

Understanding Islamic Fundamentalism

Islamic Fundamentalism frightens the West and that fear has motivated a fierce retaliation deploying more weapons and inflicting more slaughter. But in not understanding what drives the jihadists the military strategies may be making matters worse, observes ex-U.S. diplomat William R. Polk.

By William R. Polk

The Arabic word used for Fundamentalist Islam is *salafiyah*. Though it is now usually associated with revolutionary Islamists, native Arabic speakers usually translate it as “reactionary.” But the concept is far more complex. The word *salafi* in classical Arabic means a person who stands both in the rearguard and in the vanguard – Arabic delights in such contrasts.

The logic of the apparent paradox was brought out by the teachings of jurisconsults, experts on the law, from the beginning of the “impact of the West.” In the Eighteenth Century, they began to search for means to protect their civilization. Some argued that “real” strength was not gained by copying the practices of the West but had to be derived from fundamentals as laid out in the Quran and elucidated in the practices of the Prophet and his intimate circle (the *Hadith*).

Weakness, they believed, came from the innovations and perversions that encrusted Islamic thought and Islamic society in the long dark ages of decline of its power and civilization.

The movements of “purification” were inspired by such men as the Arabian Ahmad ibn Abdul Wahhab, the Algerian/Libyan Muhammad bin Ali al-Sanusi, the Sudanese Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi, the Iranian activist Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani and the Egyptian theologian Muhammad Abduh.

In a fundamental aspect, their teachings and movements resembled those set off in northern Europe by Luther and Calvin. These Christians and Muslims shared a belief in the absolute authority of the unalterable word of God as presented in the original texts. Their task was to go back to discover the “pure” message and lead their followers to implement it. However much they differed, both the Muslims and the Protestants were in this sense *salafis*.

The original texts, the Old Testament and the Quran, reflected primitive tribal Jewish and Arab societies, and the codes they set forth were severe. They aimed, in the Old Testament, at preserving and enhancing tribal cohesion and power and, in the Quran, at destroying the vestiges of pagan belief and practice. Neither early Judaism nor Islam allowed deviation. Both were authoritarian theocracies.

But, over the centuries, both outgrew their original isolation and came to deal with diverse societies and beliefs. Thus, in practice, both became more ecumenical and put aside or modified many of their original concepts. In the eyes of some theologians, such modifications amounted to perversions of God's commandments. So, throughout history, a few religious scholars have sought to "go back" to the original or "pure" message as their ancestors had received it, as they believed, from God, and as they had enforced it.

These attempts at "return" reached a large body of believers in Europe in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries and in the Middle East in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries. Thus, Old Testament-inspired New England Puritans implemented a draconian, Biblically-based legal code, complete with lashings, burnings and stoning to death for such crimes as adultery, sodomy and blasphemy.

Today's militant Muslim Fundamentalists, similarly, have insisted on a literal interpretation of early Islamic practice. Indeed, some, like the Taliban, have also sought to implement anew what were primitive, non-Islamic tribal codes (Pashtu: *ravaj*) or to insist, like several African societies, on implementing tribal customs even when they were not sanctioned by Islamic law (the *Shariah*).

The ancestors of a vast majority of today's Christians, Jews and Muslims eventually relaxed. In the aftermath of the puritan movements, subsequent generations turned away from what their fathers and grandfathers had sought to impose. In effect, they found other, less draconian ways to accomplish their social and cultural objectives. Others held firm. So among some Christian sects Old Believers, Born Again Christians and many Protestant groups – "Return" remained a powerful rallying call.

It was even more so for Muslims. That is because many of their more influential thinkers believed that Islam itself faced an existential challenge in the era of imperialism and colonialism. For Muslims and other cultural groups in Africa and Asia, the challenge was clear and present. So I turn to the recent expression of the perceived threat and the ideas among Muslims on how to counter it.

The Source of Militancy

The inspiration for the current version of Islamic *salafiyah*, and particularly for its militant wing, has come mainly from the Egyptian, partly-American-educated polemicist religiously learned man (Arabic: *alim*), Sayyid Qutub.

Born in an Egyptian village in 1906, Sayyid Qutub got his early education in a primary school in the village and then in a secular school in Cairo. During his twenties and thirties, he wrote a charming memoir on village life and a not very successful novel but gained a reputation as a literary critic in Egyptian

periodicals. Then, just before the Second World War, he became a minor official in the Egyptian Ministry of Education. From that post, he received a scholarship to study the American educational system. He spent two years mainly in Colorado and California, but traveled widely throughout the country.

Everywhere he went in America, Qutub was appalled by what he saw. In his eyes, America was a cesspool of wasteful consumption, exaggerated sex and crass materialism. Putting together all he found to detest about America, he placed American civilization in an Arabian context: it was like the pre-Islamic Arabian period of "ignorance [of God's way]," the *Jahaliyah*, which was reformed through the actions of God's Messenger, Muhammad. In this way, he categorized the West, not Islam, as the retrograde society.

Today's Muslims, he argued, must reinstate the pattern and practices of the order announced by Muhammad in the Seventh Century. That is, Muslims must go back to the original pattern, Muhammad's community, in order to correct today's excesses. Only then can they move ahead. This is the true meaning of *salafiyah*.

Salafiyah in practice even when not designated by that word has a long history in Islam. We see it first in the great Eighth-Ninth century Muslim scholar Ahmad bin Hanbal of Baghdad who preached a strict interpretation of the Islamic heritage and sought to prevent innovation (Arabic: *bida'*). Running contrary to the trends of his time and criticizing the ruling authorities, he was imprisoned. That was to become the fate of some of his successors, notably the uncompromising jurist of the Mongol period of invasions, Ibn Taimiyah, who died in prison in Damascus in 1328 AD.

These were the Muslim thinkers who laid the basis for the thought of Sayyid Qutub and today's Muslim Fundamentalists.

For such men as Hanbal, Taimiyah and Qutub, Islam was a coherent system in which the distinctions we draw between the secular and the religious were themselves travesties. They viewed life in society in holistic terms with Islam all-encompassing.

Hanbal and Taimiyah were not so challenged as Qutub by non-Muslim material superiority "the coming of the West to Asia and Africa" – and so did not need to explain or counter demands for innovation. Qutub did. And while he did not use these words, I read his works to be motivated by much the same judgment as made by secular nationalists: Muslim societies are now weak and must find their way to dignity and strength.

He differed from the secularists in believing that they could find it only by returning to first principles whereas the secularists wanted to forget the past

and rush into Western-style modernity. Thus, he believed and many Muslims came to agree with him that ventures into nationalism and socialism, the main currents of thoughts in the 1950s and 1960s, were bound to fail to bring strength and dignity. They did. And their failure opened the way for the return of Muslim Fundamentalism.

Qutub understood the nationalists' and Socialists' Westernizing program and partly, only partly, was prepared to accommodate it. It was his willingness to work with the nationalists that made him acceptable to the men who led the first of the 'Arab Spring' revolts, the 1952 Egyptian coup d'État.

Like the secular nationalists, he admitted that the West was materially strong and agreed that the East must also become materially strong. Doing so is justified, he pointed out, because God appointed mankind to be his agents to control and exploit the Earth. But, he argued, Westernized Muslim and secular Arab nationalists had perverted God's intent. They copied the wrong things in Western society. Instead of simply *using* the material benefits, they traded for them the essence of their own culture.

In fact, as he had concluded from his trip to America, the West had little to offer. In its blind race toward materialism, Qutub held, Western society had lost sight of what wellbeing really means.

In his view it is precisely the turn-away from spirituality that is the great failing of Western culture. It is not just that a life without spirituality is barren which he believed but that it loses the coherence of the whole Divinely-created and God-mandated system. The attempt to make up for this loss by adopting such ideologies as nationalism or such constructs as participatory democracy or Socialism are, he argued, wholly inadequate and, worse, they are a false trail leading away from true religion. True religious life, a spiritual life, in which God's commandments determine man's fate, was to be found in a pure form only in early Islam.

Misreading History

As a historian, I have to say that Qutub's reading of Muhammad's new order is not quite what I and other scholars believe the years immediately following the establishment of Muhammad's community to have been. There was a great deal of dissidence, infighting and greed evident in those years.

Moreover, the time of the four "Rightly Guided Caliphs" lasted only a short time. However, not only for Qutub but also for virtually all Muslims, those few years were the Golden Age. It is for this reason that the more extreme of today's Syrian *jihadis* speak of their aim as reestablishing a caliphate. In that

age, Fundamentalists believe, "pure" Islam was coherent, all-embracing, just, available and God-given.

From the short and simple beginning of the Arabian caliphate, Islam spread across the world from Indonesia to Morocco and from sub-Saharan Africa far into Central Asia and grew into a complex civilization that was widely admired and to an extent copied in contemporary Europe. Its astronomers, physicians, philosophers and other learned men were taken as exemplars throughout the West.

Even among the illiterate, Islam exercised a powerful appeal. In part this was because its creed was both attractive and easy to understand: affirmation of the unity of God (*tawhid*) and denial of any sharing (*shirk*) of His majesty; men are not to exploit one another so taking of interest (*riba*) is forbidden; Muslims are enjoined to help one another so everyone must pay a welfare tax, (*zakat*); all must abide by the law (*shariah*) where explicitly laid out in the Quran or exemplified by the actions and sayings (*hadith*) of the Prophet; Muslims are forbidden to kill one another because they are brothers (*ikhwan*); they should perform the pilgrimage (*hajj*) in which as many Muslims as possible from all over the world assemble to express their faith, exemplify their unity and draw strength from one another; and Muslims are commanded to struggle (perform *jihad*) in the cause of God (*fi sabilillah*) to create the community (*ummah*) He had ordered.

Since Islam had been announced among a tribal people, and its mores had been influenced by their traditional practices, it easily adapted to other tribal peoples and incorporated their practices. So, in Afghanistan for example, Muslims lived both by Quranic precepts and Pushtun, Turcoman, Hazara or Tajik customs. The division between Sunnis and Shiis can be explained in part by the diversity of ethnic cultures.

And since conversion was easy, peoples with even more distant ethnic backgrounds eagerly joined its community. Its emphasis on equality and its lack of racism made Islam attractive, for example, to millions of downtrodden untouchables (*dalits*) of India for whom Hinduism meant perpetual slavery. Such conversions also brought ideas and habits alien to the Quran and *Hadith* into Islamic practice. These "intrusions" were often easily accepted but from time to time, they and those who followed them were the subject of bitter reproach or violence. We see this today, as for example in the Syrian Sunni Muslim hostility to the deviant Shia Muslim sect of the Alawis.

What so infuriated the Orthodox Muslims about the Alawis was that they were "almost Muslims." That is, heretics in the Islamic family. This is or should be understandable to us. Historically, we see that reaction of religions to heresy has often been more violent than intolerance of a different religion. That is, I

think, because heretics are considered more dangerous than true outsiders. The Inquisition, as we know, spent most of its energy sniffing out Christian deviation, crypto-Jews, Judaizing Christians and Muslims who only pretended to be Christians (Marranos and Conversos) .

The modern Syrian experience was more pointed because heresy became associated with political power. No one paid much attention to the Alawis or Christians or other minorities when power was in the hands of Muslims, as it was under the Ottoman Empire and under the early Syrian Republican regimes. But when Hafez al-Assad changed the Constitution to omit the requirement that the president be a Muslim and himself took power, he provoked a civil war. Muslims were prepared to tolerate deviants but not deviant overlords.

Yet, it has to be said in fairness that over the centuries Islam has been far more tolerant of difference than most other religions. Non-Muslim and such quasi-Muslim communities as Alawis, Druze, Ismailis and Yazidis were allowed to live by their own rules and under their own authorities. (Such toleration was rare in contemporary Europe.) Islamic rules were mandatory, but mandatory only for Muslims. People who did not profess to be Muslim have generally been accepted as protected neighbors [Arabic: *jar*].

A Pluralistic World

The Quran is explicit in its description of ours as a pluralistic world. Despite the widely held idea that Islam was spread by the sword, Qutub rightly points to the Quranic injunction that *belief* is both personal and free; each man is legally, according to the Shariah, allowed to chose his own way.

Thus, the "People of the Book [the Bible]," Jews and Christians, and by later extension, Hindus, were to be accepted peacefully into the Islamic world as protected communities [Ottoman Turkish: *millet*]. Only if what an individual or a group does is deemed threatening to Islamic society are restrictions on their actions legal. Or, in extreme cases, is an attack on them justified.

This is an issue posed by the Syrian rebellion have the Alawis harmed the Islamic community? The Syrian and foreign *jihadis'* answer that it has. Therefore, suppressing it is legal. If the West supports them, it too is acting illegally and deserves to be fought. This is what the *jihadis* read the Quran as ordering (Surah II/190-193, my translation):

"Fight in the cause of God those who fight against you [that is, defend yourselves], but do not initiate hostilities. Verily God does not love aggressors.

"But [if such people are the aggressors] kill them wherever you encounter them

and expel them from where they had expelled you, because tyranny is more insufferable than fighting

“And fight them to the death until subversion is no more and the religion of God is established. But if they surrender, do not attack any but the evil doers.”

This battle cry is memorized, along with the rest of the Quran, in daily classes by millions of young students (Arabic: *taliban*) in tens of thousands of religious schools all over the Islamic world. We may take these words as essentially the marching orders of the *jihadi*. For him, the Alawis are the aggressors. And, by extension, the West, its local agents – Westernized or perverted Muslim governments allied with the West – and Israel are the true enemies of Islam. They are charged with having dispossessed Muslims from their homelands, oppressed them with tyrannies, stolen their wealth and attempted to corrupt their faith. So it is moral and legal to fight them. Only if they desist can peace come.

Sayyid Qutub was not, of course, a *jihadi*, but he was feared as a justifier of subversion of secular order. So, like his great predecessors, Hanbal and Taimiyah, he was often imprisoned. He spent about 12 years of his life in an Egyptian prison until at age 60, he was convicted of sedition by a secular court and hanged. During his life, especially in prison, he wrote commentaries on the Quran as many clerics have done. But he also wrote widely on early Islamic society, Islamic law and what he saw as the foibles and failures of Western society.

Some of his writings bear comparison to the Islamic legal classics. As a group, they have attracted a mass readership – believed to be in the tens of millions – throughout the Islamic world and have apparently influenced men as opposed to one another as the leaders of the Taliban, the Saudi Royal Establishment, al-Qaida, the Iranian and Iraqi clerics [Arabic: *ulema*] and now the various and competing groups of Syrian militants. Sayyid Qutub is the philosopher of the Islamic revolution.

Implicit in his writings was the idea that Islam is under attack and therefore must defend itself because failure to do so would be to contravene the intention of God. He does not explain how this is to be done. Defining the nature of the struggle, identifying the oppressors, justifying the tactics and predicting the outcome are the tasks taken up by several of Qutub's successors.

The Syrian Struggle

Here I will focus on the one most identified with current conflict in Syria, most influential among Fundamentalists and most candid in laying out the nature

of the struggle.

Abu Bakr Naji, about whom – or them, since some have suggested that “Naji” is not one man but a committee – nothing is known for certain. Perhaps the name is only a *nom de plume* attached to a book called *Idarah at-Tawhish* (*Management of Desolation*). Naji picked up where Sayyid Qutub left off. He is the strategist of the politico-military and military doctrine of al-Qaida and such affiliates as Jabhat an-Nusrah and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

Naji begins with his interpretation of the post-caliphal world (that is, what we call the “colonial” world): as he sees it, it began when the West took control and degraded the culture of the inhabitants and divided what had been *societies* and made them into *states* on a Western model.

When the colonial powers withdrew, the states they had created “fell into the hands of military governments or civil governments supported by military forces. Then the UN, the two superpowers and their acolytes took control of the world.” Acting alone or with the connivance of native agents [Arabic: *wukal*], who were motivated by lust or the desire for riches, they overturned the order [Arabic: *‘aqida*] of the societies.

As the societies weakened and became corrupted, the foreign powers and their local allies “squandered and plundered the resources of those states and spread inequity among the people.” So, “since the fall of the caliphate,” their lives were conditioned by “no goodness, no justice and no [material benefits of] the world”

True Muslims, however, can take heart from the fact that the great states’ power is limited: unless, that is, the natives submit of their own accord. So a part of the task that must be undertaken is to show the people the evil results of the current state system. Of course, those now in power whom he calls the *Taghut* – and their foreign allies realize this.

To disguise their real objective and to win over the natives, these powers use deceptive media to portray their rule “as non-coercive and world-encompassing ... [and to portray the native] people as subservient to it not only through fear, but also through love because it spreads freedom, justice, equality among humanity, and various other slogans.”

In assessing blame for this condition, Naji indicts not only foreign powers and their venal local henchmen – although they are the major culprits – but also to the mass of the people. Naji takes a dim view of them: “Notice that when we say that the masses are the difficult factor We know that they not generally dependable on account of [how the foreign imperialists and native turncoats have

shaped them and we realize that there will be] no improvement for the general public until there is victory. [Consequently, our strategy] is to gain their sympathy, or at the very least neutralize them.”

Naji sees the only effective way to stop the slide into iniquity which was begun in the colonial era to be a strategy of violence. It cannot be accomplished, he and Qutub agreed, by the creation of institutions, by a “theoretical model or by sparkling slogans.” What reformers offer is a snare for the youth that “prevents them from raising the slogan, ‘*jihad* is our path and death in the path of God is our noblest desire!’” So, what must be undertaken is a long-term campaign to destroy the power of the imperialists and cleanse Islamic society.

Such a violent policy, he continues, is justified by Islamic law. Moreover, Westerners are hypocrites to inveigh against it on moral grounds. Look at their record: “in the 20th century alone they committed massacres against themselves and against the Muslims [on a scale] which had not been matched in all of human history. Even the most brutal peoples, like the Tatars [or Mongols], did not shed as much blood as they did. They frivolously spent the money of the Muslims and their own money, which is, in reality, the money of God, for spreading unbelief, moral depravity, and debauchery, while millions of humans died hungry, the number of which some rational minds would not believe even if it were recorded in a book.

“As for the [the Middle Eastern] nationalists, the Baathists, and the democrats, they have afflicted the Islamic community [Arabic: the *Ummah*] by corrupting religion and by the ghastly destruction of souls. That which Saddam [Hussein], [Hafez al-] Asad, [Hosni] Mubarak, [Saudi King] Fahd, the Socialist Party in Yemen, and others did with regards to this destruction of souls alone surpasses those killed in all of the wars of the *jihadis* in this century...”

Stages of War

Since war is thus justified, it must be carefully planned and executed. It has several stages. The first stage is “vexation” of the enemy aimed at creating chaos in which the forces of the foreign powers and their local proxies are distracted and exhausted and the Muslims learn that they have power and learn how to use it.

Operations are of diverse kinds but should be dramatic. Thus, they should be on a small scale, carried out independently by autonomous groups – not like the elaborate attack on the World Trade Center which was premature. What needs to take place at this stage is “advancement of groups made capable of vexation through drilling and operational practice so that they will be prepared psychologically and practically for the stage of the management of savagery.”

The second stage is the spread of savagery: "Note here that we said that the goal is to dislodge these regions [which have been selected for attack] from the control of the regimes of apostasy. It is the goal we are publicly proclaiming and which we are determined to carry out, not [just] the outbreak of chaos." This second stage appears in Naji's order as guerrilla warfare. It is essentially what is now happening in Syria and Iraq. As he sees it, it is the transition from small scale and scattered terrorism to large-scale warfare, his third stage.

The third stage is the administration of savagery. The tasks that must be undertaken at this stage include "establishing a fighting society" with requisite means of self defense. Also necessary is the creation of an intelligence agency both to learn the plans of the enemy and to guard against internal subversion. And, a socio-political program aimed at "Uniting the hearts of the people" by means of money, food and medical services and by providing a functioning system of justice under *Shariah* governance.

This implies the creation of an enclave or territory under the control of the movement. From this base it will become possible to create a rudimentary state. We can see the beginnings of this already in eastern Syria. From this base, it will become "possible to expand and attack the enemies in order to repel them, plunder their money, and place them in a constant state of apprehension and desire for reconciliation."

The word "administration" leads Naji to a step beyond those acceptable to Qutub. Indeed, he advocates what seems perilously close to adopting the course of a business school: "We must make use of books on the subject of administration, especially the management studies and theories which have been recently published, since they are consonant with the nature of modern societies. There is more than one site on the Internet in which one can obtain management books. I believe that they can be downloaded from the website *Mufakkirat al-Islam* Moreover, it is possible to obtain more management books and resources from other sites on the Internet or from libraries and publishing houses"

But, he recognizes, this is a dangerous if necessary policy so while "in our plan we open the door of management wide to those who have mastered its art, [we open] the door of leadership only to those who are reliable, even though there is a security apparatus which keeps watch over the two doors, monitoring the professionalism of the actions of the leaders and the managers in order to prevent infiltration."

Management, he says, is not the aim. It is only the means. What is to be managed is power. Here Naji tries to draw lessons from the Russian campaign in

Afghanistan. The Afghans could not defeat the Russians in formal battles because the Russians had overwhelming military capacity. What the Afghans had to do was to provoke them so that their forces over-extended themselves and were caught in wasting, unwinnable conflict, which bankrupted their economy and lost the support both of their own people and the government they sought to protect. America, he thought, will fall easily into this trap.

America's Impulse

Driven by its own imperatives, "America will either seek revenge and the conflict will intensify or it will launch a limited war. In the case of the latter, its grudge will not be satisfied and it will not succeed in curbing this escalating expansion. America might have caused the downfall of the state of Afghanistan, which it had already planned for, or [the Taliban state] might have collapsed without the momentous events of September. [In any case America] will begin to confront the transformation of [its Afghan campaign] into tens of thousands of groups which will turn their strikes against it."

As the campaign spread and as it seeks to retaliate, "America will not find a state on which it can take its revenge, because the remaining [states} are its clients. Thus, it will become clear to it that the regimes which support it cannot protect it from attacks and cannot preserve its strategic interests and the interests of its adopted daughter, Israel, in the region.

"It has no choice but to fall into the second trap [that is occupying] the region and set[ing] up military bases [This will put it at] war with the population in the region. It is obvious at this very moment that it stirs up movements that increase the *jihadi* expansion and create legions among the youth who contemplate and plan for resistance.

"So [the correct tactic is to] diversify and widen the vexation strikes against the Crusader-Zionist enemy in every place in the Islamic world, and even outside of it if possible, so as to disperse the efforts of the alliance of the enemy and thus drain it to the greatest extent possible. For example: If a tourist resort that the Crusaders patronize in Indonesia is hit, all of the tourist resorts in all of the states of the world will have to be secured by the work of additional forces, which [will cause] a huge increase in spending.

"If a usurious bank belonging to the Crusaders is struck in Turkey, all of the banks belonging to the Crusaders will have to be secured in all of the countries and the (economic) draining will increase. If an oil interest is hit near the port of Aden, there will have to be intensive security measures put in place for all of the oil companies, and their tankers, and the oil pipelines in order to protect them and draining will increase. If two of the apostate authors are

killed in a simultaneous operation in two different countries, they will have to secure thousands of writers in other Islamic countries.

“In this way, there is a diversification and widening of the circle of targets and vexation strikes which are accomplished by small, separate groups. Moreover, repeatedly (striking) the same kind of target two or three times will make it clear to them that this kind (of target) will continue to be vulnerable.”

In short, Naji believes, violence is necessary. It weakens the enemy while it performs as the school almost the social “hospital” needed to transform corrupt societies into the pure Islam of tomorrow.

Those who adopt struggle must confront reality: “One who previously engaged in *jihad* knows that it is naught but violence, crudeness, terrorism, frightening (others), and massacring” This beginning stage is fundamental. It must be conducted ruthlessly.

So must the other stages be effected since *jihad* cannot be carried out with softness, “whether the softness is in the mode of inviting others to join (the *jihad*), taking up positions, or (undertaking) the operations, since the ingredient of softness is one of the ingredients of failure for any *jihadi* action. Regardless of whether we use harshness or softness, our enemies will not be merciful to us if they seize us. Thus, it behooves us to make them think one thousand times before attacking us. Consequently, there is nothing preventing us from spilling their blood; rather, we see that this is one of the most important obligations since they do not repent, undertake prayer, and give alms. All religion belongs to God.”

Naji goes on to assert that only the certainty of revenge will prevent the West and its native agents from harming Muslims. Revenge [Arabic: *thar*] is a very old and even pre-Islamic concept. Let us be clear: it is a concept we in the West understand. Retaliation is the policy we adopted in the “Delicate Balance of Terror” vis-À-vis the Soviet Union. It also is the policy we adopted in the aftermath of the attack on the World Trade Center.

Naji proclaims its part in the modern Muslim Fundamentalist struggle. The tools and the geography are different, but the principle of making the aggressor “pay the price” is similar: As he says, “No harm comes to the *Ummah* or to us without (the enemy) paying a price.” Not quite an eye for an eye, but certainly a death for a death. That policy has the dual objective of deterring attacks on Muslims and of “spreading hopelessness in the hearts of the enemy.”

Making the enemy “pay the price” can occur anywhere: “if the apostate Egyptian regime undertakes an action to kill or capture a group of *mujahids*, the youth of

jihad in Algeria or Morocco can direct a strike against the Egyptian embassy and issue a statement of justification, or they can kidnap Egyptian diplomats as hostages until the group of *mujahids* is freed. The policy of violence must also be followed such that if the demands are not met, the hostages should be liquidated in a terrifying manner, which will send fear into the hearts of the enemy and his supporters.”

In conclusion, the politico-military doctrine Naji lays out can be described as a Muslim version of what Mao Zedong and Ho Chi-Minh proclaimed as their kind of war: a combination of terrorism when that is the only means of operation, guerrilla warfare when that becomes possible as areas of operation are secured and ultimately, when the conflict “matures,” the creation of a warlike but independent state-society which he thinks of as a new caliphate.

It is a sequence often played out in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries all over the world as I have reported in my book *Violent Politics*. It is ugly, brutal and costly, but it has nearly always eventually succeeded. Whatever may be the outcome now in Syria, Naji gives us a plan of how his followers intend to fight it there and perhaps throughout the world.

As he tells us, it “not an economic, political, or social battle“ with state-like opponents for territory but “a battle of the proclamation of the single God [Arabic: *tawhid*] against unbelief and faith against polytheism..”

Nothing quite like it has been on the world stage since the great wars of religion some 400 years ago.

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An endnote:

Foreign Policy, Nov. 30, 2013, Stephen Walt, “Why do they hate us (II): How many Muslims has the U.S. killed in the past 30 years?” He estimates that the number is between about 300,000 and a million.

Iraqi Chaos May Give Kurds a State

Millions of Kurds live in Iran, Iraq, Turkey and Syria but the British-French imperial division of the region left them without a state of their own, adding to the region's tensions. But some Kurds see the current chaos in Iraq as a pathway to nationhood, as scholar Edmund Ghareeb told Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

As Iraq unravels amid Sunni-Shiite sectarian warfare, the chances have increased that the relatively peaceful and prosperous Kurdish autonomous region in northern Iraq may break off and form an independent Kurdish state, a long-treasured dream of the Kurdish people who also inhabit parts of Iran, Turkey and Syria.

Kurdish and Middle East Scholar Edmund Ghareeb believes this possibility could be the major story emerging from the chaos unfolding across Iraq and Syria. Ghareeb spoke with Dennis J Bernstein on Pacifica Radio's Flashpoints show. A scholar at American University in Washington, he has written extensively about the Kurdish movement.

DB: You said today "The 21st Century is likely to be the Kurdish Century in the Middle East. There is both great opportunity, right now for the Kurds, perhaps the greatest in recent history, and serious threats."

EG: Well, the Kurds are going to be a major player, whatever happens in Iraq. To a certain extent a great deal will depend on what kind of a stand do the Kurds take in this vicious, fierce fighting that's taking place between the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant that's taking the fighting in Iraq.

But for the Kurds, I think there are three major forces. Of course, there is the [Iraqi] government, there are the forces of the Islamic State and its allies. And there are the Kurdish forces. The Kurds have in the last two decades, established their own autonomous region. They have established a secure region, compared to what's been going on in Iraq. Their economy is thriving. They have their own pesh mergas, their own military force. And so they have an effective military force in Iraq.

And they have recently taken over the city of Kirkuk, which they had been claiming for quite a while. Kirkuk is a very important city, for a variety of reasons. For instance, [it is] one of the more cosmopolitan cities in Iraq, it used to have, and to a certain extent still does [have] many different ethnic and religious communities. But, what makes Kirkuk very important, one, is that

it is the center for the northern fields ... Iraqi oil fields. And before the discovery of the oil fields in the south, that was Iraq's main oil field.

And there are probably, still today, somewhere between 17% and 20% of Iraq's oil is in that area. The Kurds have claimed this, as their own Jerusalem, in a sense. The Turkoman, another ethnic community, which at one time, used to be protected by Turkey and used to look to the Turkish government for support also claimed Kirkuk as have Arabs.

So as a result of this, you have now the control of this area by the Kurds, as well as the important, the disputed areas, in other parts of Iraq. What this says, if the Kurds can keep this area ... then they might be able, if they wished to do so, and many of them have been saying that ... "Maybe this is the time." They might be able to establish an independent state of their own, which has been the Kurdish dream for many, many decades. The Kurds had not been able to achieve that, and there is question whether they will or not be able to achieve it now.

But if they decide to move in that direction, then that means that the Iraq, that we used to know, is finished, and for sure. Because that will leave only the Sunni areas, and the Shiite areas, which are basically at each other's throat. And if that fighting continues, then we are likely to see the end of Iraq.

DB: Now, unlike in prior days, there seems to be some support from the Turkish government for an independent Kurdistan, on the one hand, of course, there are 5 million Kurds, as you point out, in Iraq now, or Kurdistan, and 20 million in Turkey, so if the Turkish government supports the state next door, this could be trouble for Turkey. You want to talk about this complicated situation?

EG: Absolutely. And I think this is fascinating, in a sense, what's going on. On the one hand, we have seen a real improvement in the relationship between Turkey and the Kurdish regional government. Which is the autonomous government, Kurdish government in Iraq. The Kurds have had problems with the central government in Baghdad. They've had disputes over oil revenues. The Kurds have wanted to explore the oil, for oil in their own region, and they wanted to be able to export it. And Turkey has been sympathetic to that view. And in fact we have recently seen oil, for the first time, about the equivalent of two tankers, have been sold through Turkey, Kurdish oil, or oil from the Kurdish region.

So that is one problem which has brought the Kurds and, the Iraqi Kurds and the Turkish government together. The second factor is that the Turkish government and the Iraqi government have not seen eye-to-eye on a number of issues; whether it's Syria, whether it's a question of trade with the Kurds. And, in fact, the

Iraqi government has threatened to bring what they consider to be the illegal act by Turkey of buying oil from Iraq without the approval of the central government in the International Arbitration Court.

So, there is bad blood between the two governments. On top of that, Turkey needs the Kurds of Iraq to help in its efforts to achieve dialogue and perhaps reconciliation and the beginning of a resolution of the problem of the Turkish Kurds. And, so the Iraqi Kurds have been trying to play the role of the mediator between the Turkish government and the Kurds.

And the last item, which is very important, is also that Turkey would like to diversify its oil [supplies]. Turkey is energy poor, and therefore if it could get more oil from the Kurdish region then that would strengthen its economy and would sort of relieve them from relying on Baghdad or on other oil and energy rich countries, whether it's Iran, or whether it's Russia. So there are complicated games being played. But at the heart of it, if the Kurds decide to go ahead and establish an independent republic of their own, an independent state, then there is going to be trouble.

There are many Turks who are very much opposed to the present government's efforts to negotiate with the Kurdish population and with [Abdullah] Ocalan, head of the Kurdish Workers Party, which is a party which had been fighting against Turkey since 1984. And there are many Turks who worry, as you pointed out correctly, that if the 5 million Kurds in Iraq can establish their own state, why can't the 20 to 22 million Kurds in Turkey do the same thing, and emulate their brethren in Iraq?

DB: Do you expect that there will be more fighting [in Iraq involving the Kurds]?

EG: I think there might be trouble between this Islamic State [of Iraq and the Levant] and the Kurds of Iraq. Then as you pointed out, some clashes that have taken place. However, they have not entered into any major battles recently. Nevertheless, I think the danger is there because there was bad blood, also, between this group when they were in Syria, or their branch in Syria has also entered into a battle with the Syrian Kurds.

And right now there are also disputed areas. The southern part of Kirkuk, there has been fighting between this group and the Kurdish pesh merga fighters and I think the danger is there. On top of that, there are also the Turkomen who are the third largest ethnic community in Iraq, who are a people of Turkish origin and they have had some problems with the Kurdish government because they are both claiming Kirkuk. And some of them have warned that if Kirkuk is not returned to the central government in Baghdad, the Turkomen might begin to carry

on against the Kurds. So the situation is very fragile, very volatile, and extremely complex. And the danger of further fighting, bringing in new parties, is certainly a real one.

DB: And, complex is putting it mildly, I guess, because there are reports that Kurdistan already has a contract to export oil to Israel. Now that would certainly be something that many people in the region would be taking note. And then, of course, you have the United States, all of a sudden, they may be partners with Iran to bring peace to Iraq. You want to sort of talk about these dynamics?

EG: Well, this is another fascinating thing, and, although each one is a little different, but they are, in a way, both related. The Kurds are very much interested in getting money because Baghdad has stopped paying them when they refused to agree to Baghdad's decision that they need to get approval from the central government before they can explore for oil, and export oil outside of Iraq. So that's why they needed Turkey, and that's why they've established this new pipeline to export oil from the Kurdish region through Turkey. Turkey has been very helpful.

There have been reports that they have sold two tankers full of oil. One of them reportedly has gone to Israel. The Kurdish regional government has denied this but there are a lot of questions. What has happened? Was it sold directly? Was it sold through other parties, and then the third party sold it to Israel? There are a lot of questions about this, so it is not very clear.

The other point that you mention, which is the issue of Iran. The Kurds have a good relationship with Iran. But Iran, also, has its own large Kurdish community of nine million or a little more than that, and they have been also pressured. In fact, the only place where you have had a Kurdish state, was in Iran after the Second World War. And at that time the United States and Britain helped Iran to suppress that revolt.

But what gives Iran, the Iranian dimension, the Iranian angle is much more complex because Iran also, as you know, supports [Nouri al-] Maliki, the current prime minister of Iraq. They have provided some intelligence support, also there is a report that they have been recently providing some planning assistance to defend Iraq and to regain some of the territory lost. At the same time the United States appears to be also very much interested in helping Baghdad against this Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

So that, in a way, puts Iran and the United States on the same side, at least, on Iraq. While they disagree, they stand on different sides inside Syria. There's the opposition to the Syrian regime [that] has been getting support from

Washington, while Iran has been supporting the Assad regime in Syria. So as a result of that, what we are finding is while the two countries may not see eye-to-eye on Syria, they appear to be seeing eye-to-eye, or at least have some common interest, when it comes to Iraq. And this is going to be fascinating to see where this is likely to go in the future, especially if you also bring in the five-plus-one negotiations with Iran over its nuclear pile.

DB: Particularly we've been focusing on Kurdistan. I do want to just spend a minute or two to look at the larger regional situation. Syria's bombing, we don't know if they are bombing inside Syria, or if they are in Iraq, because really the border has disappeared. These are two wings of the same group fighting in two countries. Your assessment of the broader picture, what that looks like, the disappearing border, the wars spreading. It's almost like it could look like the worst nightmare that many people feared in terms of a real breakdown after the Iraq destruction.

EG: Absolutely. You put your finger on one of the most complex, the most dangerous aspects of this conflict. As you know, the British and the French divided the region, what was known as the Sykes-Picot Agreement. This led to the creation of the current nation states in the region. But now, with the rise of this new movement that's known as ISIS, or the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, in Iraq, but it's also moved into Syria. It helped to create the al-Nusra Front [in Syria]. They have been both part, or very close, to al-Qaeda. And they are both part of it, although they have sort of splintered. But as a result of the recent fighting we have seen elements of the al-Nusra Front now joining again with the Islamic State. And this is creating a much larger area under their control.

However, one of the errors, I think, that many in the media have been making is that they assume that much of what's going on in Iraq has been the work of ISIS. While ISIS has had many fighters, especially they have many of the suicide bombers, have come from their ranks, they have a lot of foreign jihadis fighting with them. However, much of the fighting that took place in Iraq, in the last few weeks come from, not only ISIS, but from the former soldiers and officers of the Iraqi army under Saddam Hussein, and also from some of the tribes, Iraqi tribes in the Sunni area.

Plus, another group, known as the Naqshbandi Sufi army which is led by Saddam Hussein's former vice president. So, basically what we are seeing is that these groups, although they have a different ideology, and so many of them are far more secular, they are willing to cooperate right now against Maliki, because they feel Maliki has excluded and marginalized the Sunnis.

But these groups have very different ideologies and very different visions of

what they would like to see in Iraq and in the region. So basically you are seeing new forces emerging, you are seeing new identities, new loyalties although in some way they are not really that new but they are a new version to much older identities, primordial kind of identities, where people identified themselves with their religion, with their sect, with their tribe, and in part the U.S. invasion of Iraq. The way the [George W. Bush] administration and Paul Bremmer worked with the Iraqis, they didn't deal with the Iraqis as an Iraqi community, as a one Iraqi nation or people, they dealt with them as components of ethnic and religious groups. As Shiites, as Kurds, and as Sunnis.

They divided the government [among these groups] and so as a result of this what you ended up seeing was the Lebanonization of Iraq, whereby a people identify much more than they ever did before with their ethnic, and religious and sectarian identity, and making for a very complex, and a very difficult situation on the ground. As the two, the main Islamic sects, the Shiite and the Sunnis, have rallied around their religious and political leader, leading to this very, very violent situation in Iraq.

DB: And a final question about U.S. policy. It seems as though it's going to continue down the same road, as I said in the introduction, Barack Obama has asked Congress for \$500 million to equip the moderates, in Syria. Your thoughts on continuing the same U.S. policy. Three hundred troops ... they are really special forces/killers on the ground, now. Same policy, is this going to go anywhere? Your thoughts.

EG: Even if you think what happened in Iraq with basically the arming and training of the Iraqi military. Well, \$25 billion were spent to do that. Tens of thousands of American trainers, Special Forces and other groups have helped train the Iraqi army. But as we saw in the last couple of weeks when these forces were faced with the attacks on them they ended up giving up their posts, and leaving, even leaving them to ISIS and other groups. So basically, the Islamic State ended up gaining major, large numbers of weapons, of equipment, of Hummers, of some tanks, some armored personnel carriers...

DB: Lots of cash, too, huh?

EG: Exactly. Some people have said \$435 million or thereabouts. But all of this raises questions ... here you have the United States fighting, providing help to groups and organizations which in some ways are allied, some of them at least, with the same groups fighting in both Syria and Iraq. And so that raises a great deal of questions, about the wisdom of this policy.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of "Flashpoints" on the Pacifica radio network and the author of *Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom*.
