

The Quran and stories of the life of the prophet Muhammad described an early Islamic state free of discrimination and social or political hardship. Nasser's Cairo was far from the ideal cities of Mecca and Medina.

Ibrahim witnessed the fundamentalist movement gaining strength during the time he matured as an intellectual in Sudan in the 1960s and 1970s. In his first years in college, religion was largely a private matter. The first time he realized fundamentalists were gaining momentum was when they started placing prayer mats in front of hostels and dorms. Ibrahim says the fundamentalist movement caught on because it promised to deliver the utopia of Islam — equality and a good life for every Muslim. The Quran would be the medicine to treat their frustrations.

Qutb remains a controversial figure to this day because of radically different interpretations of his work. After he was executed by Nasser's regime in 1966, three different currents emerged, Kepel says.

One was an allegorical interpretation, saying Qutb's jahiliyya had more to do with corruption of the soul. The second interpretation centered on the need to topple corrupt leaders of the Muslim world. The third and most deadly interpretation called for a jihad to eliminate all unbelievers, Muslim and non-Muslims, and build a worldwide Islamic state. It is this third reading, labeled Islamism by some, that influenced Osama bin Laden

and al-Qaida.

When Israel won the 1967 war against a coalition of Arab countries, fundamentalists touted the defeat as more proof their countries were misguided. Trying to seize on the resurgence of religion, Iran and Saudi Arabia, two of the most influential countries in the region, began a competition to spread their own form of Islam.

Saudi monarchs used oil money to propagate Wahhabism, a puritan form of Sunni Islam, to mosques and Islamic schools around the world. Iran countered in 1979 with a fundamentalist Shi'a revolution that brought Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power, a cleric known for calling America "The Great Satan."

To some Muslims, America's financial support for Saudi Arabia on one hand and its condemnation of Iran on the other was proof of a double standard. Ibrahim says the mistake of American policy at the time was seeing all forms of fundamentalism as evil.

"Fundamentalism is a political reality," Ibrahim says. "Just like Jerry Falwell. What are you going to do if he decided to take over politics?"

In the Afghanistan war in the 1980s, Islamic fundamentalists and Americans formed an unlikely alliance against a common enemy, the Soviet Union. Among the most prominent fighters for the Afghan cause was bin Laden, a Saudi financier of Islamist causes.

This is where "blowback" comes into

play, Wallace says. Blowback is an intelligence term used to describe unintended consequences of foreign policy. "You select fighters like bin Laden to fight the Soviets, and when they are done with that, they turn on you," Wallace says. "That's the blowback."

Most experts say the 1990s were a decade in which Islamists decided to upgrade their cause from a regional one to an international one. A minority view, expressed by Kepel and BBC's Adam Curtis in the documentary "The Power of Nightmares," says the internationalization of the Islamist cause is proof of its downfall. By the end of the 20th century, these movements had failed to unseat Middle Eastern autocrats, and their violent revolutions were turning off supporters. For Curtis, the attacks on the United States were not a display of power, but an act of desperation.

#### NO MORE LABELS

The reality on the ground, Esposito says, is that over the past half century, the majority of the Middle East has been ruled by monarchs and dictators who are not interested in building an environment of free speech and diverse educational opportunities. Religious zealots are also not interested in changing the climate.

There are many factions in the Muslim world and many variations of fundamentalists and moderates and rulers.

"I define it like this," Esposito says. "If you are a reformer in a Muslim >>>



LIPO CHING/ Missouriian

**John Esposito of Georgetown University is a nationally recognized scholar of Islam and founder of the Center for Muslim-Christian understanding. He has written many books on Islam, and he gave a lecture at MU this spring as part of an effort to raise awareness of Islamic studies.**