts’. Then, your duty as a monotheist is to abide by God’s law, as revealed in the Qur’an and embodied in God’s *Shari’a* (which the Qur’an does not fully define). *Shari’a*, however, is defined a little differently according to each school of law in Islam (four in Sunnism and a few in Shi’ism). Nowadays, these things are much less clear to Muslims, but a hundred years ago you didn’t say, I’m a Muslim, period—you had to say, I’m Hanafi, I’m Shafi’i, I am Imami, that is, specifying the school to which you adhered.

Part of the reason why there is so much chaos in the Muslim world today is because most people don’t know what *Shari’a* is. For there is no one Islamic *Shari’a*—each school of law defined its own, and you were a Muslim according to the *Shari’a* of this school. It touched almost every aspect of life. For example, when someone died, they needed to be buried according to the *Shari’a* of the school they followed. If the ritual was not observed, it was a huge affront to the deceased, much like not burying them at all. Nowadays, all of this is obfuscated and unclear. Many people just say, I’m a Muslim, and claim they follow Islamic *Shari’a*. But what is Islamic *Shari’a*? Where do you find it? They have no clue. They are liable to think *Shari’a* is defined by some cleric or other. But what if you are from Pakistan and this cleric is from a school of law that’s not practised in Pakistan? The eclectic practices in the modern Islamic world are more a reflection of its chaos than actual observance or clarity about what Islam is.

You mentioned the eschatological component in the message of the Prophet—the belief that a day of judgement is coming, not far off—on which some scholars lay considerable emphasis. What’s your assessment of this?

This is one of the themes where you can see an evolution within the Qur’an. In the Meccan parts, it’s much more pronounced. The eschaton as the End of Time is a trope that works only if it strikes at the imagination of your listeners as their last chance: Judgement Day is around the corner, and unless you repent now, you are doomed. In the Medina period, Judgement Day remains a reality, but has become more remote. I say this because there is one very puzzling feature in these parts of the Qur’an. The one area of the law that is prescribed in incredibly minute detail is the law of inheritance. If a movement is obsessed by the end of

time, why would it go to such pains to lay down exactly how an inheritance is to be divided? Not just, give your inheritance to your son, or if you have a daughter, then a half or a quarter to her, but—what does the mother get? What does the father get? What if only women survive? Many different scenarios of inheritance are envisaged. This is clearly not a community living in panic before an imminent day of judgement. The shift is very like that in late first-century Christian writings, when the realization dawned that the new Jerusalem wasn't coming—we can't keep waiting for it, we have to live, so how do we live as Christians? The focus of the tradition changes, and I think this happened fairly rapidly within Muhammad's lifetime, rather than after his death. Once he moved to Medina, he became a ruler, and the religious dynamic altered. He was no longer struggling to unify a community with an eschatological warning, he could use political force to impose his will. At that point, the Day of Judgment becomes an afterthought rather than a main focus.

What biographical evidence do we have about the life of Muhammad himself?

The earliest biography—*Sira*—is from the middle of the eighth century, by Ibn Ishaq of Medina, though we have no copy of it. The work he composed is preserved only in quotation in ninth-century histories, or as some kind of totality by a writer who essentially plagiarized most of it almost eighty years after Ibn Ishaq's death. Scholars have concluded he produced a first version, then acquired new information and changed certain stories, often making them longer. Ibn Ishaq's style was very interesting. He would bring lots of different reports together and with great skill weave a story out of them, producing a coherent narrative that was quite new and unlike what was circulating before. In this respect, every biographer of the Prophet created a fresh portrait of him, because although the materials they might be using came from someone else, the collage they made of them offered a different icon of him each time. Ibn Ishaq produced an image of the Prophet of which previous generations had no inkling. Later, other writers—using oral traditions—introduced miracles into the Prophet's life or mystical reflections, generating a figure who wasn't there in Ibn Ishaq. So, while nothing certain can be said about the life of the Prophet, we can be certain that a process of glorification began not long after his death, and Muslims continued to embellish it, as new movements needed to construct the image of a Prophet closer to what they preached or promoted, or even envisioned, that the life of a prophet should look like.

So you suddenly start seeing, in the ninth and tenth centuries—and ever since—biographies that depict the Prophet as a mystic. We don't have any before the ninth century, and even in the ninth century there were mystics who acknowledged that the Prophet wasn't one. But once mystics became rulers in the Muslim world, the Prophet *had* to become a mystic. More recent biographies portray Muhammad as a champion of human rights, feminism, democracy, etc.

In much the same way, but a bit earlier, Muslims started to collect stories of miracles attributed to Muhammad, although the Qur'an says that while the Jewish prophets and Jesus performed many miracles, Muhammad did not. The only miracle of Muhammad is the transmission of the Qur'an. So why should there be a biography of the Prophet full of miracles? If you are operating in a Christian milieu, how can you expect people to accept your prophet if he performed no miracles? All the biographies are shaped by these different agendas. Once Islam began to crystallize as a distinctive religion in the late Umayyad period, the first thing it needed was a story of the Prophet. The Qur'an doesn't give you that. But, more importantly, you have a scripture you need to explain, which can only be done by recounting how the Prophet received it. That's why the *Sira* was invented—to provide a chronology of the Prophet, and to help explain the Qur'an.

Think of the development of Christianity. Paul saw no reason to write a narrative life of Jesus. It was at least another twenty years before the Gospel of Mark was written, around 70 CE. That was when Christians started to ask, who was this Jesus of Nazareth? Before that, they were all his followers, or the followers of his followers. Now, there were people in Rome who had never heard of Palestine—they had never been there, knew nothing about it, and needed to be told. So each time, in the evolution of any religious movement, a point arrives where such information becomes crucial. Hence the Gospels. Then, in the second century, Christians started to wonder: what about Mary? Who was she? So you get the Protevangelium of James, followed in due course by gospels of Jesus as a child, in a kind of natural progression. The *Sira* is exactly the same, as Muslims started to ask toward the end of the seventh century and the beginning of the eighth century: who was this Muhammad? Where did he live and what was his life like? The demand produced a supply, also with an eye towards the interpretation of the Qur'an.

That's why, without the *Sira*, which is full of historiographical problems, we cannot understand the Qur'an. Countless Muslim modernists in Egypt, India and elsewhere wanted to go Protestant-style, *sola scriptura*, just by the Qur'an as God's word. But they all realized that they have no recourse to understand the Qur'an on its own without the life of the Prophet. Thus all the problems of classical Islam were brought back into modern Islam. The Prophet was a man of the seventh century, and the different medieval books on his life presented him according to the consensus of pre-modern ideals. Now we are living in the twenty-first century. He married fourteen women—what Muslim government could put up with that from a legal standpoint? It would be an embarrassment.

Within this body of literature, are there any significant disputes about the life of the Prophet?

Oh yes. We do not know when he was born. We do not know what was the first revelation he received—different sets of Qur'anic verses are given. We do not know where he was when he received the revelation. Did he go to Jerusalem in the flesh, or in spirit, or in a dream? Did his Ascension to Heaven happen in Mecca or was it the same as his Night Journey to Jerusalem? In modern Islamic textbooks we have a canonical narrative, or at least a very much more harmonized one; but in classical Muslim narratives, this is not the case. Aside from the broad picture, many details cannot be ascertained. Shi'is have their own versions of the *Sira*, which Sunnis reject. For instance, there is the story of an encounter toward the end of Muhammad's life, where he put his hand on 'Ali's shoulder, passing the mantle of leadership to him with the words 'He who takes me as his lord, to him 'Ali is lord'. Due to its political implication, one can see how such an episode becomes an issue of contention between Shi'is and Sunnis. Shi'is affirm that it happened. Sunnis deny it ever happened, or deny that Muhammad said what he said, or that he put his hand on 'Ali's shoulder. Since we have virtually nothing in writing from the first century about Muhammad, we are at the mercy of oral traditions patched together from the eighth century onwards, including Ibn Ishaq's attempt to blend them into continuous narratives. But because so many scholars attempted to do the same, we now have many variations on his life, and a confusing picture.

The other major component of tradition are the hadiths. How did they arise?

The *hadiths*, or sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, represent the raw material out of which the *Sunna* is formed. We refer to it as *Hadith*, that is, the massive body of *hadiths*. It has major legal relevance, and helps answer a lot of questions. Is it fine for me to drink alcohol: what did the Prophet say about that? Can I break my fast during the day: what did the Prophet say about that? When I enter my home, should I step in with my left or my right foot: what did the Prophet do? So the *Hadith* was needed to specify the *Shari'a*. Different groups started collecting *hadiths* perhaps as early as the late seventh century. But they proliferated on a large scale toward the end of the eighth and beginning of the ninth centuries. A famous legal scholar named Shafi'i emphasized that Muslims must live according to the rules of the perfect man, Muhammad, since only he had practised Islam flawlessly. Hence what comes first is his *Sunna*: what Muhammad said and did, and how he lived. If an issue is not addressed in the *Hadith* of Muhammad, one must look to the Qur'an, to see if it addresses the issue. If Muhammad and Qur'an disagree on an issue, the Muslim must follow what Muhammad said or did, for the belief is that his *Sunna* too comes from God. Obviously, Muslim scholars did not tolerate the idea that the *Hadith* and the Qur'an might disagree. Once Shafi'i defined right living in this way, it became urgent to collect as much as possible, or to invent, sayings and attribute them to the Prophet. Then volumes and volumes started to be collected of what are labelled good *hadiths*, and efforts were made to discount fabricated *hadiths*. What also happened is that a large number of sayings by Companions were also ascribed to the Prophet on the basis that they must have followed his model or heard whatever they said from him. So *Hadith* became a vast body of lore, much of which must have been invented, since it speaks to problems within the Muslim community—political succession, free will, predestination, and a great deal else—that arose only after the death of the Prophet.

The authenticity of this lore was never contested?

Oh yes, many scholars were liable to be called liars, and accused of fabricating *hadiths*. In theory, there was a strict science of *Hadith* scholarship to sort the wheat from the chaff. A source might in itself be trustworthy, but if it has only one line of transmission back to the Prophet, it cannot be depended on too much—it's called singular; or another source might have forgotten the name of the person who told them the *hadith*—that introduces some weakness into it; or sometimes the forger of a *hadith*

and chain of transmission to the Prophet can be detected, since we know he never met the person he claimed to have met and from whom he heard the *hadith*; and so on. Most of the collections that were made of *hadiths* excluded those deemed unreliable. The true, verifiable *hadiths* are called *Sahih* (sound). They are relatively few by comparison to the vast amount of *hadiths* in circulation. When Bukhari compiled his collection in the ninth century—he died in 870—he said that out of the close to 70,000 *hadiths* he examined, he could only authenticate as sound some 4,800—not even 10 per cent. It took three or four centuries before such recensions acquired authority, when they became required reading in the curricula of seminary schools. Before that, every important scholar of *Hadith* would produce his own collection. The advantage of Bukhari was that his compilation was relatively small in size. The collections of later scholars became larger and larger, with less and less verification. Once a *hadith* was put in circulation, irrespective of its authenticity or soundness, it was ultimately accepted by some scholars.

If we look at what are usually called the Arab conquests, there appears to be a notable gap between a very ecumenical faith, as portrayed by Donner and others, and the stunningly rapid expansion of the faith by force of arms. There seem to be two principal versions of what may have happened. One, which you find in Donner, argues that only minimal fighting can have occurred, since there's no archaeological evidence for much destruction in this period—there may have been some violent episodes, but only in passing, and if there was some plundering it was perhaps mainly by brigands. For a historian like Kennedy, by contrast, the expansion of Islam was rooted in the dynamic of Muhammad's unification of the Arabian peninsula itself, where the whole mode of Bedouin existence depended on tribal raids in which every male was by definition a warrior. Once the tribes were united in a common faith, so his case goes, such raids were no longer permitted, and the dynamic of Bedouin warfare was projected outwards into a sweeping series of external conquests. In a third version, a variant on the Kennedy position, which you find in Patricia Crone, the novelty of Islam was the marriage of the idea of a universal faith with a universal empire—there had been universal conquerors, like Alexander or others, before, but they didn't bring a faith, and you had universal faiths before, notably Christianity, but disconnected from the idea of a universal empire.³ Common to all these authorities is that the conquests

³ Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, pp. 106–18; Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, pp. 21–2, 58–9; Patricia Crone, 'Jihad: Idea and History', *openDemocracy*, 1 May 2007.

preceded any mass conversions, and that it's only towards the end of the ninth century that a majority-Muslim population came into being in today's Middle East. What's your view of the balance between these interpretations?

It was long customary to speak of the Islamic conquests, but now we realize that this is a misnomer. They were Arab conquests, or Arabo-Islamic conquests. Muhammad had accomplished the unification of Arabia by force—tradition made no secret of this. When the Prophet died, new alliances were capable of reshaping the peninsula, so Abu Bakr sent his generals to enforce the recently established unity on tribes that were now taking the chance to resist it. But as an astute leader, he then turned the anger that his campaigns aroused outwards—unleashing Bedouin energies on territories beyond the peninsula. In this respect, what became the Arab conquests resemble nomadic conquests throughout history, down through Mongol and Turkic times, in which the primary motivation of mounted warriors is plunder. What attracted the majority of Arab fighters was simply the prospect of loot—they didn't have in mind to become the new universal lords of the known Ancient World.

But it so happened that Arab raiders started to ride out from the peninsula at a time when the two main superpowers of the Ancient World, the Byzantine and Persian empires, were exhausted by half a century of conflicts between them, consuming their energies and finances in a series of wars, aggravated by religious disputes and palace coups within. So the Arabs descended on areas where the populations were eager for some kind of stability, and for the most part found societies ready to tolerate their rule rather than remain under Sassanid or Byzantine oppression. That doesn't mean that the conquerors were unconcerned with booty. But in the fertile territories and rich cultures of Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Iraq and Persia, the logic of raiding changed. Here it was not a question of attacking another desert tribe and making off with the spoils. These were communities and cities capable of paying them much more than could be gained by simply looting them. When the Arab armies reached Damascus, there are two traditions—that they seized it by force, or that they entered peacefully, in exchange for payment. Probably it was a mixture of the two, but the take-over largely occurred without a major battle. Jerusalem was conquered by peace in return for payment. Most of Egypt fell in the same way. The principal exceptions seem to have come in Iraq and Iran, where the Sassanian army put up more of a fight. But there a religious factor probably kicked in. Arab conquest met less resistance

in Syria or Egypt, because there the religious beliefs carrying it—this would fit Donner’s argument—were so close to those of the communities conquered. Iraq was predominantly either Christian or Jewish at the time, but under the control of a Persian empire whose Zoroastrian cult belonged to another religious universe.

We have a reflection of that contrast in Islamic law. For the most part, land in Syria and Egypt did not technically become the property of the Muslims—it remained the property of the local populations, who owed the Muslims a tax, the *jizya*. But in Iraq and Iran the land was owned by the Muslims, because they conquered these areas by force. This is a strong indication that, elsewhere in the Middle East, the Arab conquests were accomplished by relatively little violence. Donner is right to point to the absence of any archaeological evidence of widespread destruction—which is amazing given the magnitude of the military take-over. It was long assumed that certain strata of destruction were the work of Arab armies, but these proved on examination to come from the Persian conquest of 614. The conquests are better envisaged as the spreading-out of warrior tribes from the peninsula, which was probably suffering over-population, along lines that were initially quite traditional, but then they came up against a social landscape they were not ready for.

When the Arabs arrived in the Fertile Crescent and Egypt, they realized that they were a minority—not only a religious, but an ethnic minority—in the regions they now had to rule. They didn’t want to go back to Arabia. Mecca was largely abandoned by its tribe, whose members left for Damascus, for Egypt, for Iraq. Very few of the original inhabitants stayed in either Mecca or Medina, and the same held for many other settlements. Arabian society and economy didn’t offer much—the peninsula was arid, people were poor—whereas now they could enjoy the palaces and luxuries of the two empires they had inherited. Why go back to the desert? So the Arabs settled down in their conquests, aware they were an ethnic, linguistic and religious minority in them. Tradition tells us that in this period they banned conversion to Islam, which suggests how little the conquests were religiously motivated: the very opposite of the stock Western image of warriors holding the Qur’an in one hand, and the sword in the other—actually, since you can only hold the Qur’an with your right hand, all of these Arab fighters would have had to have been left-handed. In reality, the populations of Syria, Egypt and Iraq remained predominantly Christian—there was also a significant Jewish

presence—down to the ninth or tenth century. Iranian society remained, at a local level, mainly Zoroastrian or Christian until the ninth century. When conversions came, they were not under compulsion, but rather out of convenience—to get access to posts in the administration or army, or to all kinds of services and jobs that were open only to Muslims.

How did the concept of jihad figure, if at all, in the conquests? Crone speaks of 'missionary warfare', contending that the highest duty of the faithful was to fight for Islam. Do you regard this as mistaken?

Our only evidence for the original use of *jihad* comes from the Qur'an, where the term, and derivatives of its root *j-h-d*, can mean either of two things: to exert an effort, or to fight in the path of God. The first indicates striving in any endeavour—you make an effort to study, or to be a good person: 'exerting an effort' is the basic meaning of the term in Arabic. But the term also has a religious meaning, which has become idiomatic: to struggle in the path of God—often by waging war. It is there from the start. When the Qur'an uses *jihad* in this sense, the context is invariably warfare to deal with a danger threatening the Muslim community. In Medina, where Muhammad came under attack, and hit back, *jihad* was an ideological response to the challenges he faced. That doesn't mean it was necessarily defensive—it was the product of reciprocal hostility between the Prophet and his opponents.

By contrast, the Arab conquests are not typically described in our sources as examples of *jihad*—they are *futuh* in Arabic, which is the literal term for 'conquests'. Yet another term again was used for the campaigns under Abu Bakr to bring disaffected tribes back to the covenant that they had signed with the Prophet, after his death—this was war against apostasy, *riddah*. But once the centre of the Muslim world moved north to the ancient Near East, and the Umayyads came to power in 661, an expansionist Arab empire was created that clashed with Byzantine power and remnants of the old Sassanian Empire, dispatching forces into Afghanistan, North Africa and even Spain. This was no longer *futuh*: it was now *jihad*. Some good modern studies have examined the Umayyad Empire as a *jihad* state, unleashing a new kind of clash between the world of Islam and the world outside Islam. This is the first time you have a *jihad* between the Abode of Islam and the Abode of War—*dar al-Islam* and *dar al-Harb*. These two concepts did not exist before.

'Abd al-Malik was obliged to pay the Byzantines not to attack him, and concede territory to them, in a reversal of the pattern of Muslim expansion, because he was preoccupied with fighting opponents in the Muslim world itself. The result was that a new pre-emptive vision of *jihad* came into being, requiring virtually annual expeditions against the infidel. After 'Abd al-Malik, some scholars argued that the Caliph had an obligation to conduct a *jihad* campaign once a year. But when the Abbasids overthrew Umayyad rule in the mid-eighth century, they found the huge empire they inherited hard to govern, and these campaigns too costly and distracting. Not wanting to be bullied into them by scholars, they hired their own scholars to redefine *jihad* as a collective, not an individual duty. This transformed the practice. To give an example: prayer is an individual duty—your father or your son cannot do it on your behalf. You have to do it yourself. If you do not, it is a transgression against God, and you incur a penalty. Bakery, on the other hand, is not an individual duty—not everybody has to be a baker. But if a few individuals decide to be bakers, they can produce enough bread for everyone. *Jihad* was redefined as such a vocation: if a few do it sufficiently, that caters to the needs of society, and it is not incumbent on the rest.

This doctrine, expounded by scholars on the Abbasid payroll, irritated many other scholars, who preferred the previous definition of *jihad* as the duty of every individual—even if the Caliph himself did not call for it, it was the obligation of every Muslim to pick up their arms and go to the frontiers to fight. So in the early Abbasid period there were Turkish warriors, recently converted to Islam, who made the long journey from Central Asia to fight on the Byzantine frontier, because this is where they could perform the duty from which the caliphs were defaulting. The aim of redefining *jihad* was to tame it. Once it was a prerogative of the Caliph alone to call for *jihad*, he could come up with a million excuses to avoid performing it. The state could, of course, always invoke it when necessary, but most of the time the Abbasids had no intention of doing so—this was a period of thriving commerce between the Muslim world and the Byzantine Empire and India, which they did not want disrupted by every madcap saying, I am doing *jihad* because these are infidels.

What about the Ghaznavid campaigns in India, then?

They were the exceptions. Ghaznavid power, which extended over parts of Eastern Iran, most of Afghanistan, and into Central Asia, was

autonomous from Baghdad, though owing nominal allegiance to the Abbasid Caliphate. Ethnically, the Ghaznavid state was mainly Afghan, but with a mixture of Turks, Uzbeks and Kazakhs. At the end of the tenth and early eleventh century, its most famous ruler, Mahmud of Ghazna, invaded India seventeen times, destroying temples and looting temples and cities in the name of *jihad*, leaving a legacy of animosity between Hindus and Muslims that is remembered to this day in the Subcontinent. But this lay beyond the sway of the Abbasids.

Wouldn't the Crusades have revived ideas of jihad in the Middle East itself?

Indeed. For the Crusades posed a major challenge to the Muslim world: we thought we were the last religion of salvation, and now Christians are invading, grabbing territory in the heart of Islam, creating a panic that Mecca itself might fall—are they going to wipe us out? Such was the reaction. So you start seeing some attempts to recast *jihad* as once again a duty incumbent on every individual—the right to declare *jihad* had been appropriated by the caliphs, but the caliphs were sitting on their butts doing nothing. When Jerusalem was conquered by the Crusaders in 1099, a delegation of scholars—ironically, not from Syria or Jerusalem—set out for Baghdad to plead with the Abbasid caliph to declare *jihad* and send reinforcements to reclaim Jerusalem. The tradition says that the delegates arrived during the month of Ramadan and deliberately broke their fast in public during the daytime, a huge transgression, just to create a shock—what we have lost is much more than what you see us doing. The Abbasid caliph remained completely indifferent.

The result was more and more voices arguing that we cannot depend on the rulers; fighting the infidel has to be brought back as an individual duty. During the Crusader period more books on *jihad* were written than at any time before or since. These were produced by activist scholars close to rulers, of whom the most important was the Turkish prince, Nureddin of Aleppo (1118–74)—the West knows of Saladin, the nephew of one of his generals, but it was actually Nureddin who set up the strategy and vision that led later under Saladin to decisive defeats of the Crusader kingdom. *Jihad* ideology flourished in this period, when for the first time it also began to be deployed against other Muslims—especially Shi'is, but also deviant Sunnis. So when we get to a thinker like Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), a major influence on Bin Laden and modern militants, his intransigence is not original. It reflects the

energy of an intolerance towards other Muslims that emerged much earlier, when scholars began to argue that it was disunity that allowed the infidels to invade: the enemy within is the real problem, not the enemy without—if we are united, we can defeat the Crusaders, it is these internal elements that are keeping us weak. This outlook reached an unprecedented pitch once the Mongols poured into the Middle East, while the Crusaders were still there, sacking Baghdad in 1258 and staging massacres in Damascus and Aleppo. They were about to take Egypt, before they were stopped at Ain Jalut in northern Palestine by the Mamluks, an army of Turkish slaves.

For the first forty or fifty years of their history, the Mamluks were even more militantly *jihad*-minded than their predecessors, waging war on the Crusaders after the Mongols retreated. But once the Mongol threat passed, and they drove out the Crusaders, the Mamluks reverted to Abbasid ways, forgetting about *jihad* as they started to enjoy palace life, overseeing a huge spice trade, and trading with the Italian city-states, especially Venice. But although the Mamluks ceased to have any interest in *jihad*, unlike the Abbasids they didn't commission a group of scholars to deconstruct the way the doctrine had developed over the previous two centuries. So the last energies of *jihad*, dating from the Crusader period, were left within the mainstream Sunni tradition as a resource, ready to be activated, without a counter-voice. Unlike the Abbasid doctrine of collective responsibility, this later *jihad* ideology was never discredited. So if you go into any seminary today, this is the formulation of *jihad* that is taught.

But didn't the Ottoman state in turn have a strong ideology of jihad, with annual campaigns against the infidel along Umayyad lines?

The Ottomans picked up the culture of *jihad* of the Crusader period, and fought under its banner against the Byzantines for a long period. The Turkish term *ghazi* is synonymous with the term 'jihadist'. Some modern Ottomanist revisionists want to convince us that the *ghazis* were not actually doing *jihad*. That's historical nonsense, and it is shaped by the wish to invent an Ottoman past palatable to the EU so Turkey can join it. The fact that there were Christian auxiliaries in the Turkish war machine does not mean that the Ottomans themselves were not waging *jihad*. Even the early Arab conquests could on occasion line up Christian forces—an Armenian army fought alongside Arabs against

the Byzantines. To use groups of another faith as a military supplement does not imply tolerance of that faith. Turkish society of that time was still tribal, a warrior society that had internalized *jihad* ideology. But it saw no development of the doctrine—it was incapable of that. Ottoman religious scholars felt weak, because they could not master Arabic, except for a few. The Ottomans brought Arab jurists to Istanbul, but it was some time before they could enforce their religious authority in the Muslim world. Of course, once they had to rule a huge empire, they started to settle down and *jihad* declined.

Their big expeditions into the Balkans—the siege of Vienna as late as 1683—weren't seen as jihad?

The impulse was still there, a residue of the Abode of Islam and the Abode of War. By that time, the Ottomans had turned their attention to Europe, to which they came to think they belonged, more than to Syria or Egypt. But in the sixteenth century the principal thrust of Ottoman *jihad* was against the Safavids in Iran, who represented more a threat than a prize for them—they were not interested in conquering Iran. But the Safavids were a problem because they were Shi'is and there was a large Shi'i population in south-eastern Anatolia, of which the Ottomans were very nervous. The result was pre-emptive Ottoman animosity against Safavid influence in their own realm, for fear that it might cut the Ottoman Empire into two halves. So they mounted many campaigns against the Qizilbash, or red-heads, as they called Shi'is in eastern Anatolia, probably from an old Greek practice of wearing red hats.

That raises the really big question of the division within the umma between the Shi'is and the Sunnis. How would you describe the original nature of the split? What explains the extreme savagery of the civil wars that broke out over issues of the succession, after conquests held to have been relatively mild?

When the Prophet died in 632, the issue of succession immediately arose. The tradition wants us to believe that this is when the initial split happened. But in fact, it took quite some time. Before the ninth century, one cannot really speak of Sunnism or Shi'ism. What we can call proto-Shi'ism started as a political issue: the belief that 'Ali should have been the direct successor of Muhammad, because he was his cousin and the husband of his daughter Fatima. But if we look closely at the issue of succession, we realize that this couldn't have been a serious argument.

If there were groups that believed ‘Ali should have been the successor, it was for other reasons. I say this because there is such a clear pattern among the first five caliphs—one historians do not seem to have noticed, even though it is staring them in the face. The first two caliphs were the fathers-in-law of the Prophet: Abu Bakr was the father of ‘A’isha, and ‘Umar was the father of Hafsa; both women were married to Muhammad. The third caliph, ‘Uthman, was married to two daughters of the Prophet—hence his nickname, Dhu al-Nurayn, which means the one with two lights. There is much argument about whether he married them at the same time or separately, because in Islamic law it is forbidden to marry two sisters at the same time. You can marry one, divorce her, and marry the other, but not have them simultaneously. So there is a debate whether he was an exception to the rule, before the rule applied. Then came ‘Ali, who was married to Muhammad’s daughter Fatima. Then you have Mu‘awiya, whose sister was married to the Prophet. So the first five caliphs are all related to the Prophet by marriage. How is that not a succession according to certain tribal rules of precedence? The hierarchy goes from father-in-law to son-in-law to brother-in-law.

‘Ali became the fourth caliph when ‘Uthman was assassinated in 656, in murky circumstances. In his short reign, he not only fought the Prophet’s wife ‘A’isha, but killed two of the close companions of the Prophet, Talha and Zubair. They were among a group of ten, the closest companions to Muhammad, who, it was believed, had been guaranteed ascent straight to heaven, as men who could do no wrong. Yet ‘Ali, one of the ten, had dispatched two others. Coming after the death of ‘Uthman, this posed huge theological problems. Who of the three did wrong? Moreover, a group of ‘Ali’s supporters, who later came to be known as Dissenters—the *khawarij*—went on to rebel against ‘Ali, accusing him of being an infidel who had violated the Qur’an, and killed him. After his death in 661, Mu‘awiya—who had withheld acknowledgement of ‘Ali as caliph on the grounds that he protected the killers of ‘Uthman—was the natural choice for caliph, as the brother-in-law of the Prophet, which gave him legitimacy within the community.

By the time Mu‘awiya died, in 680, there was no one left who was directly related to the Prophet through marriage. Mu‘awiya had arranged to pass succession to his son, Yazid. That had never been done before in Islam, and created a new institution: hereditary rule. Many people objected to that, including Husayn, the younger son of ‘Ali and Fatima. But since

‘Ali’s eldest son, Hasan, had been bribed not to press any claim and to accept Yazid, Husayn had to wait till his brother died before he could rise in some kind of a rebellion. We do not know exactly what his role was in this revolt, but he seems to have been convinced by a group of his father’s followers to come to Kufa in southern Iraq—which indicates there was already a proto-Shi‘i community there—and stage an uprising against the Umayyads. When Yazid learnt of this, he ordered his general in Iraq to ambush and kill Husayn, whose head was brought back to Damascus and presented to him. Husayn was a grandson of the Prophet, and this episode blackened the memory of Yazid ever after.

Does that account for the strange asymmetry of the ensuing traditions—a tremendous Shi‘i account of the villainy of Mu‘awiya and Yazid, and no comparable Sunni counter-attack on the legend of Husayn?

Yes, even though Yazid is a proto-Sunni figure, you do not want to talk much about him—he is a figure you want to keep out of the picture. You cannot condemn him, but you cannot easily accept him. In the Crusader period, there were attempts to cleanse his image, as a ruler who led *jihad* against the infidels and transmitted *hadiths*, preserving the *Sunna* of the Prophet. But earlier, the Abbasids had no interest in this. Historically, as we can see now, it was the death of Husayn which sparked the creation of a religious movement that re-imagined Muslim legitimacy as a sequence of Imams, of whom the first was ‘Ali and the third Husayn. It was the sixth Imam, Ja‘far Sadiq, a scholarly descendant of ‘Ali and active in the mid-eighth century, who seems to have shaped early Shi‘ism as a belief system, even if much about this figure remains legend rather than history. Discarding the ideology of *jihad*, he urged withdrawal of the pious to take care of the community, and pass on knowledge of scripture.

Before he died, Sadiq declared his son Isma‘il would be the next Imam. But Isma‘il died before his father, and Sadiq then made his other son the successor. But a group of courtiers who had clustered around Isma‘il, in the expectation he would be the heir, refused to accept this. They took the line that once declared the next Imam, it cannot be taken back—so the son of Isma‘il must now take his father’s place. The result was a schism within the Shi‘i community, and the birth of the Isma‘ili sect, or Seveners, because they hold that Isma‘il was the Seventh Imam. The other line of Imams ended with the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam, for whose miraculous return Twelver Shi‘is are still waiting. ‘Alawis,

for their part, do not believe that the Twelfth Imam ever existed—they stop with the Eleventh. Zaydis, who are prominent in Yemen, but also used to exist in north-western Iran and elsewhere, do not believe that the Imamate is restricted to descendants of ‘Ali and his wife Fatima. They think *any* descendant of ‘Ali can be an Imam, opening up the field to children of ‘Ali whom he had with female slaves, but hold that an Imam has to prove himself on the battlefield, as well as among the community of scholars. In the late eighth century, we have a lot of writing by Zaydi Imams which speak to the formation of a specifically Shi‘i sect. By then Shi‘ism had started to take root as a religious identity.

Did Sunnism emerge as a creed only later, in reaction?

No, it was around the same time that a proto-Sunnism became aware of itself as a response to Shi‘ism. But at the outset Sunnism presented a chaotic scene, where every scholar could pick up a new school of law and call it Sunni. Tradition has it that around the year 850, the Abbasid Caliph Mutawakkil put a stop to this, determining that henceforward just five Sunni schools and one Shi‘i school would be tolerated. The Shi‘i school came to be named Ja‘fari after Ja‘far Sadiq, and was codified by his followers. The five Sunni schools were Hanafi, Shafi‘i, Maliki, Hanbali, and Dawudi or Zahiri (the last died out, though it was popular in medieval Andalusia). What the decision of Mutawakkil gradually meant was that every believer must follow, and every scholar work within, one of these schools. Many of the schools were still quite fluid in the eighth and early ninth centuries, becoming codified only later in the ninth century. So, in terms of law, Sunnism could be variegated. But in terms of theology, official attempts to impose a unified system produced sharper divisions (for Sunnis, they include such schools as Ash‘ari, Maturidi, Hanbali, Mu‘tazili and Sufi, and for Shi‘is they include Zaydi, Isma‘ili, Twelver, Nusayri and Druze). Quite soon Sunnis had their own version of the Prophet’s life and what happened after he died, counterposed to the Shi‘i version, each projecting back onto the Prophet opinions that supported their own theology.

When did the majority of the Iraqi population become Shi‘is? How far was the spread of Shi‘ism an appropriation of Islamic doctrine by ethnic groups that were ethnically marginal in a larger state community—say, the Buyids in Iraq or the Berbers in Tunisia, who generated the Fatimids in Egypt?

No, it is a mistake to think Shi'ism appealed to marginal elements in society. Those two movements—one coming from Tunisia, the other from Eastern Iran—broke out in areas where the control of the central government was weakest, not because they expressed a distinct ethnic identity. Actually, after the first three or four caliphs, the support-base of the Abbasid dynasty was largely Turkish. We know for sure the Abbasids moved their capital to Baghdad in 762 because they couldn't stand the energy of the 'Alids—supporters of 'Ali—in Kufa, where proto-Sunnis were thoroughly cowed by the hostility of proto-Shi'is. So the Abbasids wanted to get away and establish their own city, deciding who could reside there and who couldn't. That is why at the beginning Baghdad looked more like a proto-Sunni than a proto-Shi'i centre. But then everybody started moving there.

Who were the Buyids? A Shi'i dynasty, of mixed Kurdish and Daylami origin from northwestern Iran, they ruled Iraq and Iran under nominal Abbasid authority in the tenth and eleventh centuries. They seem to have originally been Zaydis, but some of them were also Twelvers, and they ran the show in Iraq and Iran as Shi'i sultans under the formal aegis of a Sunni caliph. This was the first time a Shi'i dynasty had such power, and they used it to promote Shi'ism. In Aleppo, the Hamdanids were a dynasty of Twelvers, and in Egypt the ruling house of Fatimids was Isma'ili. So in the mid-tenth century, most of the Muslim world was ruled by Shi'is. Just as centuries earlier, many people became Muslims out of convenience, so now many became Shi'is. Rural Syria would remain predominantly Shi'i until the arrival of the Ottomans. In the fourteenth century, lots of Shi'is from South Lebanon moved to Iran, which had remained mainly Sunni until then, increasing the weight of the Shi'i population there.

The same state pressures worked the other way round, when Sunni rulers had the upper hand. The coast of what is today Lebanon was inhabited by either Shi'is or Christians, but when the Mamluks arrived in the late thirteenth century with their war machine they forced all Shi'is—Twelvers, Fatimids or Druzes—back into the mountains, and sometimes up into the Bekaa Valley, and imported Turcoman and Kurdish tribes to settle the areas they had cleansed. The Ottomans continued such policies on a large scale, intimidating many Shi'is into converting to Sunnism. That is why if you look at the topography of Syria today, you find all these Shi'i villages around Aleppo, which was predominantly Shi'i until

a series of Sunni rulers—Nureddin, Saladin, then the Mamluks, and the Ottomans—changed the composition of the city, where people either converted or left for the surrounding villages.

In the same way, contemporary Iran is now majority Shi'i, but that is a result of the similar policies pursued by the Safavids starting in the late fifteenth century, intimidating Sunnis into either converting or leaving. For a long period Southern Iraq was also under Safavid control, and because it contained the holiest Shi'i shrines there was a lot of deliberate population movement there, to cater for the pilgrimages to them. That explains why Southern Iraq is predominantly Shi'i, whereas Northern Iraq—for a long time under Ottoman control—is Sunni; and also why the Kurds in Iran are not Sunni, but Shi'i, whereas in Northern Iraq and Turkey they are Sunnis.

The 'Alawi community in Syria has no connexion with the period of Hamdanid power—their version of Shi'ism is quite distinctive?

There are two Shi'i communities whose theology ruffles mainstream Twelver Shi'is, let alone Sunnis. The 'Alawis are technically Nusayris, who believe that 'Ali was supposed to be the Prophet of God, but the Angel Gabriel became confused and went to Muhammad instead—and when 'Ali died, he was borne up to heaven and waits there to return on the Day of Judgement. There are also the Druzes, whose religion blends elements all the way from Buddhism to Ancient Greek philosophy: Plato is a prophet, and John the Baptist is a prophet—in the Great Mosque of Damascus, John's shrine is mainly visited by Druzes. Vehemently denounced by Sunni scholars, they were pushed into the mountainous western areas of Greater Syria or South-Eastern Anatolia.

What explains the virulent recrudescence of antagonisms between Sunnis and Shi'is in the Middle East today? Tensions on this scale between the two communities have not existed for many centuries—what is the contemporary dynamic behind them?

There are three major figures of modern Islam who were pan-Islamists: Sayyid Qutb in Egypt; Khomeini in Iran; and Mawdudi in India–Pakistan. All three wanted Muslims to transcend their differences, in an Islamic unity capable of triumphing over the twin evils of decadent capitalism and atheistic communism. For each, Muslims were

living in a time—there were eschatological overtones—when believers were being squeezed between these two rocks, forced to opt for one or the other. They pitched Islam as an alternative. But Islam could offer that only if it was united. In the Sunni world, Mawdudi and Qutb preached pan-Islamism, but both of them died before their ideas gained any wide audience. It was the success of the Iranian Revolution in 1979 that transformed the ideological landscape. Khomeini's original project was a grandiose pan-Islamism, uniting Shi'is and Sunnis alike in a common battle against the two enemies of all Muslims. But once Saddam Hussein launched his attack on Iran, threatening the survival of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini was forced onto the defensive, and had to compromise his vision. Under siege at home, the unity of all believers lay out of reach. What could be achieved, however, was pan-Shi'ism. The Iranian regime opened up lines of communication to Shi'is everywhere, sending them support—including arms, money, expertise—without any conditions. Wherever there were Shi'is of any kind—in Yemen, in Syria, in Lebanon, in Iraq—there was a tremendous flow of advice and assistance. Never before, under any Shi'i dynasty, had there been this level of tolerance to all forms of Shi'ism. In the past, there had always been pressure for conversion: you should become Twelvers. Khomeinism avoided that. Zaydis, 'Alawis, Druzes could remain who they were, without theological instructions from Iran. All that was necessary was Shi'i solidarity. The strategy was designed to create regional support for the Iranian Revolution, which felt itself—this is a recurrent theme in modern Iranian history, from the constitutional movement of 1908–11 to the overthrow of Mossadeq in 1953 and onwards—the object of Western aggression. The success story of this policy was the emergence of Hezbollah as the most powerful force in Lebanon, after 1982.

The second transformative event was the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, also in 1979. That gave perfect momentum to a pan-Islamism from the other direction, a Sunni variant. The Afghan success in driving the Red Army out of the country had an ideological impact comparable to that of the overthrow of the Shah. The Iranians showed they could defeat the West—and we Sunnis have now defeated the East: Islam can triumph over both capitalism and communism. But just as Khomeini's pan-Islamism was forced back into a pan-Shi'ism by the Iran–Iraq war, so Sunni pan-Islamism contracted, under the pressure of the same war, into a pan-Sunnism. Saddam Hussein himself, who started out as an extremely secular leader, switched over to a religious rhetoric, appealing

for Sunni assistance once he looked like losing the war, pitching himself as a champion of Sunnism, even though the majority of his army was Shi'i. Then came the 2003 American invasion of Iraq, which split the Sunni and Shi'i communities in the country wider apart than they had ever been in the past, cementing the hostility between pan-Shi'ism and pan-Sunnism in the Middle East today.

To what extent does contemporary pan-Sunnism derive from the ideas of Qutb or Mawdudi?

The ideas of Mawdudi and Qutb figure to some extent. The irony is that pan-Sunnism is now a Salafist pan-Sunnism—principally the Wahhabi variant proclaimed by the Saudi monarchy, which has sunk roots everywhere in the Sunni world. Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent Qatar, stand as the champions of pan-Sunnism against Iran, as the champion of pan-Shi'ism, each with their own paranoia. Kuwait and eastern Saudi Arabia have sizeable Shi'i communities. Bahrain has a Shi'i majority. There are many Iranians in the UAE. Oman is Ibadi, an early offshoot of proto-Shi'ism, that derives from the Khawarij who killed 'Ali. Zaydis are strong in Yemen. So all the way from southern Iraq, along the Gulf and round the peninsula to the lower end of the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia is ringed by a long belt of Shi'i sects. 'Alawis still hold power in Syria, and Hezbollah dominates much of Lebanon. South of Damascus, only Jordan lies between Saudi Arabia and another Shi'i arc to the north. Add to this anxiety the prospect of Iranian nuclear weapons, and you have all the ingredients of an escalating sectarian confrontation, since the Iranian regime thinks in the same way. It feels encircled by American pressures, aiming to reduce it to submission to Western will. The result is a mutual paranoia which is fuelling Sunni–Shi'i violence across the region.

The dynamic you describe substantially pre-dates the Arab Spring. How do you assess its effect on these pre-existing antagonisms?

By cracking apart the old order, without bringing forth any new one, it has simply created a more open field for them. Currently, no Arab country has any real measure of stability. Egypt does not have it. Libya does not have it, Sudan does not have it, Jordan does not have it. Lebanon does not have it. Tunisia does not have it—let alone Syria or Iraq. Nor is Saudi Arabia stable, after repressing Shi'i demonstrations for basic rights in its north-east, and sending troops into Bahrain as soon as there

was democratic unrest there. The one regional state that could have tried to mediate these conflicts was Turkey, but Erdoğan threw away his opportunities, and now looks ridiculous with his own paranoid outbursts, blaming opposition protests at home on international conspiracies.

How far has Israel, often portrayed as a modern Crusader state, played a role like that of the original Crusades in stoking religious passions across the region?

In a pan-Islamist perspective, Israel has always been a very small country with a very small population, which can be driven out as the Crusader states were, once the Muslim world is united. But every time the Arabs fought Israel, they lost. In both Syria and Egypt, the war of 1973 is commemorated as a national holiday as if it was a victory, but of course it was a heavy defeat. Yet the threat from Israel has never been a major factor in the popularization of Islamism, whose resurgence owes little of its momentum to it. The vast majority of Arabs are hostile to Israel as a Jewish state. But this hostility coexists with a widespread indifference to the Palestinian cause, which has never been a central theme among Islamists. The fate of the Palestinians featured only in the margins of the thought of its leading theorists. Even when it is invoked, Israel figures not as a major threat in itself, but as a proxy for the true threat.

What really galvanized contemporary Islamism, and made it appealing, was the overthrow of the Shah in Iran. This was the first revolution in the region that succeeded in toppling a sitting ruler. No other change in the Muslim world has compared with that. The Algerian Revolution was made against a colonial power. The ouster of the monarchy in Egypt was a mere coup d'état, like many of the same in Syria or Iraq. In Iran, by contrast, massive popular demonstrations, sweeping aside the army, brought down the Shah: that was unprecedented. Who were the figures behind it? The mullahs. So religion can bring change; it is the alternative. An ideology, whose trial runs by Mawdudi or Qutb had had a very limited reception, started to find a much wider audience.

In Afghanistan, Salafis jumped on the bandwagon, taking it in their own direction. In Egypt, Sadat used radical Sunni groups to weaken the popularity of socialists and communists before cracking down on them, and this was a general pattern elsewhere in the military regimes of the period, which sought to appear in a good light as a barrier against

two lunatic elements, manipulating each to destabilize the other. Israeli intelligence did much the same in fostering Hamas against Fatah in the Palestinian territories.

It seems a huge irony that visionaries who wanted a united Islam should have helped set off the most violent division of Islam of modern times. Accusations of apostasy—takfir—have notoriously played a part in that. Where does this idea come from?

You can find the term in Ibn Taymiyya in the thirteenth century, used against the recently converted Mongols and other deviant Muslims, but its current usage is completely modern. In principle, you cannot conduct *jihad* against fellow Muslims. So how do you mobilize people for a *jihad* against a ruler like Sadat or the Saudi monarchs? The only way you can do it is to prove that they are not Muslims. If you look at Osama bin Laden's denunciation of the stationing of American troops in Arabia after the Gulf War, you see that his point was to show that the Saudi ruling family were apostates. He was telling his followers: you need to do what I say, because these people are no longer Muslims. By inviting enemies of Islam into the Holy Places they have abjured the faith. The same was true in Egypt. Salafists may be religious fanatics, but they have to observe basic Islamic law. You cannot cut corners, and simply urge your followers to wage *jihad* against fellow Muslims—you have to prove to them that they are not Muslims any more. So the mechanism of *takfir* is crucial to Salafism. You do not need any *fatwa* to kill infidels. But for Muslims, you not only need one, you need a *fatwa* explaining why they are no longer Muslims, and what they have done that has made them apostates.

That is why Lieutenant Islambouli, who shot Sadat, did not kill Mubarak at the same time. He could kill Sadat because he was an apostate—but he did not have a *fatwa* to kill Mubarak. Conventional analysis of Islamic terrorism does not pay attention to what its militants actually say—it looks at economic factors or historical circumstances, operating with only a very general sense of religion and ideology, ignoring the precise terms in which they justify their actions. The head of the Law School at the University of Qatar addressing a Muslim audience once said the only way Islamic terrorism can be defeated is by understanding its theology, and producing a counter to it. As long as we deny this, there is no way we can gain the upper hand over militant Islam.

Is there a Shi'i equivalent to Salafism?

Hezbollah. The difference is that the message is not broadcast—it is kept within a closed circle. Why is Hezbollah now involved in Syria? Because of a belief that those who are fighting to topple the Syrian regime will kill us if we do not kill them first. So there is the same logic in Shi'ism. The Muslim world is now gripped in the utter futility of a murderous conflict between these two ideologies. It is a tragedy. If I may add a few personal words, I cannot stand going back to Lebanon anymore, because every time I sit down with my family, the only thing they want to talk about is how horrible the Shi'is are. I come originally from a Sunni village in a Christian area of south Lebanon. But I do not have a single close Sunni friend in Lebanon—all my friends are either Shi'is or Christians. This is how I grew up. At no point did my father or mother tell me that you cannot befriend a Shi'i or a Christian.

But nowadays people are forced into their sectarian affiliations. My uncle, a professor of chemistry who lived in a predominantly Shi'i neighbourhood of Beirut and had lots of Shi'i friends, has now moved to a predominantly Sunni area. My other uncle, who lived in an area that became predominantly Shi'i, is also now living in a predominantly Sunni area. They moved because they do not feel secure. My closest friend is a Shi'i who spent all his life in a Sunni area. There he is a child of the neighbourhood—everybody knows him. But now the area has lots of Salafists, it is not safe in the same way for his wife and children, so he had to leave for a part of Beirut where it is a bit more secure. It is an incredibly depressing scene. Yet, obviously, Lebanon is still a little better than the mayhem in Syria, or in Iraq where some lunatic can walk in and blow himself up, irrespective of who is there.