The House Divided

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Sunni, Shia and the Making of the Middle East

BARNABY ROGERSON

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This book is dedicated to Bruce Wannell (1952–2020), the most enthusiastic traveller of my generation, with an infectious delight in music, mountains, calligraphy, gossip, poetry, controversy, historic monuments and picnics throughout the Middle East. He is missed for all these qualities but also for his scrupulous Islamic scholarship, generously invested into critical readings of the works of his friends.

Sunni, Shia and transliteration of names

Sunni form the majority of Muslims across the world. The Shia account for perhaps 15 per cent, worldwide, and 37 per cent in the central Middle East.

Sunni derives from an ancient Arabic word that translates as 'tradition' or 'trusted path'. Strictly, Sunni is the singular or adjective form but in modern practice it is often used for plurals.

Shia refers back to *Shi'atu Ali* – 'the partisans, or followers, of Ali'. Again, *Shia* (and *Shiite*) is an anglicised form. The word is more correctly rendered as *Shi'i* (as a singular noun or adjective) or *Shi'iyun* (in the plural).

I have followed modern, simplified forms generally in the transliteration of both personal and place names. There is no consensus between the French and English traditions in the translation of Arabic, Turkish and Iranian, so there is a rich variety of spellings. For ease of reading, accents are absent.

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The House Divided
Introduction

'And if thy Lord had willed, He would have made mankind one nation, but they cease not in differing'

KORAN, 11: 118

The Middle East is home to both unimaginable oil wealth and a passionate engagement in upholding traditional religion. This should have produced a region overflowing with the gifts of peace and prosperity, but the modern Middle East has been repeatedly rocked by wars, invasions, internal coups, bloody border conflicts, civil strife and covert operations. The target one day might be an ayatollah leaving a mosque in Iraq, the next a scientist on a street in Tehran, then a doctor and his young son in Karachi, or a refugee camp outside Quetta. Now and then, the noise comes closer to Europe, as bombs go off in Istanbul or Moscow and sirens cry out in the streets of Brussels, Paris or London.

Four of the region's twentieth-century conflicts – 1948–49, 1956, 1967, 1973 – directly involved Israel, but since then there has been no war fought for that state's survival. Over the last fifty years, however, military action in the Middle East has continued unabated, often apparently based on the ancient internal schism between Sunni and Shia Islam.

To an outsider, the vicious trench fighting of the eight-year-long Iran–Iraq border war (1980–88), the civil wars in Iraq (2013–17) and in Syria (2011–19) seem to have been fuelled by the differences between the two major Muslim sects. Hundreds of thousands of lives have been lost in sectarian civil wars fought out between armed bands of Sunni and Shia in the central heartlands of the region, in the cities of Syria and Iraq. As I wrote this book, five other conflicts were being fought within the Islamic world: in Gaza, Afghanistan, on the coast of Libya, in the Yemen and in Kurdish mountains, while the embers of strife still glow in Algeria, Lebanon and Baluchistan, not to mention truncated Sudan and imploded Somalia.

The causes of these were legion – Yemen is the only one that has clear sectarian roots. But despite talk of a clash of civilisations, none of these current conflicts is being fought between Islamic regimes and Western nations; instead it's Muslim soldier fighting Muslim soldier. The Middle East contains 5 per cent of humanity but over the current generation has produced 58 per cent of its refugees and 68 per cent of battle mortalities. (These figures come from before the invasion of Ukraine.) That is not to say that some of these conflicts haven't been ignited by the intervention of the West. Following the US invasion of Iraq, millions of refugees were driven from their homes, some to escape the cycles of violence, others purposefully terrorised by the massacre of neighbouring villages or the public execution of members of a specific sect, identified in a bus from their identity cards at a roadblock. The massacre of 2 March 2004 was a tragic example of such targeted sectarian hate, when a fusillade of nine car bombs and mortar attacks were launched at Shiite congregations gathering to commemorate Ashura in Kerbala and Baghdad; 178 were killed and another 500 maimed.

The casualty figures in these murderous neighbourhood gang wars will probably never be known, for the internal displacement has been on a vast scale. In Iraq, two million fled their nation during the civil war and another two and a half million were internally displaced. It was communities where Sunni and Shia had for centuries lived side by side that proved most vulnerable and many of these no longer exist, with the weaker minority expelled. In Iraq, Samarra has been effectively cleansed of Shia, who have been driven south, just as those with a Sunni identity have been driven out of Basra to take refuge in the north. Baghdad lies astride the sectarian fault line and has been divided up neighbourhood by neighbourhood. These turf wars, with their protection rackets, internal gang rivalries and links with political parties, raged most fiercely between 2006and 2008 in Iraq, then re-emerged with the rise of ISIS in 2014–17, which engulfed both Iraq and Syria. Further destruction was wrought in communities in Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, the Yemen and Pakistan.

What is it that fuels these destructive bloodbaths? Is the faith division between Sunni and Shia Islam really the central issue, or is it a veil beneath which other power plays are fought – such as the rivalry of nation states and political ideologies? And what role does geography, and an increasingly hostile climate, play in these conflicts? We are just beginning to understand how closely human history follows the graphs of climate change – and this is acutely true for the Middle East. The Arab Spring – the series of anti-government protests that led to armed rebellions in the early 2010s – was reinforced by economic factors, alongside a desire for political change. ISIS paymasters certainly found fertile ground in farming villages, where livings had become impossible amid climate-induced drought. Kings of Jordan

and presidents of Egypt have both predicted that the next round of wars will be fought not over faith but water.

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At first glance the modern Middle East seems to divide easily into two antagonistic factions based on rival interpretations of the Muslim faith and their distinct traditions: Sunni Saudi Arabia (ruled by keffiyeh-wearing Arab kings) opposed by Shiite Iran (ruled by black-turbanned ayatollahs). Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Saudi Arabia are the Gulf States, backed up to a lesser extent by such Sunni Arab nation states as Egypt and Jordan. The USA and Israel are supporters of this alliance, though obviously neither Muslim nor Arab in their loyalties and so working to their own agendas. The Shiite faction in the Middle East is led by the Islamic Republic of Iran, supported by its allies in Iraq, Syria, southern Lebanon, and North Yemen. Russia and China support this alliance.

But this is not the whole picture, for there is, too, a third faction, a less coherent group, made of such independent-minded Muslim states as Oman and Qatar and the Turkish Republic. In addition, there are international organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood – and before them, the pan-Arab, secular Ba'ath Party – whose influence needs to be considered.

It's a fiendishly complicated situation to understand, but not an impossible task. For those of us in the West, without affiliation, our first task is to extend our empathy to all sides, to learn to listen both to people and to history. We need to hear the stories that fuel the imagination of the Muslim world, perhaps even to share some of their emotional impact. We should, at the very least, know enough to call our own politicians to account, for their interventions (even when well intentioned) have often backfired.

Although the Sunni and Shia divisions within the Middle East are important, they are matched, and maybe exceeded, by equally strong and enduring divisions based on ethnicity and language – on the three rival identities of Arab, Turk and Iranian. For Turkey, Arabia and Iran have for centuries been the Middle East's three dominant powers. Each has an adamantine sense of its own identity, which coincides with the pride of being a Turk, an Arab and an Iranian. Each comes with its own ancient language, race and thousands of years of history and tradition. In terms of population, the three are also roughly equal: Turkey has around 72 million; Iran 80 million; the Arabian peninsula 78 million (if one includes its migrant workers – many of whom are Muslims from Egypt, Pakistan, Syria and Yemen). The three ethnicities are often considered to mirror Sunni–Shia divides and to fit neatly with the frontiers of modern nation states. Thus, Iran is Persian-speaking and Shiite, Turkey is Turkic-speaking and Sunni, and Saudi Arabia is Arab-speaking and ultra-Sunni. But as we dig deeper, we come upon many fascinating contradictions, present in virtually every chapter of this book. These are the high stress points of the modern Middle East where either faith or race is in conflict with the national majority, in regions that all too often coincide with the position of oil fields.

Turkey is a strong nation state, proud to be the latest in a long succession of Turkic Empires which for centuries have defended Islam. The Turkish Republic is the orphaned heir of the old Ottoman Empire, which ruled the Middle East and Balkans for five hundred years. The frontiers of modern Turkey are but a shadow of this old empire, but it is determined to hold onto every inch of what it has retained, and its rulers are passionately opposed to the south-eastern third of the state breaking away to become an independent Kurdistan. This is the principal reason why Turkey has become so embedded in the recent Syrian

civil war, as the Syrian Kurds, who fought so resiliently against ISIS, are seen as closely allied to its own Kurdish independence movement. Turkey also has long-term ambitions to recover its old position as the leading voice in the Middle East.

Saudi Arabia, which invented its militant, fundamentalist form of Sunni Islam – Wahhabism – back in the eighteenth century, has long wished to create a united Arabia. The Saudi Emirate came close to achieving this on two occasions, even before the first drop of oil had been discovered, but was halted by the military strength of external powers. The Saudis, too, fear the influence of an internal minority: for their eastern governate of Al-Hasa, home to all the oil fields, has a large population of Shia. These Shiite Arabs are an oppressed minority within the Sunni kingdom, which helps explain why the Saudi monarchy is so hostile to the expanding influence of the Shiite Islamic Republic of Iran. Before the Iranian Revolution of 1979, there was no Muslim state led by Shiite traditions. But since 1979 the Saudis have watched the emergence of a Shiite crescent across the Middle East, composed of Iran and its allies. This began with southern Lebanon and Syria, then vastly expanded when a Shiite government was installed in Iraq. Their latest allies are the Zaydi in North Yemen, which has led to the Saudi-sponsored war on the Shiite Houthi Movement.

Iran has not always considered itself a part of the Middle East, for it is proud of its ancient, indigenous culture, with its distinctively Central Asian links, and has a strong sense of its role as a leading intellectual centre of world culture. It has been the seat of many a great empire, and the modern Iranian state is but a shadow of past glories, but even so it too has a particular area of vulnerability. Its wealth would be crippled if Khuzestan, its Arabic-speaking south-west province, were ever separated from the nation. Ethnically, culturally and linguistically, Khuzestan is Arabic not Iranian, though it shares the same Shiite faith as the

rest of Iran. And – once again – it is the region that has most of the oil. It was the cause, the prize and the battlefield of the vastly destructive Iran–Iraq War of 1980–88.

So one of the central understandings of this book is that the situation in the Middle East will be continue to remain tense because Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran do not exercise diplomacy just to win, but to preserve themselves from internal fragmentation. Such struggles are existential. Even if one night the whole of the Middle East decided to renounce all their religious faith and close down the oil fields, there would still be tension the following morning, because of the ancient rivalry between Turk, Arab and Iranian. As we will discover, the only period when this ancient rivalry was calmed was when the entire political structure of the Middle East was threatened with extinction by Western imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this period, ancient animosities were briefly subordinated to a life-and-death struggle for independence against the aggressive colonial powers of Russia, Britain and France.

There can be no simple explanation of the sources of tension within the Middle East. Each nation, sometimes each province, each city, needs to be understood in the light of its own history, its dreams, fears and aspirations. And while oil fields seem so important in the calculations of the modern world, within the Middle East they have not altered things but merely expanded the arsenals. The essential nature of Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran – and their endemic rivalry – were formed centuries before the first barrel of oil was sold.

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So another of the missions of this book is not just to predict the geopolitical shape of the future but to explore the power

of this past. In order to understand the tremendous emotional hold of the loyalties to Shia and Sunni, we first need to hear the stories that every Muslim knows. We cannot skim over the founding era of Islamic history as if it is some Dark Age legend. As anyone who has spent time in the Middle East will be aware, the historical founders of Islam remain vividly alive in the imagination of Muslims. The members of the household of the Prophet Muhammad resonate in the collective memory of Sunni and Shia alike and provide the heroes and villains around which all Muslims navigate their lives. Mecca and Medina of the seventh century CE (first century AH*) glow with compulsive fascination for all believers. It is very hard for those of us who have been brought up in the West to conceive of the passionate engagement of the past with the present in the Islamic world. It is one of the greatest and most surprising differences between the West and the East. In my travels across the Muslim world, I have everywhere stumbled upon history as a living story, whilst in the West we have the luxury of living in the present with no compelling need to uphold the memory of martyrs, heroes and buried civilisations.

It is also important to remember that what keeps Sunni and Shia apart is much less fundamental than what they share. All Muslims recite the same Koran, revere the same Prophet Muhammad, pray, fast and go on pilgrimage to Mecca in the same way. In all major details of the practical demonstration of their faith, they are near identical. Their spiritual visions are also very similar, for most Islamic history has been dominated by rulers who do not fulfil either the Shia or Sunni vision

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* I have used the Western CE (Common Era) dating system throughout this book. The Muslim or Hijri calendar was formulated by the caliph Umar in 639 CE (17 AH) and begins with the Hijra – Muhammad and his followers' migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE (1 AH – After Hijra). The Prophet's dates are 53 BH (570 CE) to 10 AH (632CE). This book's year of publication, 2024 CE, is 1446 AH.

of 'rightful leadership'. Shia believe that before the Prophet was even buried, the Muslim community had lost its divinely anointed and rightful spiritual leadership which would have directed a radically compassionate community. The Sunni are less dismissive but nevertheless believe the rule of good Muslims lasted for less than thirty years after the Prophet's death; they revere only the governance of the first Four caliphs – Abu Bakr, Omar, Uthman and Ali. Most modern Sunni scholars believe that the generation who had been taught by the Prophet, 'the Companions', exercised the only period of true Islam. After three generations, this holy period of the pious predecessors – the Salafi – was extinguished.

This discovery – that no real Muslim scholar, be they Shia or Sunni, thinks that the actual rulers of the Islamic world were rightful after the death of Ali in 661 – is important. To an outsider, all those dynasties of Muslim caliphs appear as both political and spiritual leaders, but that was not how they were seen within their own faith communities. Political leadership within Islamic history has often tried to wrap itself up in the cloak of Sunni or Shia spiritual authority but seldom succeeds for long. The 'sultans' are simply the men who hold the power and since 661 have dominated the Islamic world. A handful of these sultans have won respect as military leaders of their community. But the true and enduring heroes of Islamic society (be they Shia or Sunni) over the last 1,400 years are the 'sheikhs', the gentle scholars and venerable elders who have suffered for their faith. They have not sought after office but have slowly earned for themselves the respect of their community, by the practice of their faith, combined with the modesty of their lives and the principled reality of their teaching.

Shia and Sunni intellectuals have now been in ceaseless dialogue with each other for 1,400 years. Over the course of this book, I have indicated a number of occasions when the

Shia intellectual inheritance was about to be placed alongside the four schools of Sunni law. Such a vision of unity, of five schools, has been suggested by many Muslim teachers, especially those who have dedicated their life to pan-Islamic unity. The most obvious human bridge is Jafar al-Sadiq – 'the truthful one' – who was both the sixth imam of the Shiites and a descendant of Abu Bakr, the first Sunni caliph. In his own lifetime (702–765), Jafar refused to accept an official political position from the Abbasid caliph, let alone challenge his right to the caliphate, but rather was content to serve the Muslim community as a simple scholar, albeit one who was treated with enormous respect.

As we will see over the course of this book, the rule of the sultans (literally 'those who possess authority') continues to this day. These men are often labelled 'moderate Muslims' by Western politicians keen to find someone they can talk to and make deals with. In every generation they have been challenged by principled scholar sheikhs to rule with the clear justice of the Muslim faith. This dialogue between sultan and sheikh is at the heart of every dynamic Islamic community, be they Sunni or Shia, Sufi or Salafi. It is what makes the study of Muslim civilisations so continuously fascinating, this quest for the perfect past, when the House was *undivided*, when the Prophet Muhammad led, directed and inspired the first community. If this interests you at all, read on.

PART ONE

The Origins of the Sunni–Shia Schism

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For all Muslims, whether Sunni or Shia, followers of every tradition from Wahhabism to Sufi mysticism, everything stems from the seventh-century Medina household of the Prophet Muhammad. It was in the Medina oasis that the Prophet spent the last ten years of his life, between 622 and 632, a period that every Muslim reveres as the path of rightful spiritual governance. To understand the later divisions, it is crucial to know the historical reality of the Prophet's life, to feel the power of stories Muslims hear from birth, and to learn of the fateful incidents that stopped the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, Ali, from being acclaimed the rightful leader of the community. These stories set the boundaries and framework of an intellectual mood that has endured for 1,400 years.

All Muslims believe that the Prophet Muhammad was a mortal being, who, orphaned in his childhood, had to earn his keep in his uncle's household, as a shepherd-boy and then on the camel caravans. Muhammad's uncle was one of the clan sheikhs of an important tribal confederation of merchants – the Quraysh – which in this period of Arab history dominated the desert trade route that connected the Yemen with the trading cities of Syria. So Muhammad, though poor

and illiterate, was an acknowledged member of an important tribe centred on the trading city of Mecca, a significant holy place in pagan Arabia.

Muhammad was naturally drawn to a life of piety and spiritual enquiry but the gift of prophecy – making him a mouthpiece for the word of God – first visited him as a terrifying revelation at the age of forty. For the next twelve years, Muhammad continued to live in Mecca but, as he and his followers were persecuted, they migrated to the safety of Medina, a community that had already agreed to protect the Muslims and accept Muhammad as their judge. From this base, Muhammad completed the cycle of revelations that would later be collected as the Koran, which during his life primarily existed in an entirely oral form. All Muslims acknowledge the same Koran, and all study and revere the decisions, judgements and sayings that the Prophet made and which later generations collected as the *hadith*.

It was only at the end of the Prophet's life that we can detect the first fractional differences between Shia and Sunni – the most obvious was a disagreement about who would inherit the leadership of the community after his death. The Shia believe that Ali would have continued the spiritual evolution of the Muslim community which, under the dynamic leadership of a dynasty of holy imam, would have become ever more engaged in the care of the poor and afflicted and the practice of holy poverty. The Sunni concentrate their energy in trying to reconstruct the belief system and practices of the early Muslim community, as it had been led by the Prophet, but also by his 'rightly guided successors', the first Four caliphs.

CHAPTER 1

The House Undivided

Medina (622–632)

Between 622 and 632 the Prophet Muhammad lived in the oasis of Medina. This was the only period in which he exercised political authority – a time seen as the ideal community – and it lasted from when he was fifty-two to his death aged sixty-three. His house was a walled yard, with a prayer hall at one end – a propped-up affair of timbers and palm trunks leaning against a solid stone wall – and a scattering of huts at the other, each lived in by a different wife and partly screened from each other by curtains. The Prophet had no room of his own but every night went to one of his wives. The house was a highly animated space, which served as mosque, family home, public kitchen, occasional hospital, store house and meeting room. Cooking seems to have been done both communally and privately, so there was a constant bustle around the fetching of water, firewood and food. At formal times of prayer it could be as packed as a marketplace, though there were surprisingly few rules to these times of assembly. Worshippers would stay on to consult the Prophet about some personal crisis, or spiritual concern, or to make a petition or tell out a disturbing dream. The only social rule imposed on his guests was to go home once fed and not to interrupt the mid-afternoon siesta.

These habits still govern Muslim etiquette: where guests are always fed, whether it be at a lavish wedding at a sultan's

palace or tea in a simple Bedouin tent. For the house-mosque is the role model for all Muslims. It is the House Undivided, where politics, religion, friends and family all came together under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad.

I have often thought about this house. I have imagined it not as some pure, white architectural prototype of the first mosque but bustling with the domestic disorder of a busy household. It would have contained piles of baggage (including at least two campaign tents), bales of reed mats, the coming and going of step-children, grandchildren and favourite animals – notably cats, of whom Muhammad was fond.* In one story about the Prophet, he became so exhausted by the animation of his household that he only found privacy by sleeping on a roof.

Camels also shared the compound. Muhammad must have known hundreds, if not thousands, of camels, during the early years of his life, when he worked first as a boy-herder and then on the caravan trails of central Arabia. Kuswa ('split ears') was Muhammad's favourite camel at Medina. He had insisted on buying her from his friend Abu Bakr during their migration from Mecca to Medina, when the two of them travelled with just three camels. It was said to have been Kuswa who chose the location of the house in Medina, for the Prophet had been besieged by so many offers of hospitality in the oasis that he decided not to offend any of his hosts, instead letting his reins slip and so giving Kuswa her head. She rambled through the sandy lanes, eventually selecting a neglected courtyard used for storing dates. Once Muhammad had unloaded his baggage

* There are many stories that testify to Muhammad's affection for cats. In one famous incident we hear how, rising before dawn to prepare himself for the first prayers, Muhammad cut off the sleeve of his cloak rather than disturb the slumbers of Muezza. This particular cat had earned this place of honour, by alerting Muhammad to the presence of a viper and so saving his life.

and saddle, he declared that he had found his camp for that night and would move no further. He stayed the next night, and the next, and in due course he purchased it from its owners – a pair of orphans – and over the next months this yard gradually evolved into both his house and Islam's first mosque. Some of the external walls of the yard were reinforced and various huts and lean-to structures gradually grew up. Fodder must have been stored, for beside Kuswa and Muezza, there were a pair of racing camels, named Al-Adbaa and Al-Jadaa, and two horses, a beautiful roan mare called Murtajaz ('spontaneous') and a dark stallion called Sakhb ('swift'). In the last years of his life, the Prophet was also associated with a black donkey called Yafur ('deer'), due to his graceful gait. Yafur came to the household, along with Meriem, a Coptic concubine, sent by the ruler of Egypt, known to the Muslims as Muqawqis.*

All sorts of pious and intriguing legends have attached to Yafur: that he could see angels otherwise invisible to humankind and could talk when he wished to. Other stories explain that he was the last survivor of an ancient dynasty of donkeys who for the last sixty generations had carried a long line of prophets, from Moses in Sinai to Jesus on the road to Jerusalem. It was said that after the Prophet's death Yafur tried to jump down a well in despair – for he knew that Muhammad was the last of the prophets.

Muhammad also owned an off-white mule called Duldul, whose name (rather surprisingly for such a beloved animal) means 'the vexatious or vacillating one'. Duldul is known to have carried the Prophet through the stormy events of the

* The Prophet had sent the ruler of Egypt a letter in the spring of 628, calling upon the leaders of the war-torn Middle East to unite beneath a shared monotheism. The governor of Egypt in this period was likely to have been a Persian-appointed official, after the Sassanid conquest of Byzantine Alexandria. He replied with a letter accompanied by gifts.

Battle of Hunayn. Victorious generals tend to ride into battle on magnificent dark chargers, like Alexander the Great on Bucephalus, or parade through a conquered city on a stately white horse. A mule is a homely animal of low social stature – infertile and obstinate – and so to ride it at the head of an army is entirely in keeping with Muhammad's renunciation of wealth and title. Mules and donkeys can be ridden bareback without saddles or stirrups, and with both legs swinging on one side. To a Muslim, the image of a bearded old man, trotting along the road on a pale mule or a dark donkey, without weapons or saddlery, still has an impact. For such a man is following the example of the Prophet, one of whose affectionate nicknames was Sahib al-Himar, 'master of the donkey'. Charismatic Islamic reformers like Abu Yazid in the Tunisian Sahara and Ibn Tumert in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco have consciously played on this imagery of the veiled power of a true leader. It stresses the poverty and humility of true Islam, when compared with the gilt and glitter of the cavalry armies of a ruling sultan.

The Shia like to remember that the care of Duldul and Yafur passed down to their hero, Ali, as part of his tattered inheritance. Possession of these two, sad, old animals is both a symbol of the holy poverty Muhammad bequeathed to his spiritual heir, and in some way the insignia of a true Muslim leader. In addition to all the other signs, a Muslim will always be able to recognise a truly holy leader by the poverty of his mount.

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The Prophet's formal political role in the oasis of Medina was a modest one. This had been agreed within his inner circle in a public oath, before he made his escape from the persecution of Mecca, and was later repeated to an expanded audience and

then turned into a written legal document. He was to be the chief arbitrator among the Muslims in the oasis.

One might expect that Muhammad's role as a mouthpiece for the divine revelations of the Koran would have placed him in a position of absolute unquestioned authority. This does not seem to be the case for, though his followers never questioned the authority of the Koran, they felt free to question any of his decisions that did not come from a divine source.

The Koran was revealed to Muhammad, verse by verse, over a twenty-two-year period and was only authoritatively written down two decades after his death. The first verse was a terrifying experience for Muhammad. It was dictated by the archangel Gabriel. Later Koranic verses often came upon the Prophet when he was unprepared and in some private space – a hut, a tent or a cave; they were sometimes witnessed by one of his wives but never by the ranks of male followers. The prophetic role was never a public performance, or a sermon before the faithful, but occurred within a domestic space. Respect for the sanctity of domestic space has always been an absolute feature of Islamic society.

Muhammad's authority in Medina borrowed nothing from existing examples of kingship. The Arabs were well used to the habits of kings – the magnificent courts of the Byzantine Caesars at Constantinople, or the Persian Sassanid shahs at Ctesiphon, or such princes of the Arabian desert as the Ghassanid, Lakhmid and Kinda dynasties. These recognised all the expressions of royal power: the sumptuous clothing, the cavalry escorts, the gilded ornaments, the palace guards, the hushed ushers, the immense halls in which to wait and the revered atmosphere of a throne room.

Muhammad despised the wearing of silks and brocades, and ornaments fashioned from precious metals, as the assertion of pride. He spurned the long, tailored trousers then closely

associated with heroic Arab cavalrymen, and instead wore his clothes loose, and homemade, from cloth that had been spun and woven by his household.

A body of tried and trusted friends, many of them bound by a decade of persecution and the filaments of marriage alliances, formed an informal inner element at the heart of the Muslim community. They could be called upon by the Prophet to lead an embassy, take command of a military raid, act as a missionary, deliver a letter or formally acknowledge the reception of a charitable tithe. They responded to these commands, fulfilled them, and then quietly returned to their family hut in one of the villages of the oasis. There was no palace quarter, no privileged suburb of walled gardens set aside for their use. Nor was there a hierarchy or a system of formal rank, aside from respect for those who had suffered for their faith and professed Islam. Time and time again the Prophet overlooked even this badge of righteous pride and trusted some recent convert with a responsible task. The Bedouin tribes of Arabia, once they had embraced Islam or agreed a peace treaty, were left under the command of their own indigenous sheikhs.

All of this creates an astonishing political role model for future Muslim leaders, Sunni or Shia. It is an example of leadership which requires very exacting standards of accessibility, compassion, humanity and honesty, a life according to the Prophet's heartfelt prayer: 'O Lord, keep me alive a poor man, and let me die poor, and raise me among the poor.' Muslim leaders will on some level always be judged and assessed by their people against the behaviour of the Prophet. They should have the good manners to be able to listen (not just command) and be prepared to share their meals with any man, not just the rich and powerful. In the conduct of their lives, they should

remember the words of the Prophet: 'What is pride? Holding another man in contempt.'

They should also be visibly content in the simple pleasures of family life. The narrative of the Prophet's life establishes an ideal role model for a Muslim leader, approaching the wisdom of old age, surrounded by loving children, one or two grandchildren and old friends who have long shared a life of simplicity and modesty and a passionate spiritual quest. No leader should be ashamed of an orphaned childhood, of poverty or of having to work to feed himself as a young man and then to provide for his family. He need not be ashamed of the sparsity of his formal education, either, for as a boy Muhammad lived amongst the herds and the camel caravans and knew no university.

Throughout Islamic history, the gap between the ideal example established by the Prophet and the reality of political leadership has been a continuous tragedy.

CHAPTER 2

The Protection of Medina

Allegiances, the Constitution of Medina and the Flight from Mecca

When Muhammad arrived at the oasis of Medina in the midsummer of 622, he joined a group of just eighty followers from his hometown of Mecca. The Muslims had been financially crippled by a trade boycott organised by the clan chiefs of Mecca, and a small group of believers (including one of his four daughters), had escaped persecution by taking refuge in the Christian empire of Ethiopia. Muhammad had already buried the two most important people in his life, his uncle Abu Talib and his wife Khadija, two years before, in the cemetery at Mecca. Under the persecution at Mecca, he had looked at various options where his followers might feel safe, such as the nearby oasis of Taif. But Medina was chosen after a delegation from the oasis of had come to him and sworn an oath to protect him.

Muhammad had left Mecca under cover of night, protected by the bravery of his cousin, Ali, who slept in his bed outside as a deception, enabling the Prophet to escape near certain death at the hands of an assassination squad put together by the city's pagan clans. For three days and nights, as search parties tried to pick up his trail, he hid in a small cave, accompanied by his old friend Abu Bakr. The Koran records that the two had