

A Personal Look Inside Modern Islam

There is a vicious cycle, rotating from Western fear and hatred of Islam to violent Islamic extremism targeting the West and around again, as a new book – reviewed by Arnold R. Isaacs – quietly explains.

Arnold R. Isaacs

For anyone seeking to better understand the recent past and present chaos in the Arab world, here's a tip: read *Generation Revolution*. To be clear, this book does not report on the broad sweep of recent history, or on the entire region. It examines that history through the experiences of a small number of young men and women navigating the last tumultuous decade in one country, Egypt.

The author, British journalist Rachel Aspden, carefully avoids generalizing. For the most part, she lets her protagonists' stories speak for themselves. But those stories, full of compelling detail, give a vivid sense of the conflicting forces that propelled upheavals not only in Egypt but across a wide swath of the Middle East.

Aspden arrived in Cairo in the summer of 2003, a 23-year-old brand-new university graduate hoping to learn Arabic and find adventure. As she came to know her Egyptian contemporaries, young men and women of her generation whose world was interconnected in ways their parents could not have imagined, she began to see the complex and contradictory currents that were shaping their lives.

As one of many examples, here's what Aspden writes about a young woman from a middle-class family who was almost exactly her own age:

"However well-off their families, Cairo's twenty-first-century twenty-somethings still inhabited a world of arranged marriages, dowries, virginity, filial obedience and religious obligation. But the old rules were only part of the story. Her generation had grown up with Internet porn, Hollywood rom-coms, women's magazines, illicit nightclubs, mobile phones and social-media flirtations. They'd also grown up with the revival of conservative Islam, the spread of headscarves and prayer bruises – marks sported by men who pressed their foreheads ostentatiously hard to the ground in worship – sexual harassment and mass unemployment. All these currents collided in the world of relationships and marriage. The confusion was driving young people crazy."

Initially, Aspden found it paradoxical that many – though not all – of the educated young people she met were drawn to conservative religious beliefs and

practice, rather than seeking greater personal freedoms. But she came to see that turning to religion was another form of rebellion, “an act of defiance against their parents’ generation and the unjust, corrupt society they had helped create.” It was also a way to a better, cleaner identity. One of her subjects, a young man she calls Ayman, explained it to her this way:

“People like us were brought up in a Westernized way, let’s say 80% Westernized.... We went to English-language schools, we watched American TV, all that stuff. And many people just continue on that path. But why should we adopt the mindset of the West? As far as I’m concerned there are three mindsets: Western, Eastern and religious. The first two are both rubbish, both bad in their own ways.... Western – do anything you want, no boundaries, make money, exploit women, consume. Eastern – oppress women, corruption, ignorant traditions, stuck in the past.”

Rather than accept either of those, Ayman went on, he chose to listen to an inner voice he knew had better answers: “God put something inside you that will guide you to the truth, if you’re seeking it sincerely.”

In describing this and many other conversations, Aspden’s reporting makes another very important point: that the Islamic revival of the last four decades has been anything but a simple story of fundamentalism vs. modernism. Instead she shows that Islamism in Egypt has taken many different forms, some fanatically reactionary and intolerant and some trying to find ways to reconcile strong religious belief with life in a modern, diverse world.

In particular it is worth pointing out that her observations completely undercut the argument of American anti-Muslim activists who portray the Muslim Brotherhood as a violent terrorist organization. The Brotherhood, Egypt’s most significant Islamist movement, is shown in these pages as repressive and theocratic but not violently extremist.

“The Brotherhood aren’t using violence, they’re using democracy, but the word is ‘using,’” a more liberal Islamist told Aspden, adding: “using is different from believing. They are using democratic actions to pursue a fundamentalist vision.” When Aspden asked what that vision was, he replied, “The dream of the supremacy of Islam.”

Whether that nonviolent character will change now that the Brotherhood is once again being suppressed is one of many critical questions that will only be answered in coming years.

Four-Year Lapse

Aspden left Cairo in 2005, then returned in 2011, the year that began with huge

anti-government protests that toppled President Hosni Mubarak and touched off a turbulent chain of events: the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power, a continuing cycle of protests and repression, and the return to military rule under Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi after a coup d'état in the summer of 2013 that led to even harsher repression including a military assault that killed as many as 1,000 pro-Brotherhood demonstrators in the streets of Cairo in the aftermath of the coup.

Again, Aspden portrays those events largely through the experiences of a small group of acquaintances, including many of the same men and women she knew from her earlier Egyptian stay. And again, those experiences are rich in telling moments that help explain a complicated history, illuminating issues and social divisions that are still far from resolved.

Narrow as its lens may be, *Generation Revolution* represents journalism at its best – an exceptional piece of reporting on a vitally important subject. This valuable book should be on the required reading list for policymakers and opinionmakers concerned with Middle East policy and violent extremism.

A conventional review would end here. This one carries a postscript, on an episode that departs from the author's main theme but touches on another important one. It occurred in an exchange with the brother of one of her principal protagonists, a few months before Aspden left Egypt for the second time.

When their conversation turned to the Islamic State, which he called by its Arabic name, Daesh, the young man told her that it has the support of many Egyptians who "believe they're fighting to protect Islam." Then he added: "We don't know that Daesh are real. There's no proof of what's really going on there, and there's a lot of manipulation by the Western media... Hollywood tricks. Those beheading videos could easily be faked in a studio."

Aspden had heard that argument before. She was "frustrated," she writes, "by the baroque conspiracy theories voiced by clever, educated people, and they in turn were disappointed by my weak-minded general belief in events reported by the BBC, *New York Times* or *Guardian*."

"What do you think is the truth, then?" she asked Mazen's brother.

"For me it's obvious," he replied. "Daesh has been created by Israel and the United States to discredit Muslims and provide the West with another excuse to invade and seize the oil."

What sounded to Aspden like "a fringe conspiracy theory," she writes, "was, in Egypt, a generally accepted truth. When I switched on my computer at home, my

friends were sharing a cartoon of an Islamic State jihadi puppet operated by the figures of a leering, hook-nosed Jew and Uncle Sam.”

At a moment when “fake news” has become a major concern, that passage teaches a chilling lesson not about Egypt but about our own public discussion. It tells us that politicians and their mouthpieces and partisan pontificators who push out false information do not just strengthen their own lies. They strengthen their enemies’ lies as well, because weakening truth weakens it for everybody.

Aspden’s Egyptian acquaintances who are sure the Islamic State is an American-Israeli hoax (and who scoff at her for trusting the BBC and the *New York Times*) – are the mirror image of Americans who believe other falsehoods – for example that “we don’t know who is coming in” as refugees, or that a vast Muslim conspiracy is infiltrating the U.S. legal system to impose sharia law – and who scoff at the identical news organizations and everyone else who reports facts they don’t like.

The more effectively one side undermines public trust in journalists or scientists or scholars who present real facts, the easier it becomes for those on the other side to distrust those sources too, and deny facts that are inconsistent with their reality. It may not be one of the lessons Aspden set out to teach in this book, but it is definitely worth thinking about.

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Bill Maher’s Muddled Attacks on Islam

As an edgy comedian, Bill Maher prides himself on his “politically incorrect” religion-bashing, but his excessive attacks on Islam more aptly reflect a “politically correct” bigotry, as JP Sottile explains.

By JP Sottile

Bill Maher thinks he knows exactly why they hate us. In the world according to Bill, all those agitated Muslims on the receiving end of multiple interventions, numerous “double-tap” drone strikes, countless tons of falling bombs, the

systematic imprisonment of “rendered” individuals and the widespread use of lawless torture are, simply put, the outgrowth of a backwards belief system. And those beliefs also inspire a type of religious violence that’s become a destructive force unparalleled in today’s world.

The “today” part is important to Maher because he doesn’t like the “false equivalence” of historical context. Instead, he’s decidedly on the side of “that was then, this is now.” So, forget Christian Crusaders, Spanish Inquisitors, Philistine-purging Israelites or, one would assume, any of human history’s numerous examples of holy war-making.

Also not equivalent are recent mass murders of Sikhs in Wisconsin and of Muslims in Quebec. And don’t bother bringing up the growing list of identity-based violence against Muslims or, perhaps most tellingly, of mistaken identity-based violence against those who are ignorantly thought to be Muslims, but aren’t.

Somehow, America’s long, demonstrable history of putting ethnic cleanliness next to its own obsessive Godliness doesn’t quite cut it either, burning crosses and Native American genocide notwithstanding. No, history doesn’t reverberate in the Islamophobic echo chamber ... unless, of course, we’re talking about the “warlike” history of long-since faded Islamic empires. Then all’s fair in this one-sided front on the anti-religious war being waged by the so-called “New Atheists.”

The New Atheism

Maher and his confrontational cohorts – like famed geneticist Richard Dawkins and anti-Muslim gadfly Sam Harris – have targeted Islam as something far more pernicious than just another fantasy-based religion with the usual roster of fundamentalists, self-appointed prophets and violent opportunists.

For them, Islam is *sui generis*. Islam is, according to their unique atheist orthodoxy, both violent and repressive in ways that make it wholly unique. Islam is not just an intellectual error, but a dangerous cultural cancer.

Essentially, these New Atheists have simplified a question almost as old as the “War on Terror” it so inadequately tries to explain. For them, the answer is clear. They hate us because Islam is the enemy of the “liberal” values and, by extension, of the entire civilized world.

Perhaps that’s why Maher doesn’t think jihadi terrorist groups or random incidents of jihadi-inspired violence are better explained as the irrational acts of individual insanity or as the predictable blowback from 75 years of American meddling the Middle East. That is, of course, if you consider “meddling” an adequate description of America’s history of profitable relationships with brutal dictators.

Maheer's "they-hate-our-liberal values" explanation is certainly an inadequate characterization of 25 years of continuous bombing in the region ... and of CENTCOM's random application of kinetic force in numerous Muslim countries over the same period. "Meddling" also falls short of describing the multi-year drone war on "suspected militants" and, all-too-often, on innocent civilians.

On the other hand, "meddling with benefits" might best describe the post-colonial period in a poorly-partitioned region where receding Western powers exploited the maps they'd drawn to great effect. The divided nations they created were fairly easy for corporate neo-colonialists to conquer or control – whether they sought oil, or sold weapons to those who had the oil, but needed protection ... sometimes from their "own people." And then there's Uncle Sam's meddling (a.k.a. complicity) in the never-ending displacement of the Palestinian people.

But those niggling details tend to cloud the clear-as-day view of Islam that Maher shares with those who see it as an enemy of civilization. That's certainly the view of die-hard evangelicals like Franklin Graham, of defense industry shills at the American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, and of the assorted denizens of the increasingly profitable Islamophobia industry.

In effect, Maher and the New Atheists have joined a legion of doomsayers led by the indefatigable Pamela Geller, the paranoia-stricken Frank Gaffney, Steve Bannon's profit-seeking Breitbart and Trump's momentary National Security Advisor Lt. General Michael Flynn.

Packaged for Liberals

To be fair, Maher doesn't employ the same type of paranoid histrionics that both buoys and enriches those right-wing poseurs and the other troubling Islamophobes who've found a home in Trump's White House. Rather, Maher makes a "liberal" argument about the need to stand up for "progressive" values like equality for women, free speech and freedom of religious conscience. He rightly points to countries like Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan as places where a basic level of human rights is not available to women, to religious minorities, to homosexuals or to anyone not willing to conform to fundamentalist orthodoxy.

Ironically, and perhaps not coincidentally, some of the places where progressive values are least likely to be embraced are the same countries America has mostly closely supported – Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Egypt, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Also not coincidentally, the places where America has exerted the most influence are also the places that produce many of the violent individuals and groups through which Maher judges the planet's Muslims.

Unsurprisingly, Maher and the New Atheists are loathe to concede the notable shades of gray around the Islamic world – from the women serving in parliament and working as professionals in Iran to the quite different Muslim experiences found in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Balkans. Nor do they mention the fact that Muslim-majority nations have had more women reach the top political spot (eleven) than the United States (zero). It doesn't quite fit into their zero-sum game.

Punchy Lines

Still, if Maher was making the point that the United States is too often a handmaiden to ... or crass beneficiary of ... repression in regimes that hold some economic and/or strategic value to the defense industry and/or the oil industry, he'd likely garner support from many of the progressives he often scolds. But he doesn't.

Instead he and his fellow finger-pointers rail against the Quran as the "motherlodeof bad ideas." Maher says Islam is "the only religion that acts like the Mafia" and even assured Muslim-American Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minnesota, that the Quran is "a hate-filled holy book."

Maher's presentation is a "schlock and awe" shtick that burnishes his credentials as a self-appointed bullshit detector. It preserves his long-standing brand as an anti-PC crusader and, like so many great comedians before him, as someone willing to "go there" even if it makes people uncomfortable.

Perhaps that's why Maher's accused his fellow liberals of giving Islam a "free pass" when it comes to their "repressive" culture. And why he's reprimanded anyone who disagrees with his assertion that Islam is both a particularly violent and a peculiarly "backward" religion that is totally incompatible with the modern world (whatever that is).

He's made a point of criticizing the "cultural relativism" that compares Islamic-based violence with violence linked to other religions – particularly violence linked to Christianity. As Maher infamously told Charlie Rose back in 2014, to "claim that this religion is like other religions is just naive and plain wrong."

This politically incorrect posture has made fans of die-hard Christian commentators. But this is also where his punchy argument – and his disdain for context – betrays him. Why? Because it fails to account for the cruel crimes against humanity currently being driven by hard-line, radical Buddhists in Myanmar. Yes, it's true ... Buddhists have fomented a widespread program of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya minority which is, oddly enough, a Muslim

minority.

Hindus Too?

Maheer's posture ignores the rise of Hindu extremism in India, where the problem of religious violence and persecution is growing under the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Vice reported that religious minorities in India "averaged one attack per day" in 2015. Muslims in particular have experienced an increase of random violence since Modi came to power. And last year, attacks on the Christian minority grew three-fold with a church "burnt down or a cleric beaten on average 10 times a week," according to a report by Open Doors UK & Ireland.

It is also true that the radical settler movement in Israel has its own hyper-fundamentalists who believe divine right has given them carte blanche to purge the Holy Land of both Muslims and Christians. In 2016, radicalized settlers produced "an average of 2 incidents of settler violence per week," according to a United Nations report. Yes, we know about Hamas' radical Islamic violence.

But human rights organization B'Tselem is monitoring the persistent problem of Jewish violence because there is such a thing as "radical Judaism." And Israel's "Ultra-Orthodox" fundamentalists have a familiar, anti-liberal problem with women worshipping next to men, riding the bus with men and with a belief in the "unclean" nature of the feminine.

Let's be honest ... it's a fundamentalist tendency shared among the three Abrahamic cousins. Even now America's Vice President Mike Pence believes married men shouldn't risk cavorting with other women, may believe it's possible to "pray the Gay away," absolutely believes gay marriage is tantamount to "societal collapse" and is the standard bearer for a well-established Evangelical political movement that "inspired" violence against abortion providers. And, as noted earlier, there are those troubling, religiously-inspired burning crosses of the Ku Klux Klan.

Do these religiously-sourced incidents, some of which are part of long, identifiable patterns, mean that the religions themselves are inherently pernicious? Is it possible that Maheer, like the politically correct liberals he scorns, is handing out free passes to these non-Muslim religions? Or is it that religions are – like most belief or political systems – potentially useful tools to those seeking righteous justification or an organizing rationale for their rage and anger?

As a guest on Maheer's HBO show recently said regarding the "lone wolf" attack outside the Houses of Parliament in London, "it has nothing to do with Islam the

same way Timothy McVeigh had nothing to do with Roman Catholicism.”

But Maher wasn't having it. And when he was then presented with the fact that Irish Catholic separatists engaged in a deadly campaign of bombings and terrorism against those they perceived as their Protestant oppressors, again Maher bristled. He said that was “the past” (like the Inquisition, the Crusades and, apparently, those uniquely American burning crosses).

And he punctuated his point by dropping this headline-grabbing punch-line: “Every time some bomb goes off, before it goes off, somebody yells ‘Allahu Akbar!’ I never hear anybody go ‘Merry Christmas! This one's for the flying nun!’”

It got a nice chuckle from the crowd. But history usually gets the last laugh.

History Matters

First of all, not only did the IRA and IRA “elements” repeatedly attack Christmas shoppers in London in the week before the holiday, but one such attack outside Harrod's on Dec. 17, 1983, killed five shoppers and wounded 91 others. That bombing led to annual fears of a “Christmas Bombing” campaign all the way into the 1990s.

No, the proudly Catholic authors of that attack did not say “Merry Christmas,” but their intention was clear. The bombings were not *in spite of* the most important religious holiday for Christians, but *because of* the added impact that holiday had in creating a feeling of terror among the intended target. The timing of the bombing was itself a terrifying message.

Secondly and, perhaps more pertinently, the United States used the Christmas holiday as a backdrop for one of the most brutal bombing campaigns of the post-World War II era. Officially it was called “Linebacker II,” but ever since it began on Dec. 18, 1972, the round-the-clock bombardment of Hanoi, Haiphong and the surrounding environs has been known as the “Christmas Bombing.” It was ordered by President Nixon as a punitive measure meant to terrorize the Vietnamese people and, therefore, designed to apply pressure on the Communist government to (ironically) sign a peace agreement in Paris.

Although there was a pause on Christmas Day, this momentary “gift” was cold comfort to the 1,600 people who died in that campaign. Hanoi was laid waste as America's fleet B-52s flew a total of 741 sorties and “dropped at least 20,000 tonnes” of bombs, according to a 40th anniversary report on the bombing by the BBC. Another report put the total at 40,000 tons. A Vietnamese source says the total – and the lingering toll on the Vietnamese people – was much higher still.

LobeLog's David Bacon wrote a retrospective look at the psychological impact of the B-52 as an instrument of *de facto* terrorism. He dug up a newspaper report on a delegation visiting in the wake of the Christmas Bombing. It was led by Nuremburg jurist Telford Taylor. It also included Joan Baez and Yale University Divinity School Associate Dean Michael Allen, who said, "The most horrible scene that I've ever seen in my life was when we visited the residential area of Khan Thieu, and as far as I could see, everything was destroyed."

Like the IRA, Nixon didn't shout "Merry Christmas" when he delivered his explosive message. Then again, he didn't really have to. As noted journalist and columnist Anthony Lewis wrote in the New York Times, "To send B-52s against populous areas such as Haiphong or Hanoi could have only one purpose: terror." And Lewis wasn't alone in his assessment that Nixon's purpose was, in fact, terrorism.

Newspapers around the United States and the world condemned the bombing and the word "terror" was used by The Washington Post ("Terror Bombing in the Name of Peace," Dec. 28), the New York Times ("Terror From the Skies," Dec. 26), Joseph Kraft ("senseless terror") and Dan Rather ("large scale terror bombing"). The Christmas bombing message was clear to all.

God-Fearing 'Freedom'

But that simple symmetry is not the end of the story. That's because the underlying propaganda of that the war – like all of America's Cold War interventions, proxy battles and ad hoc bombings – was something Americans have (perhaps unsurprisingly, perhaps conveniently) forgotten. The plain fact is that Vietnam and the entire post-World War II period was sold as a struggle against "Godless Communism." That may sound like a quirky anachronism today, but rest assured that the "Godlessness" of Commies, Pinkos and interloping Socialists was not only a core foundation of Cold War propaganda, but it also fed the monster of paranoia that helped create McCarthyism.

Indeed, at the same time Sen. Joe McCarthy, R-Wisconsin, was railing against Commies in 1954, Congress was moving to add "One Nation Under God" to the pledge of allegiance. As the New York Times recalled in a 2002 article on a challenge to the constitutionality of that addition:

"The change was made to draw attention to the difference between the system of government in this country and 'godless Communism.' ... Introducing his resolution in the Senate, Senator Homer Ferguson, Republican of Michigan, declared, 'I believe this modification of the pledge is important because it highlights one of the real fundamental differences between the free world and the Communist world, namely belief in God.' No one in the Senate or the House spoke in

opposition.”

In fact, the vocal merger of American Christianity with Cold War anti-Communism has been cited as a spur for the 16 percent rise in church membership between 1940 and 1970. In a 2003 review of a well-received book of the topic, Dr. Merrilyn Thomas of University College London noted that it should be “self-evident” that “religion played a significant role in the Cold War ... given the powerful influence of Christianity on the lives of millions of people on both sides of the Iron Curtain.”

It may not be “self-evident” now because it is simply taken for granted. We’ve inherited that era’s holy warriorism and pushed it deep into our collective subconsciously through our gaping memory hole. It’s a subtext that came to the fore when the 9/11 “changed everything.” But, then again ... it really changed nothing.

Lessons Unlearnt

Perhaps the saddest fact to emerge from the bloodiest episode in America’s war on Godless Communism is that Ho Chi Minh didn’t really have to be America’s enemy. He actually thought America – with its own revolutionary past – might be an ally in his drive to liberate Vietnam from French colonial rule. It made sense since he’d worked with the OSS to battle the Japanese in World War II. But that nascent alliance became impossible as an almost religious form of zealous anti-Communism consumed Truman’s presidency, the foreign policy establishment and, by the mid-1950s, most of America’s institutions.

Instead of seeing Ho Chi Minh as a nationalist first and a Communist second, America policymakers missed an important fact. His main goal was to liberate his nation from foreign occupation. But the foreign policy establishment viewed Vietnam and the entire world through a Manichean lens. It was the Free World versus Communism. It was good versus evil. It was a civilizational battle between the God-fearing and the God-less. And this simplistic template made it impossible to see that Communism was often as much a means to an end as it was an end unto itself.

That’s one lesson Cornell University professor and historian Frederik Logevall took from writing his 2012 book *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam*.

As Logevall said in an interview referenced by the New York Times, Ho “saw communism as the best path of development for his country, but it was always *his country*.” And it was the liberation of “*his country*” that mattered most. Even the New York Times noted in its Sept. 4, 1969 obituary that Ho was a

“remarkable” statesman who “pursued his goal of Vietnamese independence” by successfully “blending Communism with nationalism.”

And that’s the unlearned lesson of the entire Cold War period. Wherever we look back and see Communist, Socialist and other radicalized insurgencies, we usually see a larger historical process of decolonization. The years after World War II are filled with examples of former colonies fighting against the re-imposition of empire after the end of World War II. Or we see the revolt of newly-liberated peoples against the post-colonial proxies, kleptocrats and petty dictatorships that essentially stood between the people and their right of true self-determination and/or economic power.

To be sure, there were also many instances of dyed-in-the-wool Reds who were true believers. Places like Cuba, China and the Soviet Union were secure enough on their own to turn inward and, ironically, transform the communist project into a statist-style religion with personality cults that smack of religion. We see it now today in North Korea. But it is undeniable that Communism was also an effective organizing and recruitment tool that gave adherents a strong sense of group cohesion and ideological discipline that made them both effective fighters and committed believers.

Moreover, Communism was itself often criticized as a pseudo-religious paradigm that crystallized the terms of the fight into divided the world into the oppressors and the oppressed (a.k.a. infidels and believers). This mirrored the way America divided the world into the God-loving free world and the “Evil” empire of Godless Communism. In many ways, Communism became the logical “belief system” for those organizing resistance to the real or perceived American imperialism of the post-war period. It’s almost an irrefutable matter of political physics that the forceful imposition of the American Century would elicit an equal and opposite reaction. These reactions are as predictable as gravity.

Belief System Breakdown

Sadly, the coming of the War on Terror revealed exactly how little America learned from the bloodletting of Vietnam. Osama bin Laden began his Holy War as a project to eject “infidels” from Saudi Arabia – the holiest of Islam’s lands and his home nation. The infidels were American troops and they were there because they were “meddling” in Iraq – a place where America’s one-time client had become its foe. But America’s oil-thirsty neo-colonial protection racket put it right in the crosshairs of bin Laden and many others who resented America’s presence. Ironically, that resentment had its roots in yet another resistance movement – the CIA-generated plot to expel another set of invaders from a Muslim land.

That's right ... like Ho Chi Minh, Mao Zedong and countless other ideological leaders of the Twentieth Century ... the CIA realized the power of a coherent belief system to create exactly the type group cohesion and hard-won discipline necessary to fight an asymmetrical war against a superior invader. That's what Saudi Wahhabism and Salafism offered the adherents who flocked to the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan.

Perhaps the CIA took note of the power of Shiite fundamentalism to organize resistance when their hand-picked, highly-Westernized leader in Iran was quickly toppled by a religious coup that was as much an anti-colonial fight as it was anything else. It's a lesson as Russia learned in neighboring Afghanistan when they were ejected by comparatively lightly-armed foe reinforced by their hardcore beliefs.

It's strangely fitting that the Muslim faith of the Mujahedeen helped to bring down the "Evil Empire" of Godless Communism. Unfortunately, their American benefactors filled that vacuum with their own ambitions for a unipolar world and, in the process, left Afghanistan with little more than rubble to show for their help.

With America now unopposed on the world stage, it began a renewed era of "meddling" around the Muslim world that led to the arrival troops in Saudi Arabia (1990), the basing of the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain (1995), the establishment of Camp Lemmonier in Djibouti (2002) and a vast array of smaller deployments around the globe. This compounded the damage from U.S. indifference to Palestinian aspirations for self-determination and from a decade of sanctions and bombing in Iraq that reportedly led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of children.

Albright's Endorsement

Whether that story is a fact or a myth, all that really matters is that the story was widely known. In 1996, it was bitterly reinforced by then-U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Madeleine Albright when she infamously told Lesley Stahl of *60 Minutes* that the Iraq's sanction-related deaths were "worth it."

Why? Because America's former client – Saddam Hussein – needed to be punished. This is the same Saddam Hussein the United States armed in the 1980s to fight Iran. That's the same Iran the United States was simultaneously – and quite illegally – arming to fight Saddam. And this, like so many other details, may be inexorably stuffed somewhere in America's bottomless memory hole.

But, like a long litany of interventions, drone-delivered executions and troubling crimes committed since 9/11 (yes, torture and extralegal imprisonment

are crimes), it's a fact widely known around the Muslim world. Don't doubt for a minute that Gitmo, Abu Ghraib and the ever-present menace of hovering drones are foremost in the hearts and minds of many Muslims.

Given that fact, it is any real surprise that the Muslim world sees the United States and its allies as enemies? Is it really because – as the New Atheists and Right-wing Islamophobes believe (note that is, in fact, a belief) – the Muslim faith is uniquely ill-equipped to be part of their “civilized” world? Or is it that Islam is just the latest example of an ideology or religion being used to organize, to inspire and to marshal angry, displaced and/or aspirational human beings in a fight against a superior foe?

If history is our guide, radical jihadism looks like an opportune way to organize resistance to what many Muslims see as an American Century of violent “meddling” and political imposition through brutal proxies and neo-colonial adventurism. It is blowback. The New Atheists – and befuddled Americans – should look no further than the most recent slaughters of civilians in Yemen and Mosul for the replenishment of the already manifold reasons why they hate us.

And as for the often-cited the rejection of Western “liberal” values? Like the rejection of “decadent Capitalism” by fundamentalist Communism during the Cold War, it makes sense that Islamic fundamentalism would target anything that smacks of the Western world. And like other ideologies of resistance and revolution, it directs people's anger toward the accouterments and symbols of the dominant power in their lives – whether directly imposed or imposed through proxies.

If that's what radical Muslim jihadism is ... then it is infinitely more comprehensible than Bill Maher, the New Atheists and Right-wing Islamophobes are willing to accept or admit. Maybe Islam isn't a puzzling cancer that has to be excised. Maybe jihadism is a means, not an end. And maybe the brutal insanity of the Islamic State is more an echo of the excesses of the Khmer Rouge, Stalin's purges, Mao's Cultural Revolution and Robespierre's Reign of Terror than it is a logical conclusion of the Islamic faith. And maybe ... just maybe ... the radicalism around Muslim world can be seen in a larger context of history. That means acknowledging the extent to which America and its repressive proxies have set the terms of the debate around the Muslim world for the better part of a century.

Ultimately, it's most important to recognize that Maher is, at best, misguided when he says there aren't “Christian terrorist armies like ISIS.” As far as many Muslims on the receiving end of officially-sanctioned violence from the U.S. military, that's probably a distinction without much of a difference. And if there's any doubt about America's own lingering fundamentalism, take note that

few things would be more futile today than trying to get Congress to scrub that Cold War-era religious test from the Pledge of Allegiance.

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Letting Russia Be Russia

Political philosophers stressing Traditionalist values have influenced the thinking of Presidents Putin and Trump, but that may offer a path for Russia and the U.S. to coexist, explains ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

Many in the West have purported to find Candidate, and now President, Trump's insistence that détente with Russia is a "good thing" to be troubling. Some suggest that the President's insistence on this is somehow sinister – worse even than troubling. But perhaps Trump and his chief strategist Steve Bannon's sense that détente may be possible is not so much "sinister," but has more to do paradoxically with a particular coincidence – a confluence of intellectual thinking, a confluence that has been taking shape, almost unnoticed over recent years, but which nonetheless is becoming more significant, and which posits a profound foreign policy potential.

Much has been read (most of it hostile) into Steve Bannon's [comment](#), via the internet, at a 2014 Vatican conference, during which he said that many of Vladimir Putin's views were underpinned by eurasianism: "He's got an adviser who harkens back to Julius Evola and different writers of the early 20th century, who are really the supporters of what's called the Traditionalist Movement ... We, the Judeo-Christian West," continued Bannon, "really have to look at what [Putin]'s talking about as far as Traditionalism goes – particularly the sense of where it supports the underpinnings of nationalism."

Here lies one immediate problem. It is presumed in the Western media, that the unnamed Putin adviser who harkens back to Julius Evola is Professor Alexander Dugin. And here, precisely is the first difficulty: both philosophers have a rare quality of intellectual brilliance, a command of the literature that is encyclopedic, but they are *radical* – radical way beyond, and at odds with, today's secular, and uniform tastes. Indeed, even today in Italy, it is best to read Julius Evola, a prolific Italian philosopher and writer, with some

discretion, or at least to hold such a book within nondescript, concealing covers, if one is to avoid hostile glares, or even physical abuse.

And the second difficulty? Alexander Dugin has been described as Putin's "Rasputin" – a "mad mystic." And Julius Evola was charged in 1951, with others, with the crime of promoting the Fascist Party, and of promoting ideas proper to fascism. Both philosophers, in short, are controversial and have proved hugely vulnerable to sometimes quite wild misrepresentations. Evola was acquitted on both charges of promoting fascism (though he is popularly still viewed as linked to post-war Italian neo-fascism), and Dugin, from 1998 to 2003, was a geopolitics counselor of the Duma's Chairman (Gennadiy Seleznev) – but was not adviser to Vladimir Putin.

In fact, as Professor Bertonneau has written: "Evola condemns with equal fervour Muscovite communism and American money-democracy, as representing, the both of them, the mechanization and dehumanization of life. Unlike the Marxists – and unlike the Fascists and National Socialists – Evola saw the only hope for Western Civilization as lying in a revival of what he liked to capitalize, on the one hand, as Tradition and, on the other, as transcendence [personal transformation]; he thus rejected all materialism and instrumentalism as crude reductions of reality for coarse minds and, so too, as symptoms of a prevailing and altogether repugnant decadence."

Delicate Ground

So why raise these controversial figures? Particularly, as in raising them we tread delicate ground. Well, it is because of that interesting coincidence to which we earlier alluded. Here is one aspect, as Professor Dugin himself notes:

"Julius Evola's works were discovered in the 1960s [in Russia] by the very esoteric group of anti-communist intellectual thinkers known as 'the Dissidents of the Right'. They were a small circle of people who had conscientiously refused to participate in the 'cultural life' of the USSR, and who had instead chosen an underground existence for themselves. The disparity between the presented Soviet culture and the actual Soviet reality was almost entirely what made them seek out the fundamental principles that could explain the origins of that evil, absolutist idea. It was through their refusal of communism that they discovered certain works by anti-modernist and traditionalist authors: above all, the books by René Guénon, and by Julius Evola."

And, in America: "Sometime around the year 2000, the work of Julius Evola reached [the American] public consciousness, and thanks to writers like Bill White, Radical Traditionalism entered the [American] right-wing lexicon. This is a philosophy more than a political view, but fits neatly into the New Right idea

that culture must be the generative actor for change which will manifest in politics and other areas ... It is concerned with two fronts: first, arresting the decline of the West by crushing the Left by any means necessary; and second, a zeal for restoring the greatness of Western Civilization at its height, and [even] surpassing it.”

And here lies the third “difficulty” (or perhaps not a difficulty, but its particular merit, in the eyes of many): in a secular, liberal age, Evola’s philosophy is anti-modernist, anti-secularist and anti-Liberal. It harks back to *philosophia perennis*, and in American terms, to Aldous Huxley’s definitions of Perennial Philosophy. (In France, the Nouvelle Droite has a different, but parallel, ontological basis, i.e. with such as Alain de Benoist). More confusingly, though it is called Traditionalism, it is really a traditionalism that has no defined tradition.

Of course, this is not to suggest that Julius Evola was the only writer in this radical traditionalist vein. There was René Guenon, Frithjof Schuon, and many others. But, as the *New York Times* acknowledges (in a typically hostile piece): “More important for the current American administration, Evola also caught on in the United States with leaders of the alt-right movement, which Mr. Bannon nurtured as the head of Breitbart News, and then helped harness for Mr. Trump. ‘Julius Evola is one of the most fascinating men of the 20th century’, said Richard Spencer, the white nationalist leader, who is a top figure in the alt-right movement.”

Just to be clear, that the widely-read Steve Bannon made mention of Evola does not, of course, make him an Evolista. And nor does Putin’s embrace of Eurasianism, make him a Duginista. “But,” as the *Times* quotes one specialist, “the fact that Bannon even knows Evola is significant.”

Radical Traditionalists

In fact, what we seem to be witnessing is that just as the Russian philosopher, Dugin, draws on Radical Traditionalist thinking and then tries to apply it to the Russian situation, so too, the Alt-Right in the U.S. seems to be doing something similar: drawing on Evola and other Traditionalist sources, while distilling their ideas into an American cultural perspective (linking back to Huxley and Edmund Burke).

In this respect, Trump and Bannon may indeed find much in common with Mr. Putin (though it would be a mistake, I believe, to read the Russian President through the prism of Professor Dugin). Where there is common ground between the latter (Putin and Dugin) is the sense that the West has never made a satisfactory attempt to try to understand Russia as distinct, and of worth, in its own right.

So the West has always tried to change Russia into something that it isn't – has always tried to make it more like the West: more liberal, more democratic, more "diversity"-orientated – always assuming that that's how it somehow *has to be*, and is *the best way* for it to "be." But Russia is a thousand-year civilization; it has its own religious sites and its own particular civilizational code. Russia's leaders do not want to let the West dictate to it how to interpret Russia's history, or its present – and, certainly not its future.

Dugin unquestionably does share Evola's unyielding disdain for liberalism, liberal modernity and liberal democracy. And moreover, he also intensely dislikes how the West tries to force this liberalism upon others – in ugly ways – as an "universal value." This attitude has led him to be cast as fiercely anti-American and a Russian imperialist to boot, who yearns to re-establish the Soviet Empire.

It is possibly Dugin's polemical video *In Trump We Trust* that contributed to the (unwarranted) U.S. inference that President Putin too, favored Trump in the U.S. Presidential election. To read Putin in this way, would be wrong. He likely does have empathy for the Traditionalist leaning toward differentiation (national as well as personal, in the Evola sense of *becoming*: of becoming oneself, of a return to origins). President Putin frequently makes this very point about Russia having its own essential essence and having, too, every right to that differentiation and cultural particular (as do other nation-states).

Evola *does* refer to Empire, but this has to be understood in a very different way from our contemporary understanding. And Dugin reflects this explicitly:

"One particular layer of Evola's thoughts is felt by the Russians to be of imminent and extreme importance: his praise for the Imperial Ideal. Rome represents the focal point of Evola's worldview. This sacred living power which had manifested itself all across the Empire was to Evola the very essence of the West's traditional heritage ... But a similar line of thought is seemingly naturally felt by the Russians, whose historical destiny has always been profoundly tied to that of Imperium ... [that is to say], Moscow as the 'Third Rome': It should be noted that the 'First Rome' in this cyclic orthodox interpretation, was not Christian Rome, but rather Imperial Rome, because the Second Rome (or the 'New Rome') was Constantinople, the capital of the Christian Empire.

"Thus the idea of 'Rome' held by the Orthodox Russians corresponds to the understanding of ... the inseparable 'symphony' between the spiritual authority and the temporal realm. For traditional orthodoxy, the catholic separation between the King and the Pope is simply unimaginable and close to blasphemy; and

this very concept is actually called the 'Latin heresy.' Again, one can see the perfect convergence between Evola's dogma and the commonplace mindset of Russian conservative thought."

In his book on Evola, Paul Furlong describes it thus: "Evola sees nationalism as, in essence, the offspring of liberalism, modernity and bourgeois subversion, which announced the arrival of the fourth state that destroyed the traditional order of empire. Within the empire, nations find a just hierarchical order; [whereas] outside of it, they are mere tools of chauvinistic nationalisms, and of regimes interested only in material conquest in the name of contingent realities such as fatherlands."

Misreading Philosophy

It is not hard to see how Dugin might be misread (and therefore perhaps project a false reading on to President Putin of Imperial revanchism rather than, as Dugin intends, of the hoped-for co-joining of the spiritual with the secular). This, despite President Putin having been at some pains to distance his own notion of eurasianism (communal psychology and a single geo-geographic and civilizational unity as a firm basis for state solidarity) from the more (literal) nationalist currents in Russia today.

The point here is that Dugin's (and Evola's) thinking is novel, and can give rise to wrong assumptions about what some Russian philosophers mean when they talk about "Empire" – a terminology which is translated in the West to imply Russia as being a potential "aggressor."

But, if we turn to Steve Bannon and his 2010 film *Generation Zero*, which narrates America's decline into crisis, it is not hard to detect some Evola resonances – albeit ones tailored to the distinct American cultural code:

Firstly, there is the idea of virile America (as it used to be) as the traditional, just, order of American society – a sort of "New Imperial Rome" perhaps, rather than a "New Jerusalem."

Secondly, Bannon – like Evola – traces the beginning of the American slide towards decadence to the narcissistic, self-indulgent 1960s (to the Woodstock era, in Bannon's narrative). Ditto for Europe, in Evola's view.

Thirdly, Bannon – like Evola – disdains the undifferentiated, materialist and uniform bureaucratic modernity, to which this decadence has given rise. Evola admires ancient and historical societies for the virility of their structures – and not as tools of power (or of chauvinistic nationalism).

Fourthly, Bannon – like Evola – extols the symphony between the spiritual (Judeo

Christian) and temporal authority.

Fifth, both see history as cyclical: the fourth turning in Bannon's narrative versus the fourth stage in Evola's.

Sixth, both believe that if you are a traditionalist, you must challenge "decadence" by all means.

I do not know whether Bannon or Trump have read Evola, but his spirit, and that of other Radical Traditionalists, has certainly permeated the thinking of the Alt-Right circles in which both men have been moving.

The important point here, is not to draw out all the parallels in order to assert a literary lineage. That does not matter. But rather, to point to something far more substantive: their foreign policy implications. The concinnity of thinking – albeit one refined through different cultural optics – is there.

Trump and Putin do indeed have something in common. If both parties – as it seems they do – concur that differentiated, individuated (but not individualist) states, are legitimate and appropriate to their separate and particular, cultural codes – what then, is there to fight about?

If America and the West now can disavow the need to remake Russia in the Western, diversity-centric, individualist, liberal-democratic image, and agree to accept Russia simply for what it, and its culture, "is," then this would amount to a shift in Western policy of tectonic import. It would indeed be paradoxical if a figure, such as Evola, somehow might have contributed to such an event.

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Why Trump's 'Muslim Ban' Lost in Court

By overtly targeting Muslims with a travel ban, President Trump put himself at odds with U.S. treaties and other legal agreements, ensuring his latest legal setback in federal court, writes legal scholar Marjorie Cohn for JURIST.

By Marjorie Cohn

After a federal district court judge and a unanimous three-judge panel of the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Donald Trump's Executive Order (EO) instituting a travel ban was likely illegal, the president suspended it and issued a new EO on March 6.

On March 15, a federal judge granted a temporary restraining order in Hawaii v. Trump et al., halting the operation of the new EO nationwide. U.S. District Judge Derrick K. Watson found that plaintiffs met their burden of establishing a strong likelihood of success on the merits of their Establishment Clause claim, that irreparable injury is likely if the requested relief is not issued, and that the balance of the equities and public interest counsel in favor of granting the requested relief.

When the case is heard on the merits, the legality of the new EO, which categorically suspends immigration from six Muslim majority countries to the United States, should be assessed in light of U.S. treaty and customary international law, according to an amicus brief filed in the case.

Eighty-one international law scholars, including this writer, and a dozen non-governmental organizations with expertise in civil rights law, immigration law or international human rights law (amici) argue in their amicus brief that the new EO threatens discrimination that would run afoul of two treaties. They are the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

When the United States ratifies a treaty, it not only makes the U.S. a party to that treaty; it also becomes U.S. domestic law under the Supremacy Clause of the Constitution, which says treaties "shall be the supreme law of the land." Courts have a duty to restrain federal executive action that conflicts with a ratified treaty.

Customary international law develops from the general and consistent practice of states. It is part of federal common law and must be enforced in U.S. courts, whether or not its provisions are contained in a ratified treaty.

Under the Constitution's Take Care Clause, the President must "take care that the laws be faithfully executed." This means Trump has a constitutional duty to comply with our legal obligations under both treaty and customary international law.

"[T]he Immigration and Nationality Act and other statutes must be read in harmony with these international legal obligations pursuant to the Supremacy Clause of the Constitution and long established principles of statutory

construction requiring acts of Congress to be interpreted in a manner consistent with international law, whenever such a construction is reasonably possible,” amici argue. “In this case, the international law obligations . . . reinforce interpretations of those statutes forbidding discrimination of the type threatened by Sections 2 and 11 of the EO.”

International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

The United States ratified the CCPR in 1992. Article 2 prohibits “any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference” based on religion or national origin, which has “the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by all persons, on an equal footing,” according to the United Nation Human Rights Committee (HRC), the body charged with monitoring implementation of the CCPR.

Article 2 prohibits discrimination against the family as well as individuals. “The family is the natural and fundamental group of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State,” Article 23 says. The HRC has opined that states have an obligation to adopt appropriate measures “to ensure the unity or reunification of families, particularly when their members are separated for political, economic and similar reasons.”

Many immigrants and refugees flee their countries of origin and come to the United States to reunify with their families. The CCPR protects them against discrimination based on religion or national origin.

Amici state in their brief, “Restrictions on travel and entry caused by the EO that impose disparate and unreasonable burdens on the exercise of this right violate CCPR article 2.” According to the HRC, although the CCPR does not generally “recognize a right of aliens to enter or reside in the territory of a State party . . . , in certain circumstances an alien may enjoy the protection of the Covenant even in relation to entry or residence, for example, when considerations of non-discrimination, prohibition of inhuman treatment and respect for family life arise.”



Thus the non-discrimination mandates and protection of family life in the CCPR “should be considered by courts in interpreting government measures affecting family unification,” the brief says.

Article 26 prohibits religious and national origin discrimination and guarantees equal protection in any government measure. These provisions are not limited to individuals within the territory of the state party and subject to its jurisdiction. So immigrants need not be physically present in the United States to enjoy the protection of Article 26.

Moreover, the non-discrimination requirements enshrined in the CCPR also constitute customary international law. In 1948, the United States approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which is part of customary international law. The UDHR forbids discrimination based on religion or national origin, guarantees equal protection of the law, and protects family life against arbitrary interference.

International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

The United States ratified CERD in 1994. That treaty also prohibits discrimination based on religion or national origin. “Racial discrimination” includes any distinctions and restrictions based on national origin. Article 1 specifies that states can only adopt “nationality, citizenship or naturalization” policies that “do not discriminate against any particular nationality.”

Like the CCPR, CERD does not limit its non-discrimination provisions to citizens or resident noncitizens. “While CERD does not speak specifically to restrictions on entry of nonresident aliens,” the brief says, “the general language of CERD expresses a clear intention to eliminate discrimination based on race or national origin from all areas of government activity.”

In Article 4, CERD provides that states parties “[s]hall not permit public authorities or public institutions, national or local, to promote or incite racial discrimination.” This includes discrimination based on national origin. The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the body of independent experts that monitor the implementation of CERD, interprets Article 4 as requiring states to forbid speech that stigmatizes or stereotypes noncitizens, immigrants, refugees and those seeking asylum.

International Law Should be Considered in Evaluating the EO

“Those international law principles require courts to reject any attempt by the President to define classes based on national origin or religion, and then to impose on those classes disparate treatment, except to the extent necessary to achieve a legitimate government purpose,” amici wrote.

Their brief continues, “The EO ... makes an explicit distinction based on national

origin that, unless necessary and narrowly tailored to achieve a legitimate government aim, would violate US obligations under international law.”

In effect, the EO makes a distinction based on religion. All six of the listed countries have majority Muslim populations. As the brief says, “the EO does not suspend immigration from any state with a non-Muslim majority.”

Amici also argue that international law is relevant to Section 11 of the EO, which requires the Secretary of Homeland Security to “collect and make publicly available” information relating to convictions of terrorism-related crimes, government charges of terrorism, and “gender-based violence against women” by foreign nationals. But the EO does not require publication of this information on U.S. citizens.

“By mandating that the Secretary publish pejorative information about noncitizens without comparable information about US citizens,” amici wrote, “Section 11 makes a suspect distinction based on national origin.”

Section 11 “may bear on the intent to discriminate, because the decision to publish derogatory information about noncitizens alone is stigmatizing, and appears to be motivated by a desire to characterize noncitizens as more prone to terrorism or gender-based violence than US citizens.” Moreover, “a measure designed to stigmatize noncitizens cannot be proportionate and thus violates article 26 of the CCPR and articles 2 and 4 of the CERD.”

Thus, amici “request that the Court consider US obligations under international law, which forms part of US law, in evaluating the legality of the EO.”

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Celebrating the Balfour Disaster

A century ago, the U.K.’s Balfour Declaration set in motion the human rights disaster of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but – for opportunistic reasons – British politicians plan to hail it as a brilliant success, says Lawrence Davidson.

By Lawrence Davidson

British Prime Minister Theresa May has announced that Britain will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Balfour Declaration later this year. The Conservative Party leader addressed her party's "Friends of Israel" faction and declared that the Balfour Declaration was "one of the most important letters in history" while pledging that her government would celebrate it "with pride."

Her determination to do so is a clear indication that those who control national politics also control official interpretations of history. In the case of the Balfour Declaration's centenary, it is the ongoing alliance of Zionist special interests and British political power that is about to turn what has been a disaster for Britons, Jews and Palestinians alike, into a source of national pride.

I have told the story of the Balfour Declaration in documented detail in my book *America's Palestine*. Here is a brief synopsis: The November 1917 declaration was a World War I expedient undertaken by the then British government to enlist the aid of worldwide Jewry (mistakenly believed to be led by the fledgling World Zionist Organization) to the British side. In exchange the British government promised to create a "Jewish National Home" in Arab Palestine after the war. In so doing it sought to buy Jewish assistance with someone else's currency – that is, with territory then belonging to the Ottoman Empire.

Key members of the war cabinet in London, such as the Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, were believers in the myth of worldwide Jewish power, and on that basis were convinced that Jewish influence in Washington could help bring the United States into the war as a British ally, and at the same time keep their eastern front ally, the Russians, from leaving the war. Though the U.S. did soon enter the war, it had nothing to do with Jewish influence, and the Russians, now led by the Bolsheviks, proceeded to make a separate peace with the Germans.

At the end of World War I, the Ottoman Empire collapsed and Britain found itself in military control of Palestine. The government in London then proceeded to follow up on its promise to the Zionists. It did so by allowing the massive immigration of European Jews into Palestine. At this point the policy was driven by a blend of religious and racist beliefs, along with imperial ambitions.

First there was the fact that the Jews were seen as European allies who would allegedly help secure a strategic part of the Middle East for the British Empire, and second there was a mesmerizing mythic belief that a Jewish National Home was somehow in line with the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. In the end none of this played out well for the British. In 1948, they were driven out of Palestine by both violently hostile Zionists and Arab nationalists. They left

with their tails between their legs.

It appears that Prime Minister May and her party's "Friends of Israel" reject this history. Or, perhaps they don't care about documented facts because all that now matters is keeping for the Conservative Party the financial backing of the Zionist lobby. Such is democratic politics in the West.

A Disaster All Around

It is worth repeating that the consequences of the Balfour Declaration have proven to be disastrous. British hegemony lasted but 30 years and, as just mentioned, ended in an ignominious withdrawal. The Palestinians have suffered decades of dispossession and ethnic cleansing.

And the Jews, religious and secular, of the resulting state of Israel, now officially tied to the Zionist ethos, have been politically seduced and culturally converted to a racist ideology. Today, for many Jews, Zionism and Judaism are two sides of the same coin. One way you can demonstrate this latter point is by calling the ideology of Zionism into question. In doing so you will be labeled an anti-Semite.

Why has this situation come to pass? Certainly the history of European anti-Semitism, culminating in the Holocaust, has a lot to do with it. Anti-Semitism always constituted a threat for the Jews of the West. However, traditionally, that threat was mostly local. That is, even as the Jews of a particular shtetl in, say, southern Russia were being slaughtered, those elsewhere might be prospering. So, the danger was always there but only sporadically realized.

But then came the Nazis and the dimensions of the threat changed radically. As a result, there was a total breakdown of European Jewish life. And, for a significant number, the old Torah-based insights and philosophies that explained the world no longer sufficed.

So what did those Western Jews who managed to survive do in such circumstances? Their customary social order was gone. They were adrift in a world that did not make sense except in terms of its mortal danger. Under such conditions an applicable single idea that appeared to be historically logical could serve as a life preserver – and that idea was Zionism.

Zionism seemed historically logical because it melded the historical success of the nation-state, which was after all the dominant political system of the age, with a biblical myth that rationalized a "Jewish state" in the Arab land of Palestine. To both the survivors of the Holocaust and to those Jews who had watched the destruction of European Jewry from afar (i.e., from such places as the U.S.), the whole package must have had an internal logic that was

irresistibly comforting – promising permanent security in a Jewish national home.

While one can understand the seductive power of Zionism, it, like other exclusively racial or ethnic political ideologies, only led to predictable disaster. The truth is that it is impossible to create a state exclusively for one people (call them people A) in a territory already populated by another people (call them people B) without the adoption of racist policies by A and serious resistance on the part of B. Under such circumstances, for A, there can be no real security nor can there be anything like a healthy national culture.

The whole process has proved remarkably self-corrupting for Zionist Jews. It is ironic that now most Zionists are themselves anti-Semites. In this case the Semite targets are the Palestinians and the growing number of western Jews who have come to support their cause.

Thus, the plans to celebrate the centenary of the Balfour Declaration is based on an illusion that something awful is really something prideful. The only way you can pull this off is if you have the power to twist the entire historical episode into something it is not – and that is what Theresa May is planning to do.

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Palestinians See More of the Same

President Trump has offered mixed signals about precisely what his attitude toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will be, but Palestinians see little prospects for meaningful improvement, reports Dennis J Bernstein.

By Dennis J Bernstein

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's recent visit to Washington reaffirmed one thing in terms of U.S./Israeli relations: that not much will change in the United States' massive one-sided support for Israel, says Palestinian author and activist Ramzy Baroud.

The U.S. will continue to support, arm and publicly defend the ongoing Israeli policy of ethnic cleansing, as things go from bad to worse, Baroud adds, noting that Israel – with U.S. support – has already reduced the Gaza Strip to a fenced-in prison, where well over a million Palestinians don't even have access to the basics such as food and clean water. Now, the Israeli government has turned its full attention to the West Bank, which is under siege with new Israeli settlements.

I spoke to Ramzy Baroud about the Netanyahu visit, the illegal settlement boom on the West Bank with its concurrent upsurge in settler violence, the implications of moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, and the general daily brutalities of living under the iron fist of Israeli occupation.

Baroud is an internationally-syndicated columnist, a media consultant, and the founder of PalestineChronicle.com. His latest book is *My Father Was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's Untold Story*.

Dennis Bernstein: It is good to speak with you on the heels of the visit to the U.S. by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. [...]

This is sort of how the visit, and, I guess, the story of Palestine and Israel, is being framed by the corporate press. This is coming off the BBC, but it's typical: U.S. President Donald Trump has asked Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to "hold off on settlements" in a joint press conference.

Mr. Trump also promised to deliver "a great peace deal" but said Israel and the Palestinians must both compromise. So that's the BBC's characterization. How would you frame the current visit?

Ramzy Baroud: Well, the current visit, really, is a culmination of a whole bunch of events that have been taking place for months now prior to Trump coming to office, and the inauguration, and the aftermath. There's a great sense of euphoria, a great deal of euphoria, among the Israeli political elites. The whole two state solution enterprise is dead. The whole era of being told what to do, or being pressured in any way, or being censured, even in the slightest, most gentle way by previous administrations, that era is over, done with.

And now we are entering into a new era in which Israel single-handedly dictates everything it needs to dictate. Not just on Palestinians but on the United States, thus the so-called international community. So I see this kind of as a celebration of the Israeli political triumph, over the American foreign policy, and the balancing act that they have been playing in the Middle East for, really, in the last 25 years since the Madrid peace talks in '91, until today. It's the end of all of that, and it's ushered in our new era, and that's an

Israeli era, for sure.

DB: Well, just to set the tone. You say that ...Trump's pick for the U.S. Ambassador to Israel [David Friedman], is to the right of Netanyahu. You want to say a little bit about that choice, and his desire to move the Embassy to Jerusalem?

RB: Well, that's right. There was a recent article by a Professor Rashid Khalidi in the New Yorker, in which he said this is the first time in the history of U.S./Israeli relations that you could actually swap both ambassadors, the Israeli and American ambassadors, back and forth and you can't even tell which one is there to defend Israel's interests, and which one is there for American interests. There is this cohesion that is happening at last. And it's a perfect scenario for Israel.

The new pick for the ambassador [Friedman] is someone who is very much pro-settlements, does not even refer to the West Bank by its internationally recognized name. He refers to the occupied territories as Judea and Samaria. It's the land with the biblical reference, made by right-wing ultra-nationalists and religious Jewish politicians. So we are seeing something that's really unprecedented. The attempt at kind of dilly-dallying around this issue is over as far as American foreign policy is concerned.

American foreign policy, now, is exactly what Israel says it is. And I think it was really interesting what Trump said today in the press conference, when he said "I don't care, two states, one state, it's what you guys decide."

But the interesting part about it, is that when you have an occupier and an occupied, someone with powerful military and someone who's, you know, just in a constant state of self-defense, and someone that is commanding one of the Middle East's, the strongest economy, and others who are living in a South African apartheid-like Bantustan, well guess what? You can't really decide equally. One would have to impose his vision on the other.

And that is precisely what Trump is doing. He is giving Israel free hand to behave in any way that is consistent with its interests. And as you heard, what Netanyahu was saying was pretty dark and terrifying actually.

DB: Now, clearly Israel has always been given the gold from the United States. There's always been that kind of relationship. I guess Obama signed off on that deal for \$38 billion ... in aid—the most [to a foreign nation] ever. That certainly was a demonstration of U.S. friendship, if you will. But, how do you see this proceeding? If they go into Jerusalem, if they put the Embassy in Jerusalem, what happens next? How does that reverberate within the Palestinian

community? Is it possible that they could just stand by?

RB: Of course not. They will not stand by. And that's what Trump does not understand. I think there's a couple of important points that will have to be stated. The first one is that the U.S. did not put any expectations on Israel, whatsoever.

The \$38 billion and whatever political support and financial backing that they have received through all these years, they haven't put any expectations, except one single expectation. And that is to allow the U.S. the prestige, the leadership, the ability to come and impose itself as the "honesty spokesman," if you will.

Because the peace process was essential for American foreign policy. It is more important than we can possibly imagine. It is that kind of soaked power opportunity to impose themselves, not just on the Palestinians in the occupied territories, but on the rest of the Arabs. If you play along you're a moderate, if you are against us, you are a radical. That's all the United States expected from Israel. Just use the language of peace, just entertain this discourse and we will give you exactly what you want.

Even that proved to be too much for Israel. They don't want that, and Trump is willing to completely move away from that entire discourse. I think this is really interesting, and I think, eventually, it's going to alter America's standing in the Middle East altogether. What Trump doesn't understand, he is... it's all about making the deal... it's all about business, it's all about looking at who is the powerful party? Who is the weaker party? And he is just thinking of it in terms of dollars and cents. Now, it doesn't work that way in the Middle East.

Even the supposedly powerless and unarmed Palestinians could actually prove to be... their reaction could prove to be truly consequential, as far as American foreign policy is concerned. Palestinians are most likely to react, to mobilize. There are a great deal of efforts at forging a new Palestinian political outlook. They are looking for alternative leadership. They have their alternative allies. They had a meeting in Moscow, between Hamas and Fatah recently.

But also, you could see that entire region as far as destabilizing against the Americans, who are trying to, kind of, maintain their status and their influence in Syria, and Libya, over the Gulf, and so forth. And they find themselves in this huge anti-American backlash, as a result of their blatant support for Israel. Then Trump is going to actually realize, "Okay, this is not as straightforward as I thought it would be." What works in business might not

actually work in politics, after all.

DB: What are the realities, at this time, in terms of settlement buildings? How much has been built? How does that look at this point?

RB: Actually, it was interesting what Trump said to Netanyahu when he kind of leaned, you know, sideways and he said very gently, "If you could just hold off on the settlements, just a little bit." The problem is they have already issued approval of 6,000 settlement units throughout Jerusalem and the West Bank. And this number of units goes beyond any assumption of natural growth of settlements. It's way beyond that. It means that they are really now looking into expanding settlements beyond the fast streak it has experienced in the last eight years.

Not just that: they are now talking about legalizing all the illegal settlement outposts, which range from anywhere from 100 to 200 outposts, even more. If you are going to legalize these illegal outposts, it also means... and, of course, by saying legalize, I mean from an Israeli government, from an Israeli officials point of view, as you know, all Israeli settlements are illegal under international law.... But if they are to do so, it means that they would have to provide protection. The army would have to be deployed. There would have to be expansion. There would have to be fortification of these settlements.

So we are really talking about an unprecedented land grab here, on the West Bank. It doesn't matter what happens to the Palestinians in the process. Let's take as much as we can, and let's do that fast because this is the perfect opportunity to do so.

The last point I want to make is, for the first time in 20 years there was a brand new settlement, that has been approved. This is also new, in the sense that Israel has been justifying the expansion of the growth of settlements based on what they call natural expansion. But if they are issuing orders for new settlements, it means they are going back to the 1967 mentality of "This is part of the land of Israel. This is part of Yehudi and Santa Maria. It's our biblical land, and therefore Palestinians have no rights in this land anymore." So, not only the language itself is changing, but there are actually parts on the ground that prove that the action itself is also fundamentally being altered.

DB: Can I ask you to say a little bit about the relationship between the settlements and the military? How the military, if they do use the settlements... because we hear a lot about torture. You reported in your service, in the palestinechronicle.com, you are reporting about the torture of Palestinian teens. How does the settler movement play into this, sort of, growing use of torture, which, obviously, Trump thinks works.

RB: That's right. Well, I think it's important that we delineate this. There are no separate enterprises, the army enterprise and the settlement enterprise. Sometimes the media makes the mistakes of trying to make it look like the settlements are, kind of, behaving at odds with Israeli official policy. They actually don't. And we actually have been saying this from the very, very beginning, that this is a charade in Israel's name. And, the fact that they have just approved and legalized right after... all the settlements that have been built supposedly illegally... the fact that they have done so, it's an indication that this has all been part of the Israeli official program, all along. So, this is really important that we remember.

And also, we need to remember that in 1967, when Israel occupied the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, there were two settlement movements happening. One that was commissioned by the government, as for some strategic reason. And the other one was the religious settlements, that were built for spiritual reasons. At the end of the day, as far as Palestinians are concerned, it makes no difference whatsoever. This is land grab, our land, private property, lands being confiscated, whether for spiritual reasons or whether for strategic political reasons, it makes no difference. So as far as Palestinians are concerned, they are all working together, it's all one and the same.

The issue of torture, this is related to Gaza, Dennis. In order for anyone from Gaza to leave to Israel, to be treated in Israeli hospitals, or West Bank hospitals, or Jerusalem hospitals, they have to go through the Israeli border area, which is the Arab checkpoint. The Arab checkpoint means they have to meet the intelligence, the Shin Bet, the Israeli internal intelligence, which is equivalent to the FBI. And quite often they are bargain. If you want to get through, you have to divulge information, you have to give us names. Many people refuse to do so, many people get tortured in the process, and many people actually go home, and die as a result.

DB: I think one of the things that isn't at all reported through the corporate press, in any way, shape or form, rarely even a mention... doesn't get into the New York Times, or anywhere. But the way in which... it sort of, you know, you've got the wall, right? That is so tall, you can see it from space, as sort of the anvil. And then you've got the expanding settler movement, as the hammer.

And I say that in the context of thinking about the violence imposed by the settlers, on the peoples whose land they are stealing. That story, which is a continual drumbeat of violence beyond the torture of children, which we... there's a peek through every once in awhile, in a human rights report. Could you talk about that?

RB: That's right. And it is sad that we never hear about it. I just feel like,

I've been doing this for a long time, Dennis. And I know you have been doing it for a long time, as well. And we are yet to register any fundamental shift in how mainstream media really perceives the situation in Palestine/Israel. To the contrary, I think it's becoming even more consolidated behind Israel, which is entirely immoral and inexcusable, especially at a time when that country is now really ruled by ultra-nationalists and some, even, fascists like Avigdor Lieberman and others.

And by any political standards these men are fascists. And yet they rarely get any serious criticism in American media. While the settlement movement, I think this is really interesting, Dennis, is the fact that we are... we have seen how the settlers change their political position within Israeli politics from being on the margins, many years ago, in the post-1967, to becoming the center, most important component in the formulation of Israeli...

DB: ... the soul. The soul of the future of Israel.

RB: Absolutely. No question about it. And they have a great deal of influence in the army. They can actually sway Israeli politics, altogether. In some strange way, the life of Netanyahu, as right-wing as he is, he's actually on the left side of those who are truly capable of destroying his coalition at any given moment. They don't care about politics anymore. They are not the savvy Zionists of the past. They are right and they take exactly what we want.

That's why the settlers are being empowered, at this point. They are empowered in the sense that they are getting exactly what they want ... and the Palestinians are paying the price for it.

So, Palestinians are falling victim, not just for Israeli army violence but for settler violence as well. The land that the settlers are usurping from Palestinians, well it has owners and sometimes these owners try to defend their land, and they pay the price for it. And, I don't know if your audience is aware of ... the whole process of how a settlement is even constructed in the first place. But it is a very, very simple process.

The settlers come and they push the people out of the area. And then they claim it as their own, the army is involved. They make it a military zone, they fence it, starts growing, we see caravans moving in, trailers moving in, fences going higher and higher. And eventually it becomes a settlement. Well, Palestinians usually fight back for their land, their olive groves, the schools, for the roads, for the villages. And they pay a very heavy price.

DB: Yes, they do. That's sort of the front line of the suffering. We mentioned the word Gaza. Your most recent book *My Father was a Freedom Fighter: Gaza's*

Untold Story, and again when you... it must be absolutely maddening, I know it is, to see what's happening on the ground in Gaza, and hear the way in which, the character of this story, that these are a bunch of fenced-in terrorists, that we have to go to war against to defend Israel's right to exist. That is the theme, that still reverberates in the press.

And with Trump coming in... and I can imagine him using Israel as a model, "See I told you torture works, and the Israelis prove it time and again. It works, that's where they use it. That's why they're so effective blah, blah." Have you been thinking about that?

RB: It is sad to see that the United States at this point in its history, where they really need to have as much sensible policies at home and abroad as possible to stave off various crisis, they actually look at Israel for inspiration. And this is what Trump said today. "Israel is absolutely the most inspiring model." I mean, this is a crisis. It's a moral crisis, but it's political as well.

A place like Gaza has been under siege since 2006. Of course, it has been under occupation since 1967, but under a hermetic siege, for ten years. People are malnourished, people are suffering, they are digging tunnels under various fences in order for them to get food and supplies. Egypt is part of the siege, not just Israel. And not just the siege alone. But there are these intermittent wars that have been taking place in 2008-2009, 2012, 2014.

Thousands of Palestinians perished, tens of thousands have been wounded. Nearly a quarter of the Gaza Strip has been destroyed. And yet we didn't hear anything of that, yesterday. There's no humanitarian process throughout. If this happened in any other part of the world it would really be the headline in every newspaper. But, in Gaza, somehow, this is so irrelevant, so unimportant.

And the one that really need protection is the one whose imposing destruction on other people. It's Israel that needs our protection. It's Israel's security that really matters. Not the security of those desperate, poor souls that have been suffering year after year after year, crying for help, and getting very little, of it. And this is why we really need to keep the focus on this issue, Dennis. Gaza is a central piece to this discussion, and the suffering of the people there is getting worse with time.

DB: People have trouble getting clean, clear water, fresh water. Kids are sick because of that.

RB: The United Nations has decided... rendered Gaza, it's not suitable for human habitation in 2020. Others have actually said it is already not suitable ...

because of the issue of the polluted water, and the depleted uranium, as a result of the war, the fact that 100,000 people are still homeless, the fact that half of the population is unemployed, and so forth. With no political horizon, and no respite, whatsoever.

Dennis J Bernstein is a host of “Flashpoints” on the Pacifica radio network and the author of Special Ed: Voices from a Hidden Classroom. You can access the audio archives at www.flashpoints.net.

Deciphering Trump’s Opaque Foreign Policy

President Trump has set loose several competing – and contradictory – strands of foreign policy with the big question now whether he can avoid tripping himself up, writes ex-British diplomat Alastair Crooke.

By Alastair Crooke

It is now a commonplace to note that President Trump is advocating a mercantilist “America First” foreign policy, at odds with the prevailing globalist view of a cosmopolitan, super-culture; that he is intent on dismantling this globalist zeitgeist that he believes imposes moral and cultural norms which have weakened America’s mercantile “animal spirits” and whose embrace of the politics of diversity has sapped the strength from America’s moral and cultural sinews.

In practice, the policy that emerges will not be so black and white, or so easily categorized. “Team Trump,” in fact, embraces three distinct approaches: the “benevolent American hegemon” traditionalists, the Christian warriors pitted against an Islamic “hostile” ethos – and, of course, Trump’s own “America First” mercantilism. Each of these trends distrusts the other, yet must ally with one or the other in order to balance the third or at least avoid having it act as spoiler.

This inter-connectivity makes it especially hard to read the runes – the Trump administration’s marks of mysterious significance – of likely U.S. policy given the jostling and elbowing ahead between three distinct world views. And it is made even harder given President Trump’s and strategic adviser Steve Bannon’s deliberate embrace of a politics of feint and distraction, to throw opponents off-balance.

Trump's style of mercantilist politics – though novel in our era – is not new. It has occurred before, and in its earlier setting led to profound geo-political consequences. It led then to war and ultimately to the emergence of a new geo-political order.

That is not necessarily to say that the same will occur today, but on Sept. 17, 1656, Oliver Cromwell, a Protestant puritan who had fought a civil war in England against its Establishment and its élite and who had deposed and then executed the reigning king, addressed his revolutionary parliamentarians in Westminster by posing the question: Who are our enemies? There was, he answered to the gathered parliamentarians, an alignment of “wicked men” in the world led by a powerful state – Catholic Spain with the Pope at its head. The “enmity” that Cromwell's countrymen faced was, at its root, the evil of a religion – Catholicism – that “refused the Englishman's desire for simple liberties ... that put men under restraint ... [and] under which there was no freedom.”

Since Cromwell's day, the mainly English-speaking (Protestant) world has demonized its “enemies” as opponents of “God's will” through their clinging to the failings of a static and backward religious ethic (as the Puritans characterized Catholicism). And, as for the complaint of “restraint” and “lack of liberty”? At its crux lay English frustration at the impediments faced by its traders and merchants. The Puritans of that time saw in Catholicism an ethos that was not welcoming to individual enterprise, to profit or to trade.

English “hawks” – usually Puritans and merchants – wanted an aggressive anti-Spanish policy that would open new markets to burgeoning English trade. Catholicism was not an ethos, the Cromwellians fervently and dogmatically asserted, in which the nascent capitalism of the time could thrive.

Cromwell's address to Parliament in 1656 was an early articulation of the Protestant ethic: one that has contributed hugely to shaping American entrepreneurial capitalism, and in taking America to its position of power (Steve Bannon does in fact acknowledge the parallel: “I am Thomas Cromwell in the court of the Tudors,” he once said to a reporter).

A Religious War

Today, for one significant Trump constituency (the Tea Party base), Iran is today's Spain, and it is Islam (*vice* Catholicism) that is frustrating “God's will,” by embracing an ethos that hates the Christian “ethic.” And, it is secular globalization that has sapped America's mercantile animal spirits, imposed restrictions on trade (i.e. NAFTA), and whose cultural and “value” norms are sapping America's moral and spiritual muscularity.

Why should this Cromwell analogy matter today? In one sense, Trump had little choice. In opposing the (“restrictive”) globalist, foreign policy – with its spinal cord of a U.S.-led global defense sphere – the President needed to stand up some alternative foreign policy to the embedded totem of “America as the gyroscope of the global order.”

Pure mercantilism – in the style of businessman negotiator-ism – is not really, of itself, a foreign policy. The power of the “benign U.S. hegemon” meme would require something more powerful to be set up, over, and against it, to balance it out. Trump has opted for the “Christianity in peril” narrative. It is one that touches on deeply buried cultural veins of Protestant imagery within the President’s Tea Party constituency.

Retired General Michael Flynn, now Trump’s National Security Advisor, perhaps best represents this religiously based, pro-Christian Republican foreign policy, while retired General James Mattis, now U.S. Defense Secretary, perhaps has a foot in both Republican camps – as Martin Wright from Brookings explains:

“Republican foreign policy since 9/11 has had two basic strands, *which sometimes contradict each other*. The first is that the United States is in an existential fight against radical Islam. The second is that America’s global interests involve the maintenance of U.S. leadership in Europe and East Asia – interests, in other words, that extend far beyond combating radical Islam. The Republican establishment has always toed the line on the first, but it has increasingly focused much more on the second. The global war on terror has, of late, taken second place to balancing China and containing Russia.

“But a group within the Republican tent never made this shift. These are the people who believe the United States is engaged in a war against radical Islam that is equivalent to World War II or the Cold War. They believe it is a struggle rooted in religion to which all else should be subservient – that America’s overwhelming focus must be on radical Islam instead of revisionist powers in Europe or Asia. They also generally favor moving away from a values-based foreign policy to harsh methods to wage a major war.

“For the most part, the leaders of this school of thought have been dismissed as cranks or ideologues. But their views were widely shared in the Republican electorate, who were increasingly alarmed by the Islamic State. And they found an ally in Trump.” (emphasis added)

In short, we should expect the Administration’s policy to oscillate between these two poles of Republican foreign policy, as Trump plays off one against another, in order to insert his own (“non – foreign policy”) of radical mercantilism. The Cromwellian meme of making Iran the “number one” terrorist

state and radical Islam the “hostile ethos” does fit well for the U.S. President to embrace the businessman-negotiator *modus operandi* – under the cover of belligerency towards the Islamic “ethos.”

A Popular ‘Enemy’

Belligerency towards Iran is, of course, popular and in this way Trump’s policy translates well or at least understandably to the mores of the Washington Beltway. This “hostile Islam” meme also provides the rationale (defeating Islamic terror) for détente with Russia. I have suggested earlier that détente with Russia is key to Trump’s dismantling of Washington’s “benign hegemon” global defense sphere. Trump argues that the “blanket” U.S. defense sphere precisely limits the possibilities for the U.S. to negotiate advantageous trade terms with its allies on a case-by-case bilateral basis.

In effect, under the cover of fighting a hostile Islamic “ethos,” Trump can pursue détente with Russia – and then toughly “businessman-negotiate” with allied states (now stripped of the Russian “threat” elevating them to a status as America’s somehow privileged, defense allies). This seems to be Secretary Tillerson’s intended role.

Martin Wright again: “This is why naming Rex Tillerson as secretary of state was so important for Trump. A week before he was named, Trump’s senior aide Kellyanne Conway told the press that Trump was expanding the list of names for secretary of state and that the most important consideration was that the nominee ‘would be to implement and adhere to the president-elect’s America-first foreign policy – if you will, his view of the world.’ The implication was clear: [Mitt] Romney, David Petraeus, and others would not fit the bill, so Trump would have to look elsewhere. He found Tillerson.

“Tillerson is a pragmatist and a dealmaker. In many ways, he is a traditionalist. After all, he was endorsed by James Baker, Robert Gates, Hadley, and Condoleezza Rice. However, Trump also sees him, based on his personal relationship with Putin and opposition to sanctions on Russia, *as someone willing to cut deals with strongmen and who sees national security through an economic lens and is thus an embodiment of his own America First views.* Speaking in Wisconsin hours after naming Tillerson, Trump said, ‘Rex is friendly with many of the leaders in the world that we don’t get along with, and some people don’t like that. They don’t want them to be friendly. That’s why I’m doing the deal with Rex, ‘cause I like what this is all about.’” (emphasis added)

Is this – the war with a “hostile Islamic ethos” – then just a ploy, a diversion? Something for Iran to ignore? We suspect that Iran should not assume that Trump’s targeting of Iran and radical Islam is just some harmless

diversion. It is not likely that Trump actively seeks war with Iran, but were Iran to be perceived to be deliberately humiliating Trump or America, the President (self-confessedly) is not of a temperament to let any humiliation pass. He likes to repay those who do him harm, ten-fold.

End of White America

But additionally, since, as polls show, and a leading American commentator on religion and politics, Robert Jones, has written, the Trump phenomenon is also deeply connected with the end of an American era: *The End of White Christian America* (as his book is entitled). In point of fact, the era has already passed. For, as Jones notes, “1993 was the last year in which America was majority white, and Protestant.”

Jones writes of the “vertigo” felt – even within the insular settings of many Southern and Midwestern towns where white Protestant conservatives continue to dominate society, and politics – at their “loss of place at the center of American culture, democracy and cultural power.”

Salt has been rubbed into this wound by a Democratic Party that has somewhat reveled in the passing of white majority America and exacerbated the sore through rebranding itself as the new “majority” of minorities. Jones remarks that while some in America “might celebrate” its passing, white Christian America did provide some kind of “civic glue,” and he ruminates on how the sense of void and anxiety on “what might serve that purpose [in the future], might well turn destructive.”

This is, Iran might recall, Trump’s core constituency, which he must mollify if he is to remain in office. The destructive impulse of Tea Party-ists, if scratched repeatedly, might seek to let off steam at some convenient target.

But secondly, it seems that Trump shares in some measure, this embrace of Judeo-Christian values. Certainly Steve Bannon does. He has said plainly that American capitalism – if it is to survive – must be reconnected to Judeo-Christian values. But what explains Trump’s paradoxical focus on Iran, which *is* fighting Islamic radicalism, rather than say, Saudi Arabia, which *is not*?

Here, Martin Wright gives us the clue: “In January and February [2016], Trump was under pressure to unveil a foreign-policy team. The Republican foreign-policy establishment overwhelmingly condemned him, largely because of his America First views. It was at this point that retired Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn started advising him. ... Several weeks after Flynn came on board, Trump rolled out a list of foreign-policy advisors. Most were completely unknown, but the name Walid Phares stood out. Phares has a controversial past as a leading

figure in a Lebanese Christian militia, and is known as a hard-liner in the war on terror.”

Mother Jones' investigative report is plain: Phares, a Lebanese Christian Maronite, is a Samir Gagea man, who has a long history, dating back to Lebanon's civil war of (intellectual) animosity towards Iran and Syria. It seems Trump (and Flynn too?) may have imbibed deeply at the bitter well of Lebanese prejudice and civil war hatreds?

Translating the Runes

So what do the runes tell us? The occult alphabet of Trump's foreign policy will prove hard to read. The essential tension between, on the one hand, the “America Firsters” and the religious warriors – and all those who adhere to the American “traditionalist” policy position – portends the prospect of policies that might oscillate, from time to time, between these three diverse and conflicting poles.

Let us remind ourselves – “traditionalist” includes “all those officials who support the institutions of American power, and are generally comfortable with the post-World War II bipartisan consensus on U.S. strategy, even though they may seek to change it on the margins.”

It is quite likely that some of Trump's team members who are mercantilists (such as Tillerson) or “Christian warriors” (such as Flynn), might be “bi-polar”: that is to say will be pulled in both directions on certain policy issues. We perhaps might be advised, therefore, to disregard most leaks, as more likely to constitute self-serving exercises directed towards influencing the internal struggle within “the team” (i.e. kite-flying exercises), rather than as true leaks that describe a genuine consensus reached within the “team.”

But the runes will be harder to read precisely because of Trump's tactics of feints and distractions. As one astute chess-coach-turned-analyst has observed, Trump seems to be a pretty accomplished hand at chess:

“Chess is a game where the number of possible positions rises at an astronomical rate. By the 2nd move of the game there are already 400 possible positions, and after each person moves twice, that number rises to 8902. My coach explained to me that I was not trained enough to even begin to keep track of those things and that my only chance of ever winning was to take the initiative and never give it up. ‘You must know what your opponent will do next by playing his game for him.’ was the advice I received.

“Now, I won't bore you with the particulars but it boiled down to throwing punches, at each and every turn without exception. In other words, if my opponent must always waste his turn responding to what I am doing, then he never

gets an opportunity to come at me in the millions of possibilities that reside in the game. Again, if I throw the punch – even one that can be easily blocked, then I only have to worry about one combination and not millions.

“My Russian chess coach next taught me that I should Proudly Announce what exactly I am doing and why I am doing it. He explained to me that bad chess players believe that they can hide their strategy even though all the pieces are right there in plain sight for anyone to see. A good chess player has no fear of this because they will choose positions that are unassailable so why not announce them? As a coach, I made all of my students tell each other why they were making the moves that they made as well as what they were planning next. It entirely removed luck from the game and quickly made them into superior players.

“My Russian coach next stressed Time as something I should focus on to round out my game. He said that I shouldn’t move the same piece twice in a row and that my ‘wild punches’ should focus on getting my pieces on to the board and into play as quickly as possible. So, if I do everything correctly, I have an opponent that will have a disorganized defense, no offense and few pieces even in play and this will work 9 out of 10 times. The only time it doesn’t work for me is when I go against players that have memorized hundreds of games and have memorized how to get out of these traps. With all that said, let’s see if President Trump is playing chess.

“First, we can all agree that Trump, if nothing else, throws a lot of punches. We really saw this in the primaries where barely a day could go by without some scandal that would supposedly end his presidential bid. His opponents and the press erroneously thought that responding to each and every “outrage’ was the correct thing to do without ever taking the time to think whether or not they had just walked into a trap. They would use their turn to block his Twitter attack but he wouldn’t move that [chess] piece again once that was in play but, instead, brought on the next outrage – just like my [Russian chess] coach instructed me to do.

“Second, Trump is very vocal in what he is going to do. Just like I had my students announced to each other their [chess] strategy, Trump has been nothing but transparent about what he intends to do. After all, announcing your plans only works if your position is unassailable. It demoralizes your opponent. You rub their face in it. Another benefit to being vocal is that it encourages your opponent to bring out his favorite piece to deal with said announced plans. This is a big mistake as any good chess player will quickly recognize which piece his opponent favors and then go take them.

“Time has been the one area that our president is having problems. Executive Orders and Twitter Wars have pushed the opposition off balance but he has not

been able to use this time to get all of his pieces into play. The Justice Department (his Queen) is still stuck behind a wall of pawns. Furthermore, only 5 of his 15 Cabinet picks have been confirmed as of this writing. Without control over these departments, the president can fight a war of attrition but he really can't go on the offensive. In chess, I will gladly trade a piece for a piece if it means you have to waste your turn dealing with it. It isn't a long term strategy if you do not have all of your pieces ready to go."

Well, maybe its best just to sit and observe, and stop trying to read the runes?

Alastair Crooke is a former British diplomat who was a senior figure in British intelligence and in European Union diplomacy. He is the founder and director of the Conflicts Forum.

Trump's Incoherent Anti-Terrorism Policy

By blocking travelers from seven mostly Muslim nations – but not ones that have sent terrorists to the U.S. – President Trump has pushed an incoherent policy that may increase the risks of terrorism, writes ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

Donald Trump's efforts, during his first week in office, to give substance to his campaign rhetoric have involved executive orders that have generated reactions ranging from bemusement over their vagueness to worried waiting for other shoes to drop. But the previous orders do not do as much quick damage, both to individual U.S. persons and their families and to broader U.S. foreign relations and national security, as the grossly mistitled order, "Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States."

The heartlessness of what the order does regarding asylum and resettlement for refugees fleeing strife and persecution is bad enough. In addition to humanitarian considerations, the move undercuts everything Trump has said about burden-sharing – such as when he complains about NATO and the contributions of other members of the alliance.

Trump has repeatedly portrayed his objective regarding the processing of foreign applications for admission to the United States, and what this executive order supposedly begins to implement, as "extreme vetting" that is somehow more rigorous than what has been in place. He ignores, however, how the existing vetting is among the most rigorous by any country, and by many standards rather

extreme already.

The sudden and sweeping nature of the barrier to travel that Trump has thrown up is already having deleterious effects on many U.S. citizens. First- and second-generation Americans especially are suddenly being kept separate from parents and spouses. And that is just a portion of the hardship being experienced by innocent individuals with legal status in the United States, such as businessmen returning from overseas or students and scholars returning from conferences.

The order, despite the title, is divorced from where actual terrorist threats to the United States are most likely to come from. The order does nothing to protect against the kind of attacks the United States has most experienced in the decade and a half since 9/11, perpetrated by radical individuals, including U.S. citizens, in places such as Fort Hood or Orlando. It ignores how terrorism in the West generally has not been the work of individuals who are nationals of countries whose regimes we don't happen to like.

Favoring Christians

The order is anti-Islam and anti-Muslim, and will be primarily read as such by audiences overseas, given the previously established record of Islamophobia of Trump and some others with high positions in his administration. The President reinforced that message Friday in an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network, in which he said that in any future refugee resettlement his administration would give preference to Christians over members of other religious groups.

In using a falsehood (or lie, or "alternative fact," or however one chooses to label it), Trump asserted about U.S. practices to date, "If you were a Muslim you could come in, but if you were a Christian, it was almost impossible."

In fact, the United States admitted nearly as many Christian refugees (37,521) as Muslims (38,901) in fiscal year 2016, even though Muslims constitute a significantly higher proportion of people suffering from, and fleeing from, war and violence in the Middle East.

This kind of religious litmus test is a marked departure from the best historical traditions of American taking in tired, poor, huddled masses. It is a throwback to some of the most ignoble phases of American history. "Yellow peril" of bygone years has now been replaced by Trump's "green peril." Such religious discrimination in admitting foreigners may also be illegal, as a violation of law that was enacted to prevent a return to the more prejudicial practices of the past.

As for terrorism, the anti-Muslim nature of this order is likely to increase

anti-U.S. terrorism rather than decrease it. The order is music to the ears of ISIS, Al Qaeda, and other violent groups that portray in their propaganda and recruitment pitches a world engulfed in a war between Islam and a Judeo-Christian West that is led by the United States and is out to persecute Muslims. Persuading other governments, especially in the Muslim world, to cooperate with the United States in the name of counterterrorism will be made more difficult. And Americans will be more, not less, likely to fall victim to terrorism perpetrated by Islamist extremists.

The designation of the nationals of seven states (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen) for the most sweeping prohibition on entry to the United States (i.e, for all travelers, not just refugees) for at least 90 days reinforces the anti-Islam flavor of the executive order, given that these are all Muslim-majority countries. This grouping of states was first named in legislation that the Republican-controlled Congress passed last year as "countries of concern." But that legislation had to do with which countries were or were not to be eligible for the visa-waiver program. The new executive order is instead a blanket ban on all travel to the United States, visa or no visa.

A Bizarre List

Conceivably this list of seven could dilute the anti-Islam flavor of the order somewhat, given that other Muslim-majority countries are not so listed. But looking closely at who was listed and who wasn't only underscores how far divorced this matter is from counterterrorism. No one from any of the seven countries on the list has killed anyone in a terrorist attack in the United States. By contrast, the hijackers who perpetrated 9/11 came mostly from Saudi Arabia and the rest from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Lebanon; none of these countries are on the list.

To the extent any distinction is being made between Muslims the administration most wants to keep out and others to whom it will be a little more tolerant, the distinction seems to be made for unrelated reasons that some regimes get favored and others don't. The reasons not only don't have to do with terrorism but also don't relate to democracy or human rights either.

And maybe there's an additional explanation, very much in the realm of the ignoble. It has not escaped the notice of media that some of the principal countries – including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt – that legitimately could be objects of worry as exporters of terrorists but aren't on the no-travel list are ones in which Trump in his private capacity has done business or sought to make deals. Thus this matter will be one of the first of what are likely to be many presidential decisions about which, as long as Trump flouts ethical principles and refuses to divest himself of his business interests,

understandable questions will be raised about his motives.

On the same day he signed the executive order with the travel bans, Trump implicitly raised the same sort of question about another of his positions that goes against U.S. interests: his support for Brexit and his overall antipathy toward the European Union. In an appearance with visiting British Prime Minister Theresa May, the President remarked that in seeking necessary approvals for his business deals in Europe, getting approvals from individual countries was “fast, easy and efficient” but that he had a “very bad experience” with the E.U., where it was “very, very tough” to get approvals. Then he put in a plug for his golf course at Turnberry.

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Trump’s Pipeline Orders Challenge Protesters

Ignoring environmental concerns and tribal objections, President Trump has put the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines back on track without even consulting the opponents, Dennis J Bernstein reports.

By Dennis J Bernstein

On his second business day in office, President Donald Trump signed executive actions to restart construction of the controversial Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines, sending shockwaves through the indigenous environmental communities at Standing Rock and their supporters across the U.S. and around the world.

After Trump’s actions, I spoke with Tom Goldtooth, Executive Director of the Indigenous Environmental Network, who has worked on various grassroots environmental issues with tribal governments to develop indigenous-based environmental protection infrastructures. He was a key organizer at the Standing Rock protests that convinced President Obama to consider alternative pipeline routes.

Dennis Bernstein: Give us your initial response, your overview.

Tom Goldtooth: Yes, our network, which is a grassroots Native organization of frontline organizations and individuals and tribal members throughout North America, are very concerned. We're very alarmed at how fast he has put this ... insane initiative forward.

[...] We definitely are opposed to their recklessness, and the political motivation behind these kinds of fossil fuel development projects. As we know, [Trump] is invested in the Dakota Access Pipeline. And this is just a really bad step on his behalf, as a new-seated President of the United States.

He is violating existing, government to government policies between the United States and tribes, as federally recognized tribes. He never consulted... no one in his administration consulted with the chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, nor any of the other federally recognized tribes, on this initiative that he is putting forward.

And so, we're very concerned as he's taken this executive action towards making the first step towards approving of the easement of the Dakota Access Pipeline across the Missouri River. So, you know, we're very concerned. We had a couple calls with members in the community at Standing Rock. Some people in leadership with the Oceti Sakowin Camp, as well as many of our other supporters. So, we definitely are bringing attention to this ... where's this going to end? [...]

We know that these kinds of pipelines are violating the private rights of private land owners, ranchers and farmers along that corridor, with threats of eminent domain. They were forced. It was a forced choice many of those private land owners were faced with, on these kinds of energy developments. So we're going to see that more under this privatization initiative that Trump has put forward around jobs and economic development. But at what expense?

DB: This is about the most blatant... one of the most blatant things I've seen in my lifetime. But this really does continue, shall we say, Columbus' American tradition of genocide... I mean, this is a white ruler acting on behalf of the white race. Wouldn't you say? It has to be seen that way.

TG: It's a continuation of those colonial policies that are at the foundation of the United States. And throughout past decades under social justice and environmental justice movement initiatives, we begin to try to unwrap these colonial policies built upon racism. And here we are. We got a president in office that is racist and, many people say, is a fascist. And so, this is just another continuing practice that we have to stop. We have to mobilize and stop this right now.

Like I said, this initiative is indicating to us, right now, that he doesn't

respect the sovereignty rights of our American Indians and our Alaskan Natives. And this decision he's making, if he moves forward and implements this action with these executive orders, it's going to violate the treaty rights of the Lakota/Dakota people. But where's it going to stop? It's going to violate, again, all of our Native rights. So, we've spoken out against this pipeline and the Black Snake initiative, with all these pipelines. And Trump is portraying his true self, joining forces with that darkness.

There's no light in his decisions. These prairie lands are very rich culturally, and environmentally, and it's a very spiritual relationship our people have with the land. And he's violating that, as well.

DB: It seems that all the actions at Standing Rock were, in a way, preparation for the resistance of this next level of violence. Would you say that the work that people have done will do them well, in terms of the continued resistance? And perhaps people are already thinking about that, in deep ways?

TG: Well, one of the things that many thousands of people ... that have come to Oceti Sakowin Camp and the Sacred Stone Camp, at Standing Rock, have consistently said... they said, "This is a spiritual movement." They felt that connection to the sacredness of Mother Earth. They saw that our people... both Native and non-Native, were standing in prayer, in peace.

And they saw that there is a meaning when we say "Water is life." And there's meaning when we say we have to recognize the sacredness of our Mother Earth. But, yet, we're dealing with the colonial system of laws and regulations that are often violating those natural laws, as we know it, of protection of that sacredness of Mother Earth, and Father Sky.

So, that's why we [have] definitely been opposed. And many of Trump's comments in his election process, talking about privatization—what that means to us is the privatization of nature, of land, of water. So that it gives those rights to the corporate, private sector. They have more rights than we have.

Those corporations like Dakota Access Pipeline, Energy Transfer Partners, ConocoPhillips, Shell, Exxon, Chevron... they have more standing than our own first Nations, or our Native people. Whether it's in Canada in the Tar Sands, or whether it's right here in the prairie lands with these pipe lines. So, definitely we saw a wake up, as millions of people globally looking at what's going on at Standing Rock. So, we're going to utilize that movement that we're building here.

And we're going to see what Trump is going to do. We're going to demand that he pull back from implementing these executive orders. Otherwise, we're going to

put that call out. There's going to be massive mobilization, and civil disobedience, on a scale that may never have been seen on newly seated presidents of the United States. So, we're going to keep this movement going. This resistance is stronger now than ever before. It's not just about Standing Rock. It's not just about this specific pipeline. It's about a whole system that is not sustainable. Something has to change and Trump is not going to be that leader that is going to be looking at the best interests of everyone's future.

DB: Final question, now. The climate denialists obviously own Trump. He's one of them. ... This battle ... is the cutting edge ... [of] those who understand how important it is to protect the Earth and the water ... [against] these fascists who put profits over everything ... The line really is drawn at these pipelines, isn't it?

TG: It is, it is. It was that dream that that Lakota woman had years ago on this Trans-Canada Keystone XL pipeline... when that dream told her that this pipeline has a darkness to it, that it's a black snake. And that we have to, somehow, cut the head off of that snake. So the question is what do these pipelines represent? It's like a whole system that's clouding the reality of what we need to do. And now it has the leadership that is put into office.

So that's why our spiritual leaders are telling people that we need to go back to a prayer. We need to go back to having ceremonies, and this is what's going to bring in that light of understanding, of peace and compassion. And maybe that's one reason I got that Gandhi peace award, here, you know, last year.

And, there's a link between how we as modern society and this world have separated itself from that sacredness of Mother Earth. And, we need to, as a humanity, throughout the world, including President Trump, his cabinet, Congress, and state by state, county by county, city by city, and our families, we all need to look at what's going on.

We need to come back to understanding what our relationship is to these natural creative laws, these principles, that many land-based peoples still have, many of our Native peoples still have. And so, it's that critical right now. We know that the current economic system of unlimited growth is barely hanging in there, on a thread. But it's trying to survive. At what expense, though? So it is an indigenous issue, but it's all of people's issue, our future children's issue. So it's that critical.

DB: And that Gandhian prayerful, peaceful resistance, which was really engaging the youth, that's going to continue defining this movement as the resistance grows. You feel sure and certain of that?

TG: Yes, we gotta continue. We've got to continue to put our thoughts together, from our heart. Let's link up and bring together our mind and our heart. Sometimes that's the furthest distance that is created in these modern times. So we gotta let that heart speak up.

Compassion and prayer is very strong. It can move mountains. And so, as our Native spiritual leaders have said in these ceremonies ... we have to stand there in resistance, taking action in peace and prayer. And we will continue to do that at Standing Rock, with the leadership of the Standing Rock Sioux tribe, with its elders, and their youth and their women.

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Fear and Misunderstanding of Russia

Much of America's recent demonization of Russia relates to deep cultural and even religious differences between the two countries, requiring a deeper understanding of the other's strengths and weaknesses, writes Paul Grenier.

By Paul Grenier

Given the recent near-hysteria over Russia's alleged hacking of U.S. political email traffic, it is difficult to imagine a U.S. -Russia relationship established upon a peaceful footing – or, to put it another way, a relationship so stable and constructive that it no longer would depend on the vagaries of changing political personalities.

Let's look at it first through the prism of realism. If we are realists, we throw America's habitual moralism out the window and offer the Russians a deal. The "normalization" negotiations between a realist America and the regional power of Russia might unfold along lines something like this:

The United States would propose a provisional alliance with Russia to thwart a rising China, which continues to grow inexorably in wealth and power. China's ascendance naturally makes U.S. policymakers nervous, and thus does the United States (in the realist view) have a vested interest in a U.S.-Russian alliance.

According to this realist playbook, Russia would be flattered by these attentions but would want to know precisely what kind of *provisional* alliance

the United States had in mind. Given that realists always seek to be open and honest, this particular realist government would explain that its attention is focused on China's apparent expansionist ambitions in the South China Sea. After all, according to the realist outlook, nation-states not only usually *do* pursue constant expansion of their power whenever and wherever possible, as China seems to be doing now, but *should* pursue such hegemonic expansion whenever possible because, in an anarchic world, that is the way to survive.

Would Russia accept such an offer? It might. But if it did, it would be with a certain sense of bad faith to match that surrounding the U.S. proposition. It would not be a friendship but an alliance based on mutual interest. If circumstances were to change, as inevitably they would at some point, the underlying sentiments of national interest might well evaporate – as they should.

But such conditionality wouldn't contradict the realist conception of international relations. Under the realist model, there simply is no basis for a *good faith* long-term settlement. It is excluded by the power-political assumptions of the realist model, as is frankly acknowledged in such foundational realist texts, for example, as John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.

And realists are correct, no doubt, in arguing that Americans should stop moralizing about Russia taking actions to defend its vital interests in its own neighborhood in exactly the same manner as the United States does in defense of its vital interests in its own region.

And yet realism's dismissive attitude toward the moral dimension – as historian Matthew Dal Santo recently pointed out – contains a flaw. It requires that the United States renounce certain moral concerns that are foundational to what America is. Would a coldly rational America still be *America*? And would Russia itself ultimately even welcome such a "partner"?

The prominent Russian political philosopher Boris Mezhuev, in a recent essay (in Russian) about the history of the America First movement, mused that an isolationist United States during World War II would not at all have been welcomed, first and foremost by Russia itself. It might have led to the annihilation of Russia at the hands of the Nazi war machine. Mezhuev's point is that it is not the rejection of universal ideals that we should seek in international relations, but the finding of the right ideal.

Stop Being Russia

According to the outlook that might be described as the democracy-idealism/neoconservative-interventionist school, the only way to achieve a

lasting settlement is for Russia to cease being what it is at the moment and to become instead much more like the United States. Russia should become a liberal democracy. Only then – because, as many Wilsonian idealists have argued, “liberal democracies don’t fight one another” – can the relationship be stabilized for the long term.

The theory is not entirely implausible. There are indeed forces within Russia that strongly identify with American liberal democratic values. American diplomats and journalists frequently run into people who hold such sentiments. They pop up among one’s well-traveled Russian-intelligentsia friends and are widely quoted in the articles written by prominent journalists who happen to be imbued themselves with the Wilsonian sensibility.

The problem with this line of thought – aside from the impossibility of imposing it from the outside – is that the Russian version of liberal democracy differs fundamentally from the American version.

The fact is that Russia today is already in many ways liberal. But its liberalism is of a peculiarly Russian sort. It does not deny rights and freedom, but it grounds them not negatively (in terms of what government shall not do), as does the Enlightenment liberalism of Locke and Hobbes, but rather in terms of Eastern Christianity’s image of what man is. As a result, there is no Russian liberalism, or Russian politics of any other sort – including its standard semi-authoritarianism – that separates the state from religion in the way that the United States does today.

An authentically *Russian* liberalism, in other words, is hardly less starkly different from our secular, liberationist order than is Russia’s present political arrangement under Vladimir Putin. The fact is that there simply is not available to Russia a political order that is aligned with the present-day American version of secular liberal democracy. Both its history and its mores exclude it. And if we try to impose it anyway, in defiance of Russian history and self-understanding, then we will find ourselves repulsed in the same way Napoleon was.

As Henry Kissinger wrote, “No power will submit to a settlement, however well-balanced and however ‘secure,’ which seems totally to deny its vision of itself.”

So where does that leave us? It leaves us precisely in the relationship in which the two countries currently languish. The realists, in such meager numbers as they exist, have little to offer beyond a temporary reprieve. As for the democracy idealists, they have witnessed Russia’s rejection of U.S.-style liberal democracy and secularism, and they have drawn the only possible

conclusion: Russia is incorrigibly evil.

To prove their point, the idealists and neoconservatives point to Russian acts of violence, such as its bombardments in Syria or Chechnya or its support for the separatists in Eastern Ukraine. The Russians, for their part, cast back at America and its Western allies the West's own acts of aggression and accompanying untruths.

Rejecting Lectures

It's instructive, in this regard, to recall British Foreign Secretary David Miliband's famous phone conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, in which the latter, after pointedly reminding the former about the Anglo-U.S. invasion of Iraq, demanded of Miliband, "Who are you to f***ing lecture me?"

Critics of Russia likewise point to various lies that Russian politicians have told in defense of their foreign-policy aims. But telling lies is in the very nature of international relations and certainly the waging of wars, as is reflected in the familiar accusation that "the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy."

And yet, though nations often tell lies as part of their self-defense, it doesn't follow that what they are defending is therefore essentially a lie. It may be in some cases – Nazi Germany, for example, or ISIS. But such cases are rare.

In short, both the United States and Russia have used lots of violence against their enemies. In both cases, this violence has no doubt exceeded ethical norms. Both have told lies. So which side is the more evil? How does one prove such a thing?

Robert Kaplan, who generally belongs to America's democracy-idealist camp, suggested in a recent essay that we can answer this question by means of a close reading of Russian literature.

Kaplan's "The Real War of Ideas," published in *The National Interest* in September, stakes its claim about Russia by reference to Anton Chekhov's fictional *My Life: A Provincial's Story*. A careful reading of this work, Kaplan tells us, allows us to "realiz[e] the utter impossibility of any good ever coming out of Russia."

This remarkable story, Kaplan believes, holds the key to understanding Russia as a whole. "[E]verything from the czar, to Lenin and Stalin, to Putin, is connected in some indirect way to the Russian social reality" described by Chekhov. Here, for Kaplan, is the story's money quote:

“They [the peasant *muzhiks*] were mostly nervous, irritated, insulted people; they were people of suppressed imagination, ignorant, with a poor, dull outlook, with ever the same thoughts about the gray earth, gray days, black bread, people who were sly but, like birds, only hid their heads behind a tree – who didn’t know how to count. They wouldn’t go to your haymaking for twenty roubles, but they would go for a half-bucket of vodka, though for twenty roubles they could buy four buckets. ... [As for their masters, their money] had been acquired by a whole series of brazen, shameless deceptions.”

Here’s an interesting question: why, out of all the tremendous variety of Russian literature, has Kaplan chosen precisely this short story focusing on ignorant peasants, instead of, say, *War and Peace*? Answer: to demonstrate that Chekhov’s Russia is the same as Putin’s Russia – in the double sense that Russia has never successfully become modern and liberal and, for Kaplan, never will.

The peasantry symbolizes what is pre-modern and illiberal. These particular peasants, furthermore, are incapable of acting as a rational liberal should – maximizing their own advantage and thereby increasing wealth for society as a whole. Chekhov’s peasants cannot even properly calculate how to maximize their consumption of vodka!

The Chekhov passage has, furthermore, far-going implications for Russia’s place within the international order. If Russia were smart enough to become part of the Western order, if it played according to American rules, Russia would earn more than it does now! And yet Russia stubbornly, stupidly, and in contradiction of its own interest refuses this reasonable tradeoff. Russia’s rulers and oligarchs of today, like its peasant masters of yesteryear, prefer to practice deceit, because such is their nature. That, for Kaplan, is what Chekhov’s story tells us.

Selective Reading

Kaplan’s reading of the Chekhov story, however, is incomplete. On the very same page of Chekhov’s text, between the word “buckets” and the closing words about the masters’ “brazen, shameless deceptions,” there are the following lines:

“In fact, there was filth, and drunkenness, and stupidity, and deceit, but with all that you could feel, nevertheless, that the muzhiks’ life was generally upheld by some strong, healthy core. However much the muzhik looks like a clumsy beast as he follows his plow, and however much he befuddles himself with vodka, still, on looking closer, you feel that there is in him something necessary and very important that is lacking, for instance, in Masha and the doctor – namely, he believes that the chief thing on earth is truth [*pravda*], and that his salvation and that of all people lies in truth alone, and therefore he loves justice more than anything else in the world.”

Had he quoted the Russian author in full, I would be in agreement with Mr. Kaplan about the importance of this story for understanding Russia. To be sure, modern Russia, with its impeccable metro systems and fashionable cafes, has little in common with the peasant world here described (though in the provinces, something of that peasant world – fortunately to my mind – still remains). Modern Russians, furthermore, know how to count very well.

What then remains constant? First, the centrality of truth and justice. We have already, above, briefly discussed the role of lies. They are, sadly, something of a constant in foreign relations. What needs stressing here is something else. The attempt to lure or to force Russia into a world that requires that it “deny its vision of itself” by forcing it to be liberal – and thereby to interpret everything exclusively in terms of advantage, rights, losses, and profits – will not work.

This is confirmed not only by Russian behavior but also by the explicit words of its foreign minister, who in a recent interview insisted that “Russia’s only role in the world is to stand up for the truth [*pravda*] together with other powers, but exclusively on equal terms.”

The second constant is Christianity. The text’s reference to “salvation” and the word *pravda* itself have clearly Christian overtones. Russian Christianity differs from American Christianity. American Protestant Christianity embraces individualism and is open to change; in many ways, it has hitched its cart to the modernization project.

Russian Orthodox Christianity uses virtually the same liturgy today as it has for hundreds of years. Its standard of perfection in iconography is the same as it has been for hundreds of years. Russian spirituality is oriented to what is timeless and to beauty. American spirituality is oriented to the future and to rights. Both Russia and America can be very tough. But that toughness defends two very different ideals.

Kaplan’s selective quotation of the Chekhov story quite likely was unintentional. He may genuinely have found unimportant the passage about truth and justice and salvation, because these things fall outside the realm of modern American liberalism. His inability to notice the good in Russia when that good falls outside of the specifically liberal framework is something very common in recent Western reporting on Russia.

No Junior Partner

An accommodation with Russia will never be reached by ignoring what Russia is, still less by attempting to transform it into a junior United States. Nor is there any need to do so. An accommodation between Russia and the United States

can be reached by applying what is healthy in the realist and idealist traditions, and jettisoning what is false.

Realism is right to the extent that it teaches that one's own nation's ideals do not necessarily embrace the whole of the human good. It teaches a salutary humility. Realism is wrong, however, when it dismisses moral considerations altogether, among other reasons because such a dismissal eliminates the only possible foundation of long-term trust.

The idealist school clings to the United States' longstanding vision of itself as a force for good in the world. There is no need for the United States to abandon this vision. All that is needed is for the United States to expand its notion of the good.

For my money, a good place to start would be with the writings of Semyon Frank, one of the most respected Russian philosophers in Russia today. "In all that is human as such," Frank wrote, "... there is nothing sacred; 'the will of the people' can be just as stupid and criminal as the will of an individual man. Neither the rights of man nor the will of the people are sacred in themselves. Only the *truth* as such, only the absolute good which is independent of man, is primordially sacred."

Russia, for its part, needs to guard against the temptation of identifying this good, this *absolute*, with Russia itself.

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