



MONTEFERRO PRESS

PO Box 52163 | Boston MA 02205

---

## Q&A with author Michael Isenberg

**What is your latest book, *The Thread of Reason*, about?**

*The Thread of Reason* is a murder mystery that takes place in the Muslim world in the year 1092. In that year, Nizam al-Mulk—he was the sultan’s vizier, like a prime minister—was brutally murdered while traveling to Baghdad. That was in real life. In my fiction book I solve the mystery of who done it. And even though historians have been speculating about the same mystery for centuries, as far as I know, my solution is unique.

**I understand that even though it’s a work of fiction, most of the characters were actual historical figures. Is that true?**

Yes, that’s correct. For example, in the book, the sultan turns to the two smartest people he knows to investigate the murder: the leading scholar of science, Omar Khayyam, and the leading scholar of shari’ah or Islamic Law, Abu Hamid Ghazali. And even though I invented the investigation, both Omar and Ghazali were real people.

Omar was quite a character. He’s the only figure I came across in my research who played practical jokes. In the Muslim world, he’s known primarily for his achievements in astronomy and mathematics, which were considerable. The sultan commissioned him to come up with a new calendar, and the result (with some modifications) is still in use in Iran today. And it’s more accurate than the Gregorian calendar that we all know and love. But in the west, Omar’s known mainly for a collection of poems he wrote called *The Rubaiyat*—Sheldon Cooper even quoted it once on *The Big Bang Theory*. And more than half of the verses were about wine, which, of course is prohibited in Islam. No doubt that

strained his on-again off-again friendship with Ghazali, who was one of the pillars of orthodoxy.

**What interested you about this particular period in history?**

Like a lot of people, after September 11, I started reading about Islam. When I came across the assassination of Nizam al-Mulk, I thought it was a fascinating mystery in its own right. But I also thought this was a particularly fascinating period in Muslim history. Because if you wanted to find culture or technology on this planet in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Muslim world was one of two places you could go (the other being China). They had the best astronomers, doctors, mathematicians. Anyone who was anyone wrote poetry. The enforcement of the shari'ah was lax, including the laws against alcohol. There was no shortage of wine in Baghdad. The restrictions on Jews and Christians weren't very well enforced either. Some Jews and Christians rose to very high levels in that society.

But if you fast forward a hundred years, the situation completely reversed. There was a crackdown on shari'ah. Wine shops were closed. Jews and Christians were forced out of the government and there was economic pressure on them to convert to Islam. And the level of scientific activity dropped considerably. The Muslims virtually stopped writing books about science and literally started burning them. By the time the Mongols invaded in the 1200s, the Muslim institutions had deteriorated so much they weren't able to put up an effective defense.

For a society to commit suicide like this in such a short time—a little more than 100 years—I thought it was so captivating, that I had to tell the story. *The Thread of Reason* is going to be the first book in a series where I do just that.

**What insights did your research give you into the Muslim world of today?**

Talk about your loaded questions! Because of course we're completely polarized today when it comes to Islam. Some of my right-of-center friends look at the Muslim world and

all they see are the terrorists. They dispute that the periods of tolerance or the scientific achievements ever existed. Meanwhile my left-of-center friends are in denial that Islam has anything to do with terrorism. To them even the mildest of criticisms of Islam is “racist.” What my research has shown me—and I portray this in *The Thread of Reason*—is that both left and right have a piece of the truth, but neither have the whole truth.

Obviously the Muslim world had some great achievements—the career of Omar Khayyam, to give just one example, proves that. So my right-of-center friends are wrong about that. I think the real story isn’t whether these achievements occurred, but why they stopped.

As for my left-of-center friends, they’re equally wrong when they say, as both Presidents Bush and Obama did, that terrorism has nothing to do with Islam. Not only is the ideology of terror deeply rooted in Muslim thought, but its sources may be found in the writings of some of the most revered figures in Islam—including Ghazali, who I was just talking about. He was bedtime reading for Hasan al-Banna, who started the Muslim Brotherhood. And if you look at some of the despicable edicts that ISIS came up with, they’re almost word for word the same as Ghazali’s writings. I even found one ISIS propaganda document where they quoted Ghazali by name. So here’s this guy who’s a revered figure in Islam—he’s been called the greatest Muslim after Muhammad—and he gave the jihadists their blueprint. And that speaks directly to the question of whether the terrorists are Islamic.

**To obtain a review copy of *The Thread of Reason* or schedule an author interview, please contact Michael Isenberg at [NewsRoom@MonteferroPress.com](mailto:NewsRoom@MonteferroPress.com)**