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In Islamic Law, Gingrich Sees a Mortal Threat to U.S.

By SCOTT SHANE Published: December 21, 2011 | 443 Comments

WASHINGTON — Long before he announced his presidential run this year, Newt Gingrich had become the most prominent American politician to embrace an alarming premise: that Shariah, or Islamic law, poses a threat to the United States as grave as or graver than terrorism.



Enlarge This Image CJ Gunther/European Pressphoto Agency For Newt Gingrich. In New Hampshire on Wednesday, Shariah is a concern akin to terrorism.

"I believe Shariah is a mortal threat to the survival of freedom in the United States and in the world as we know it," Mr. Gingrich said in a speech to the American Enterprise Institute in Washington in July 2010 devoted to what he suggested were the hidden dangers of Islamic radicalism. "I think it's that straightforward and that real."

Mr. Gingrich was articulating a much-disputed thesis in vogue with some conservative thinkers but roundly rejected by many American Muslims, scholars of Islam and counterterrorism officials. The anti-Shariah theorists say that just as communism posed an ideological and moral threat to America separate from the menace of Soviet missiles, so today radical Islamists are working to impose Shariah in a "stealth jihad" that is no less dangerous than the violent jihad of Al Qaeda.

"Stealth jihadis use political, cultural, societal, religious, intellectual tools; violent jihadis use violence," Mr. Gingrich said in the speech. "But in fact they're both engaged in jihad, and they're both seeking to impose the same end state, which is to replace Western civilization with a radical imposition of Shariah."

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Echoing some Republicans in Congress, Mr. Gingrich blasted the Obama administration's policy of declining to label terrorism carried out in the name of militant Islam as "Islamic" or "jihadist." Administration officials say such labels can imply religious justification for a

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distortion of doctrine that most Muslims abhor, thus smearing an entire faith.

But to Mr. Gingrich, whose campaign did not respond to a request for comment, the administration's language smacks of the willful blindness of an earlier era. "The left's refusal to tell the truth about the Islamist threat is a natural parallel to the 70-year pattern of left-wing intellectuals refusing to tell the truth about communism and the Soviet Union," Mr. Gingrich said.

Shariah (literally, "the path to the watering place") is a central concept in Islam. It is God's law, as derived from the Koran and the example of the Prophet Muhammad, and has far wider application than secular law. It is popularly associated with its most extreme application in societies like Afghanistan under the Taliban, including chopping off a hand as punishment for thievery.

But it has always been subject to interpretation by religious authorities, so its application has varied over time and geography, said Bernard G. Weiss, professor emeritus at the University of Utah and an authority on Islamic law.

"In the hands of terrorists, Shariah can be developed into a highly threatening, militant notion," Professor Weiss said. "In the hands of a contemporary Muslim thinker writing in the journal Religion and Law, Shariah becomes an essentially pacifist notion."

The Arab Spring has set off a lively political and scholarly debate over the growing power of Islamists in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. But those are all overwhelmingly Muslim countries. The idea that Shariah poses a danger in the United States, where the census pegs Muslims as less than 1 percent of the population, strikes many scholars as quixotic.

Even within that 1 percent, most American Muslims have no enthusiasm for replacing federal and state law with Shariah, as some conservatives fear, let alone adopting such ancient prescriptions as stoning for adulterers, said Akbar Ahmed, chairman of Islamic studies at American University in Washington, who spent a year traveling the United States and interviewing Muslims for his 2010 book "Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam."

The notion of a threat from Shariah to the United States "takes your breath away, it's so absurd," Dr. Ahmed said. He sees political demagoguery in the anti-Shariah campaign, which fueled rallies against mosques in the last two years from Manhattan to Tennessee.

All of the Republican presidential candidates have been asked about the supposed threat from Shariah. Representative Michele Bachmann told the conservative Family Research Council in a November speech that Shariah "must be resisted across the United States," endorsing moves by several states to prohibit judges from considering Shariah.

Mitt Romney said in a June debate: "We're not going to have Shariah law applied in U.S. courts. That's never going to happen." He immediately added, "People of all faiths are welcome in this country."

For Mr. Gingrich, concern about Shariah has been a far more prominent theme. He and his wife, Callista, produced and narrated a 2010 film on the threat from radical Islam, "America at Risk," that discusses the danger of both terrorism and Shariah against a lurid background of terrorist bombings, bloody victims, wailing sirens and chanting Muslim crowds. (Mrs. Gingrich does say, at one point, "This is not a battle with the majority of Muslims, who are peaceful.")

One Muslim activist who is shown in the film calling for "separation of mosque and state," Dr. M. Zuhdi Jasser, said he appreciated Mr. Gingrich's support in an ideological contest with large Muslim advocacy groups in the United States that he believes have an Islamist

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