

Islam

A centuries-old problem worth a deeper study

By Jeanne Whitaker
staff writer

LOOK ABOUT YOU and imagine that one of the four people beside you is a Muslim.

Then imagine that that one person represents millions of Muslims who believe that you are an oppressor, an imperialist whose word cannot be trusted, and that you are determined to force your fledgling nation's technology, government and way of life on their ancient culture.

Angry? You bet they are, said London Sunday Times correspondent Robin Wright, author of "Sacred Rage — The Wrath of Militant Islam" (Linden Press, \$17.95).

The University of Michigan graduate and Ann Arbor native is resting at home before returning to the Middle East to see what has taken place there since she left in December 1984.

In the interim she has been, Journalist in Residence at Duke University completing her account of what she believes are the gross diplomatic and government miscalculations that have led to the explosion of violence directed at Americans throughout the Middle East.

"We could have avoided all of this so easily. The U.S., besides its super power status, seems to lack the maturity of that status. We try to ram everything about our lifestyle, etc., down their throats. 'Dallas' in Kuwait. Coca Cola. We've tended to be overpowering. Absolutely, we are patronizing," Wright said.

WRIGHT IS A veteran foreign correspondent, who has covered news for such publications as the Christian Science Monitor, The Washington Post, CBS and The Sunday Times.

A need to understand the "whys" that she said the media wasn't presenting to its readers and viewers led to the book.

The search led her to the leaders of the militant fundamentalist movement behind the kidnappings of U.S. nationals, the bombings of the marine bar-

racks and the Beirut embassy, hijackers of international airlines and the troops locked in battle along the Iraqi border. It also led her to the wives of hostages still held in Lebanon, university professors, state department specialists and fellow journalists.

Wright said she is no apologist for the Arabs, but she can appreciate the deep-seated frustration that led to this latest outburst of Islamic fundamentalism. What they want is a return to Islam, not as a religion, but as a complete way of life, she said.

"What fundamentalists are calling for is not a western form of modernization. They don't want cultural imperialism."

Countries such as Iran, which elect to return to fundamental Islamic principles and practices that are more representative of the seventh than the 20th century, are reacting to centuries of what they perceive as injustice, she explained.

"Much of what has happened would not have occurred without the Iranian revolution," she writes. "In particular, Iran has played on the anger and frustration of one small group of Shi'ites who have launched a protest, a very violent protest, against their regional rivals and the West."

"There are many Third World nations who admire Iran for what it did," she said. "After all, it has lasted six years. They unleashed an entire new form of government."

"This whole phenomenon represents the thing that is going on in the Third World. The majority of countries in the world want to be neither East nor West. They want to be respected for who they are not."

Wright believes that the Iranian revolution, in which a fundamentalist Shia theocracy led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini replaced the deposed Shah, is the single most significant political event of this century. It is on a par with the Russian revolution, whose roots rest in the 19th century, and the 18th-century French revolution.

The West, she said, is going to have to learn to live with this reality and to find a way to establish a rapprochement with this phenomenon, and in particular with Iran.

"The rapprochement has to include letting them know that we will not try to overturn the theocracy, or try to put the Shah's son back on the throne. If the tension is diffused there the ripple effect will have a calming affect on the whole area."

TO UNDERSTAND why the current administration's hard-line approach will never succeed, she said, one has to understand the makeup of the opposition. Although the protagonists are a small group among the Shi'as who make up about 10 percent of the 82 million Muslims living in 70 nations, they are symbolic of the Islamic crusade.

Throughout history, she said, the Shia have been the oppressed, while the more populous Sunni Muslims have respected the profits of their land and their labor. The mind-set to martyrdom, the sense of injustice to their sect, and their fierce loyalty to religious leaders have shaped the Shia into a fiercely militant branch of the faith.

For 13 centuries, she explained, until a religious ruling by an Egyptian cleric in 1949 accepted the Shia as equal members of the faith, they nursed their grievances while the Sunnis scorned them as heretics.

And the intervening years of domination by Mongols, Turks and eventually European colonialists, who paid them little heed, only ground in their bitterness. Americans will have to take notice of the fact that we are perceived as the latest in a long line of oppressors and imperialists.

"Their anger with us is because of separate things, not solely because of our friendship with Iran."

The conflict between foreign ideologies and value systems that newly independent Middle East governments embraced between 1945 and '62, the loss of historic Jerusalem, and the loss of

morale and confidence in public institutions slowly led many Muslims, Shia and Sunni, to turn inward, she said. And inward they found Islam.

The Islamic revival was a response to the challenge of the defeat and failures of past formulas and ideologies, she writes.

More fuel was added to the fire when the Arabs relied on faith rather than equipment and tactics to make the Yom Kippur War a "jihad" or holy war, and emerged having smashed the Israeli image of invincibility.

The third catalyst was oil. The Arabs' decision to quadruple the price of oil, to cut back on production and to embargo sales to the U.S. made the entire world sit up and take notice.

Yet the very triumvirate — oil, Arabs and Islam — which made the world take notice, embittered the Shia further.

According to Wright, most of the profits were siphoned off by the Sunnis for new airports, armaments and palaces instead of social services, schools or health centers badly needed by the poorest parts of the country where the Shia lived. The practice applied to both the oil and non-oil Arab states.

It was inevitable that the establishment of a Shia fundamentalist government in Iran would have, and will continue to have, a big influence on Shia fundamentalists.

Wright believes the failure of the U.S. government to recognize the Shia frustration, the importance of the phenomenon of the Iranian revolution, and the perception that the U.S. is no longer neutral incites the violence directed at American nationals and institutions.

"They think we started it all. They think they are responding to our provocations," she said, adding that fundamentalist acts of violence are usually provoked by an act of American violence.

She sees the bombing of the marine barracks as a response to the U.S. abandoning strict neutrality to side

with the U.S.-trained Lebanese army and the U.S. naval bombardment of the Chaut mountains. There were plenty of signals that there would be a retaliation, but the U.S. failed to identify them.

"I think punitive action won't work. It just rallies more people to their cause." We must recognize "the fear is a two-way street. We have to defuse that fear and show that the two can coexist."

WRIGHT SAID at no time during her interviews did she perceive that the acts of violence were directed at individual Americans. Indeed, she said, she was frequently told that the fundamentalists like the American people at the same time they hate American policies.

During interviews among an extensive list of leading mullahs and government figures, "they were open and invited me to bring back my friends." Ordinary soldiers she met along the Iraqi-Iran battlefield were also anxious to meet her. They talked of their esteem for the American people and asked questions about favorite American pop stars.

Ann Kerr, widow of murdered American University president Dr. Malcolm Kerr, told Wright, "I suppose it's a group of people who feel bewildered about what's happening in the world today. They feel imbued with a cause of their own. They don't understand western culture; they feel they have no say in what's going on in the world. It

seems to me it's this kind of motivation that drives people to extreme fundamentalism, and to perpetrating the kinds of acts that happened to my husband."

American diplomats and university officials agreed, saying that Dr. Kerr, a respected Arabist, was killed because he was the most important American outside the embassy. Five months after the Rev. Benjamin Weir was kidnapped, his wife Carol said the same thing.

"I don't think my husband's kidnapping was a personal act against him. It's a protest against our foreign policy. The U.S. is losing its credibility as a mediator in the Arab world. The violence which occurs is produced by the U.S.'s inability to look behind the causes of violence and to deal with those causes," she said.

Robin Wright concludes her readable and comprehensive survey with the conclusion that the first step must be rapprochement with Iran, which may be a bitter pill, but one that is hardly without precedent.

"There are a surprising number of precedents. We can arrive at a rapprochement with Iran, just as we did with China, without having to wait 23 years as we did with China," she contended.

The time is short — the U.S. must make haste to work with men such as Nabil Berri, Yasir Arafat and an older generation that is still willing to find solutions where there is space for all. The second generation is not.

Volunteers called

Persons interested in volunteering at Common Ground, Oakland County's 24-hour crisis center, are invited to attend an orientation session at 8 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 8 in Common Ground, 1090 S. Adams, Birmingham. No appointment is necessary. Individuals interested in the crisis worker position will have the opportunity to sign up to screen for admission to the training program. Training will begin Jan. 24.

For information about volunteer opportunities at Common Ground, call Karen Conaway, coordinator of volunteers, at Common Ground's business line, 645-1173.

Distinguished citizen sought

The Farmington Area Jaycees are soliciting nominations for their annual Distinguished Citizen Award, which is to be presented at the 19th Community Leadership Prayer Breakfast, Tuesday, Jan. 21 in Glen Oaks Golf Course.

Submit nominations, giving specific reasons and services the nominee has rendered to the Farmington-Farmington Hills Community, to Bob Rudnick, Prayer Breakfast Chairman, 1859 Oak Grove, Walled Lake 48088.

All nominations must be received by Jan. 3.

Second uses for trees

These are busy days for all as family reunions are in style. It is too bad that we can't carry out this loving spirit all the days of the year.

We must not forget that this cycle of December is a special time to revive past friendships and enjoy the warmth of family and friends.

Many of our readers have green, live Christmas trees. If you want to avoid its early demise, try raising the tree and setting it into a bucket of wa-

ter during the holiday interim. Many of our households have someone with engineering aptitude. Let them figure it out. At least they can't say they have a golf game at the moment.

When the holidays have come to an end, plan to place the tree outdoors for the bird to enjoy. Do so, and another project awaits you — stringing popcorn for the birds.

Evergreen branches can also be cut

to provide a mulch for spring bulbs, which often have an early arrival.

If you have a Christmas tree with roots I hope you have processed the roots with damp peat moss and enclosed the root area in plastic so the live tree will be ready for a successful transfer later.

One more important idea to make this holiday fun for young and old to remember is to turn low the lighting in the gathering room and sing the traditional songs of the season. Moments such as these keep kindled a loving regard for family and friends destined to carry through until the next holiday season.

Happy New Year to all.

WSU writing contest under way

Writers are again invited to compete for Wayne State University's annual Judith Siegel Pearson award offering up to \$500 for the best creative scholarly work on a subject concerning women.

Entries of fiction, drama, poetry or essays should not exceed 20 double-spaced pages. Compositions should be anonymous with the author's name on a duplicate title page and typed, double-spaced on one side of standard typing paper. Deadline is March 3.

All manuscripts should be sent to the Judith Siegel Pearson Award, c/o Eng-

lish Department, Wayne State University, Detroit 48202. Further information may be obtained by calling 577-2450.

The award competition honors the memory of the late Judith Siegel Pearson, a native Detroit, who received her B.A. and M.A. degrees from Wayne State University. She also earned a Ph.D. degree at Washington University in Missouri. Pearson later joined the faculty at the University of Missouri, becoming one of the first English instructors to include women's studies methods in her classes.

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