

The Soft Power Hoax

U.S. officials love the idea of “soft power,” a concept that applies non-violent means from propaganda to culture to induce foreign countries to conform to Washington’s wishes. But the arrogance of the approach has alienated, rather than attracted, many people around the world, writes Mike Lofgren.

By Mike Lofgren

A recurrent buzz phrase of the Washington mandarin in the last two decades has been “soft power.” The term was coined by Joseph Nye, a Harvard academic, in his 1990 book, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. What he meant by the term is that “when one country gets other countries to want what it wants [it] might be called co-optive or soft power in contrast with the hard or command power of ordering others to do what it wants.”

Soft power he defined as the putatively attractive political, social and cultural traits of a country that induce admiration in a target people, and, presumably, a desire both to emulate those traits and to willingly comply with the wishes of the country projecting the soft power.

The term has gotten a workout by American politicians and national security bureaucrats, particularly since the manifest failure of military power to make Iraqis love us. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has used the term, saying he would like to augment U.S. soft power by “a dramatic increase in spending on the civilian instruments of national security diplomacy, strategic communications, foreign assistance, civic action and economic reconstruction and development.”

As might be expected, the idea is most loved by State Department officials, principally because they believe it could give them a leg up in the Washington budget battles with their colossal rival, DOD, the repository of “hard” power. A Google search of “Hillary Clinton smart power” gets about 3.7 million hits. Smart power is the former Secretary of State’s pet term for a fusion of hard and soft power. John Kerry is also fond of the concept.

It is easy to see why the national security establishment, casting about for some alternative to the usual bluster leading to military action, would be drawn to the magical notion that our presumed cultural attractiveness, combined with a really cool Twitter feed, could advance American interests (as the Beltway elite defines them) throughout the world.

Democrats, in particular, looking for some substitute to the brain-dead neoconservative policies that some of them were briefly enamored of when

President George W. Bush was Stockholm Syndroming them, are magnetically pulled to a concept that sounds like the first cousin to the dorm room philosophizing that so many of their kind indulged in during their formative years in the Ivy League.

“If we just explain our policies to them in the right way in a Facebook post, and maybe open an Apple Store in downtown ChiÈ™inÄfu, ordinary Moldovans will be clamoring to join NATO!”

It is surely preferable to think in this manner than to act like a warmongering troglodyte, even if some soft power ploys, like John Kerry bringing James “You’ve Got a Friend” Taylor to Paris to console them after a terrorist attack, seem frivolous if not embarrassing one can hardly picture Charles Francis Adams or George Kennan doing likewise.

Yet soft power, while less pernicious, still springs from the same roots as neoconservative militarism. It arises from the near-universal belief among the Beltway illuminati in American Exceptionalism, the fairy tale that the United States dwells outside the normal processes of history and has a duty as a global redeemer. It is what H.L. Mencken would have classified as “the bilge of American idealism,” and it ranks right up there with intelligent design and a conviction that real estate will always go up among the foolish things Americans have believed in.

Was the invasion of Iraq and the whole Bush-era nightmare really the polar opposite of what the soft power advocates wanted? With the fall of Baghdad, a military campaign that took only a month, the whole soft power apparatus swung into action: passing out soccer balls to children, rebuilding the municipal sewer system, and opening a Baghdad stock market on the assumption that the benighted Iraqi masses were pining for the fruits of American-style capitalism.

In 2015, vastly more Iraqis speak English than in 2003. The Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development spent \$50 billion in the country. Yet has all that money and all the cultural export of Americana accomplished anything? And could we not draw the identical conclusion about Afghanistan?

The whole soft power hallucination was born of the end of the Cold War in a particularly hubristic moment of American triumphalism. It was at that time that Francis Fukuyama wrote his extraordinarily silly discourse prophesying the end of history and the ushering in of a capitalist-consumerist utopia a kind of upside-down Marxist dialectic.

That is the fallacy at the heart of soft power: the belief that consumer goods,

or some latent yearning for a Disney-fied lifestyle, or some technological gimmick like Snapchat, will liberate the foreign masses yearning to breathe free.

In the 1990s, one could see the apotheosis of this mentality in the pontifications of The New York Times' Thomas Friedman, who claimed that no two countries that had McDonald's franchises would go to war with each other a thesis that has proven false several times. But one can see why Corporate America might love the idea of soft power as a way of selling Philadelphia cheese steaks in Burundi. They might even get an Export-Import Bank loan to facilitate peddling their wares because of the alleged diplomatic value.

We have seen the fruits of this delusion in the Middle East. Saddam's Iraq, a secular if tyrannical government, at least allowed unveiled women to attend university and beer to be served in outdoor cafes. Tariq Aziz, Saddam's longtime foreign minister, was a Chaldean Catholic. Iraq is now a far more dogmatically Muslim country than it was 15 years ago.

The same could apply to most of the Middle East: blue jeans, smartphones, and contact with Westerners did not make most Middle Eastern peoples more Western psychologically, it did just the opposite. The botched Washington reaction to the so-called Arab spring was a case in point: mesmerized by the fact that the Tahrir Square demonstrators used social media, Foggy Bottom could not quite grasp that the popular democracy demanded by the Cairo throng may have had little in common with the vision of democracy of Kennedy School of Government professors.

The fact that Saudi princes drive Bugatti Veyrons, own flats in Mayfair, and get their cholesterol checked at the Cleveland Clinic, does not stay them from lopping off the heads of those they deem miscreants or sorcerers at a record rate.

It is precisely the money grubbing, pop-culture aspect of American soft power that has made it such a hard sell in the Middle East. Sayyid Qutb, a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood in early post-World War II Egypt, attended university in Colorado, where he was repelled by what he saw as the rampant materialism and superficiality of American life. He went back to Egypt determined to reverse the growing Westernization of his country. So much for the Kumbaya effect of cultural exchange.

It is common for educated, progressive Americans to be appalled by the increasing intolerance of Muslim societies and their treatment of women, and to declare that these are broken, dysfunctional societies. There may be some validity in that judgment. But they ought to reflect that the antics of the

Kardashians, Duck Dynasty, and the World Wrestling Federation, not even to mention the candidacy of Donald Trump, do not exactly broadcast to the world the image of America as the Last, Best Hope of Mankind.

We should have known that dressing up the outer man in Gap clothing does not change the inner man. One of the most profoundly exotic societies in the Nineteenth Century, from a Western point of view, was Japan.

Yet in an amazingly short time, the Japanese adopted the outward, physical trappings of a Western society. Their naval personnel donned U.S. Navy-style uniforms and their officers grew addicted to playing bridge as if they were barnacle-encrusted old English seadogs at the Admiralty. Their diplomats strutted around in wing collars, frock coats, and top hats like any respectable gentleman at the Court of Saint James. They adopted the superficial accoutrements of parliamentary rule. The Japanese industrialized rapidly. Babe Ruth turned them into baseball fans.

Yet Japan simultaneously became a violently aggressive country whose militarism astonished the world. Parallel with its outward "Westernization," Japan's elites concocted a jingoistic Shinto emperor worship that was at once reactionary and yet new: an arresting analogue to the increasingly violent brands of Islam that have arisen in recent decades along with rising contact with the West. And these same Islamic fanatics, namely in ISIS, are now experts in social media, a talent that is giving the FBI director fits.

Soft power, the hula hoop craze of a segment of the national security establishment, is one more peculiar aspect of American parochialism and ethnocentrism, such as hewing to the English system of weights and measures, or the archaic use of a.m. and p.m. on airline schedules rather than the more rational 24-hour clock.

It is no substitute for traditional diplomacy that emphasizes horse-trading, reciprocity, and the fact that other countries just might, after all, have legitimate interests. A bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken is no suitable door prize for peoples whose sense of cultural pride could very well be as strong as our own.

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The West's Help to Islamic Jihadists

Though Western leaders now lock arms in disgust over Islamic fundamentalism, the West's actions from Ronald Reagan to Barack Obama have often promoted the interests of jihadists from Afghanistan in the 1980s to Iraq in the 2000s to Libya and Syria in the 2010s, as William Blum recalls.

By William Blum

After Paris, condemnation of religious fanaticism is at its height. I'd guess that even many progressives fantasize about wringing the necks of *jihadists*, bashing into their heads some thoughts about the intellect, about satire, humor, freedom of speech. We're talking here, after all, about young men raised in France, not Saudi Arabia.

Where has all this Islamic fundamentalism come from in this modern age? Most of it comes trained, armed, financed, indoctrinated from Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. During various periods from the 1970s to the present, these four countries had been the most secular, modern, educated, welfare states in the Middle East region. And what had happened to these secular, modern, educated, welfare states?

In the 1980s, the United States overthrew the Afghan government that was progressive, with full rights for women, believe it or not, leading to the creation of the Taliban and their taking power. [U.S. Department of the Army, *Afghanistan, A Country Study* (1986), pp.121, 128, 130, 223, 232]

In the 2000s, the United States overthrew the Iraqi government, destroying not only the secular state, but the civilized state as well, leaving a failed state.

In 2011, the United States and its NATO military machine overthrew the secular Libyan government of Muammar Gaddafi, leaving behind a lawless state and unleashing many hundreds of *jihadists* and tons of weaponry across the Middle East.

And for the past few years the United States has been engaged in overthrowing the secular Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad. This, along with the U.S. occupation of Iraq having triggered widespread Sunni-Shia warfare, led to the creation of The Islamic State with all its beheadings and other charming practices.

However, despite it all, the world was made safe for capitalism, imperialism, anti-communism, oil, Israel, and *jihadists*. God is Great!

Starting with the Cold War, and with the above interventions building upon that, we have 70 years of American foreign policy, without which as Russian/American writer Andre Vltchek has observed “almost all Muslim countries, including Iran, Egypt and Indonesia, would now most likely be socialist, under a group of very moderate and mostly secular leaders.” [*Counterpunch*, Jan. 10, 2015]

Even the ultra-oppressive Saudi Arabia without Washington’s protection would probably be a very different place.

On Jan. 11, Paris was the site of a March of National Unity in honor of the magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, whose journalists had been assassinated by terrorists. The march was rather touching, but it was also an orgy of Western hypocrisy, with the French TV broadcasters and the assembled crowd extolling without end the NATO world’s reverence for journalists and freedom of speech; an ocean of signs declaring *Je suis Charlie Nous Sommes Tous Charlie*; and flaunting giant pencils, as if pencils not bombs, invasions, overthrows, torture, and drone attacks have been the West’s weapons of choice in the Middle East during the past century.

No reference was made to the fact that the American military, in the course of its wars in recent decades in the Middle East and elsewhere, had been responsible for the deliberate deaths of dozens of journalists.

In Iraq, among other incidents, see *Wikileaks’* 2007 video of the cold-blooded murder of two *Reuters* journalists; the 2003 U.S. air-to-surface missile attack on the offices of *Al Jazeera* in Baghdad that left three journalists dead and four wounded; and the American firing on Baghdad’s Hotel Palestine the same year that killed two foreign cameramen.

Moreover, on Oct. 8, 2001, the second day of the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, the transmitters for the Taliban government’s *Radio Shari* were bombed and shortly after this the U.S. bombed some 20 regional radio sites. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld defended the targeting of these facilities, saying: “Naturally, they cannot be considered to be free media outlets. They are mouthpieces of the Taliban and those harboring terrorists.” [[Index on Censorship](#), the UK’s leading organization promoting freedom of expression, Oct. 18, 2001]

And in Yugoslavia, in 1999, during the infamous 78-day bombing of a country which posed no threat at all to the United States or any other country, state-owned *Radio Television Serbia* (RTS) was targeted because it was broadcasting *things which the United States and NATO did not like* (like how much horror the bombing was causing). The bombs took the lives of many of the station’s staff, and both legs of one of the survivors, which had to be amputated to free him

from the wreckage. [*The Independent* (London), April 24, 1999]

I present here some views on *Charlie Hebdo* sent to me by a friend in Paris who has long had a close familiarity with the publication and its staff:

“On international politics *Charlie Hebdo* was neoconservative. It supported every single NATO intervention from Yugoslavia to the present. They were anti-Muslim, anti-Hamas (or any Palestinian organization), anti-Russian, anti-Cuban (with the exception of one cartoonist), anti-Hugo ChÃ¡vez, anti-Iran, anti-Syria, pro-Pussy Riot, pro-Kiev Do I need to continue?

“Strangely enough, the magazine was considered to be ‘leftist’. It’s difficult for me to criticize them now because they weren’t ‘bad people’, just a bunch of funny cartoonists, yes, but intellectual freewheelers without any particular agenda and who actually didn’t give a fuck about any form of ‘correctness’ political, religious, or whatever; just having fun and trying to sell a ‘subversive’ magazine (with the notable exception of the former editor, Philippe Val, who is, I think, a true-blooded neocon).”

Remember Arseniy Yatsenuk? The Ukrainian whom U.S. State Department officials adopted as one of their own in early 2014 and guided into the position of Prime Minister so he could lead the Ukrainian Forces of Good against Russia in the new Cold War?

In an interview on German television on Jan. 7, 2015, Yatsenuk allowed the following words to cross his lips: “We all remember well the Soviet invasion of Ukraine and Germany. We will not allow that, and nobody has the right to rewrite the results of World War Two.”

The Ukrainian Forces of Good, it should be kept in mind, also include several neo-Nazis in high government positions and many more partaking in the fight against Ukrainian pro-Russians in the south-east of the country. Last June, Yatsenuk referred to these pro-Russians as “sub-humans,” directly equivalent to the Nazi term “*untermenschen*.” [[“Ukrainian Prime Minister Arseniy Yatsenyuk talking to Pinar Atalay”](#), Tagesschau (Germany), Jan. 7, 2015 (in Ukrainian with German voice-over)]

So the next time you shake your head at some stupid remark made by a member of the U.S. government, try to find some consolation in the thought that high American officials are not necessarily the dumbest, except of course in their choice of who is worthy of being one of the empire’s partners.

The type of rally held in Paris this month to condemn an act of terror by *ihadists* could as well have been held for the victims of Odessa in Ukraine last May. The same neo-Nazi types referred to above took time off from parading

around with their swastika-like symbols and calling for the death of Russians, Communists and Jews, and burned down a trade-union building in Odessa, killing scores of people and sending hundreds to hospital; many of the victims were beaten or shot when they tried to flee the flames and smoke; ambulances were blocked from reaching the wounded.

Try and find a single American mainstream media entity that has made even a slightly serious attempt to capture the horror. You would have to go to the Russian station in Washington, DC, RT.com, search "Odessa fire" for many stories, images and videos. Also see the [Wikipedia entry on the 2 May 2014 Odessa clashes](#).

If the American people were forced to watch, listen, and read all the stories of neo-Nazi behavior in Ukraine the past few years, I think they yes, even the American people and their less-than-intellectual Congressional representatives would start to wonder why their government was so closely allied with such people. The United States may even go to war with Russia on the side of such people.

L'Occident n'est pas Charlie pour Odessa. Il n'y a pas de d'œfil'œ Å Paris pour Odessa.

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The Problems with Being Charlie

It's one thing to decry all terrorism and defend the principle of free expression; it's another to show disproportionate concern for some victims over others and to embrace offensive or irresponsible media content, troubling issues from the Charlie Hebdo case, says ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar.

By Paul R. Pillar

The responses, outside as well as inside France, to the recent attacks in Paris have become a bigger phenomenon, at least as worthy of analysis and explanation, as the attacks themselves. This pattern is hardly unprecedented regarding reactions, [or overreactions](#), to terrorist incidents, but what has been going on over the past week exhibits several twists and dimensions that are especially

misleading or misdirected.

–*Scale of the attacks vs. scale of the reaction.* Seventeen people, not counting the perpetrators, died in the Paris incidents. With the usual caveat that the death of even a single innocent as a result of malevolently applied violence is a tragedy and an outrage, the response has been far out of proportion to the stimulus.

The magnitude of what the Paris attackers did was modest by the standards even of international terrorism, let alone by the standards of all malevolently applied violence or of political violence in general. By way of comparison, about the same time as the Paris attacks the Nigerian extremist group Boko Haram conducted a massacre in a town in which probably several hundred, and possibly as many as 2,000, died. The international attention to this incident was minuscule compared to the Paris story.

Of course anything disturbing that happens in a major Western capital is bound to get more attention than an even bloodier happening in a remote part of an African country. Probably another reason why press coverage of the Paris story was enormous from the beginning was that the target of the first attack was part of the media, and that *ipso facto* makes the story of greater interest to the press itself.

But much of what we have been seeing over the past week is an example of how public and political attention to something, regardless of what that something is, tends to feed on itself. Once a certain level of salience is reached and enough people are talking and writing about a subject or an event, then for that very reason other people start talking and writing about it too.

As the attention snowballs, political leaders feel obligated to weigh in and to appear responsive, regardless of their private assessment of whatever started the crescendo of public attention. Thus in the current instance even the White House feels obligated to answer for the President or Vice President of the United States not having flown off to join a crowd in Paris.

– *Consistency vs. inconsistency in upholding free speech.* With the initial attack being against the staff of a magazine, the whole story quickly became couched as one of upholding the right of free speech and freedom of the press (a particular reason for the interest of the press itself and thus the extensive coverage the press devoted to the story).

Lost sight of amid the swell of street-marching champions of such civil liberties is the inconsistency in getting so worked up about this one affront to free speech but not to others. Surely we ought to be worked up as much about

other, comparable limitations on free expression, especially when the power of the state is used to enforce those limitations. In France itself the state enforces a variety of such limitations, some of which might be offensive to those who were offended by what the magazine published, and some of which are apt to be offensive to other groups, often with criminal penalties attached.

Of course, glaring examples become even easier to find outside Western liberal democracies. One thinks, for example, of the outrageous blasphemy laws in Pakistan. And last Friday Saudi Arabia administered the first 50 of 1,000 lashes as part of the punishment of a human rights advocate accused of “insulting Islam” because he established an online forum for discussing matters of faith. Some international protest was heard in response, but nothing remotely comparable to the outpouring in Paris.

– *Right to free speech vs. responsibility in exercising that right.* The exerciser of free speech in question in Paris was a satirical magazine that seems to specialize in cartoons that are bound to offend a lot of people. It is fair to say that in the centuries of struggles for civil liberties, this is probably not one of the nobler vehicles for the cause. We are not talking Thomas Paine here.

What is that “je suis Charlie” stuff supposed to mean? That we are all dedicated to putting down religious prophets? With most rights also go responsibilities, and prudence in the exercise of those rights, with an honest effort to bear in mind the consequences of what one does or says. Responsible, prudent exercise of a right does nothing to diminish or compromise that right.

We in the United States should have had occasion to think hard about such matters recently with the episode involving a comedic Hollywood movie that offended the North Koreans, and ordinary North Koreans, not only the regime, were offended. If North Korea conducts computer sabotage against an American company, we certainly should strongly object to that. But we also might imagine how we would react if a North Korean film company, or any other film company for that matter, were to produce a movie with a plot centered around assassinating the President of the United States. We would understandably object, and it is unlikely that we would be discussing the issue primarily in terms of artistic freedom or a right of free speech.

– *Unity vs. disunity among world leaders.* That image of foreign leaders locking arms with French President Francois Hollande and each other suggests that they are of one mind about whatever they were marching down the avenue about. Don't believe it. It was a phony show of unity.

Each one of those leaders had his or her own reasons for being there, involving

politics back home as well as international politics, and not just to show solidarity and good will toward the French. This may have been most apparent with the graceless Benjamin Netanyahu, who rebuffed the French government's request for him to stay away rather than inserting his own agenda, but he was not unique in having an agenda. (Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas initially acceded to a similar French request for him to stay away, before Netanyahu's decision to crash the event made it politically necessary for him to come as well.)

If President Obama had attended, it mainly would have been to avoid subsequent political criticism at home for not having attended. That is a bad basis for deciding how to apportion the President's time.

– *Debate about Islam.* The Paris events have rekindled an old debate about whether the seeds of violent Islamist extremism can be found in the content of Islam itself. That debate had a surge a couple of decades ago when Samuel Huntington was writing about a clash of civilizations and about how Islam has "bloody borders." The debate gets a renewed surge whenever, say, Congressman Peter King says something on the subject or events such as those in Paris transpire. The debate will never be resolved.

The debate as commonly framed is not very useful because even if those who argue that the content of Islam explains the motivations of those who commit violent acts in its name were right, and they are more wrong than right, that would not take us very far toward any implied policy recommendations.

There still would be the fact that the great majority of adherents to the same religion are not violent and are not terrorists. There still would be nonviolent Islamist parties, movements and regimes to deal with, and there still would be large Muslim populations whose emotions and preferences would have to be taken into account.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt spoke the other day about the need for a reformation of Islam. Maybe he's right, but it certainly would not be up to Western governments to accomplish, push, or otherwise influence any such reformation. There probably isn't much else al-Sisi himself could do to accomplish it.

One of the essential policy-relevant points that Western governments do need to understand is that Islam provides a vocabulary for expressing a wide variety of ideologies (a fringe subset of which is used to justify violence).

Another essential point is that notwithstanding the very wide array of ideologies and objectives found under the banner of Islam, there is a widespread

sense of a single Muslim community or *umma*; what happens to one part of that community can become a grievance or inspiration for actions of another part, including a violent part.

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Savage Atrocity Reported in Nigeria

Exclusive: Islamist terrorists shocked the world with the killing of 17 people in Paris, but a possibly larger atrocity occurred a continent away in Nigeria where Boko Haram insurgents may have slaughtered as many as 2,000 in a remote village, reports Don North.

By Don North

With the world's attention centered on Paris last week as terrorists killed 17 people, Boko Haram militants may have slaughtered as many as 2,000 people in assaults on Baga, a remote village of 10,000 in the northeast corner of Nigeria's Borno State on the shores of Lake Chad.

Yet, the Baga massacre prompted few protests, editorials, condemnations or much notice from world leaders – and not even a rebuke from the ineffectual Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, who sent his condolences to the French but made no comment on the Boko Haram atrocities.

Instead, President Jonathan's chief spokesman for the Nigerian Department of Defense downplayed the shocking reports, apparently for political reasons because of the upcoming elections just five weeks away in which Jonathan's handling of the Boko Haram insurgency is a central issue.

At a press conference in the Nigerian capital of Abuja, the spokesman, Major General Chris Olukolade, declared that no more than 150 persons, including many Boko Haram insurgents, were killed in the Baga fighting. "Unfortunately, the figure of 2,000 killed is now being bandied about in the media as if it has been authenticated. It cannot be true," Olukolade said.

Given Baga's remoteness and the dangers facing journalists and human rights investigators who venture into Boko Haram territory hard evidence of the massacre has been difficult to secure, with information mostly coming from

terrified refugees fleeing the area and from generally unreliable government sources.

But Amnesty International, decrying Boko Haram's "deadliest act," reported that as many as 2,000 soldiers and civilians were killed in two raids on Baga by insurgents armed with assault rifles and grenade launchers. Amnesty International said most of the dead were women, children and the elderly who could not flee in time.

A CNN report cited information from residents and local authorities who described attacks starting on Jan. 3 and continuing throughout the weekend, with the Islamist militants spraying bullets as they arrived in trucks and armored vehicles. Boko Haram fighters on motorcycles then pursued residents who fled into the bush, firing indiscriminately, CNN reported.

Hundreds of bodies were reported strewn in Baga's streets and adjacent jungle after the raids, with people who hid in their homes burned alive.

BBC cited Muhammad Abba Gava, a spokesman for a vigilante group that fights Boko Haram, as saying his group gave up on trying to count all the bodies. "No one could attend to the corpses and even the seriously injured ones who may have died by now," he said, adding: "The human carnage perpetrated by Boko Haram terrorists in Baga was enormous."

A multinational military base was located in Baga, but days before the attack the troops from Cameroon, Niger and Chad withdrew with no explanation, leaving only the Nigerian Army defending the village and soon routed by the attacks.

Military hardware abandoned at the base was reportedly seized by the insurgents and when reinforcements did not arrive, Boko Haram attacked again last Wednesday targeting the remaining residents. Even civilian vigilante groups that have recently been effective against the insurgents were overwhelmed, according to reports.

In Geneva on Tuesday, the United Nations Humanitarian Affairs Office estimated that 11,320 Nigerians have fled the Baga area since the attacks and taken refuge in neighboring Chad.

History of Division

Nigeria, an oil-rich western African nation of 174 million people, is divided by extreme disparities in wealth as well as by religion with a mostly Christian south and Muslim north. Over the past few months, Nigeria's economy also has been reeling due to the collapse of oil prices.

While the conflict between the Nigerian government and the Boko Haram rebels has received only spotty attention from the world's news media, the one exception was the global outrage last April over Boko Haram's kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok. Though more than 50 escaped, the fate of the rest has remained a mystery even as their plight was highlighted by international women's rights advocates, including U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama.

According to some reports, the girls who remained captives may have been separated and hidden in the remote Boko Haram base in the Sambisa forest or across the border in Chad and Cameroon.

I recently spent several months as a visiting professor of journalism at the American University of Nigeria in Yola, just a few hours drive from the frontlines of the conflict. Using sources from the database in the AUN library as well as consulting several of Nigeria's more responsible newspapers, local security advisers and diplomatic sources I was able to trace the history of the Muslim fundamentalist group Boko Haram back to its origins 34 years ago.

Its genesis began with a handful of Muslim clerics who followed the extremist Islam of the Saudi Arabian Wahhabis and Salafists. Boko Haram morphed slowly into its form today feeding on the poverty and illiteracy of northern Nigeria to form its ideology of fundamentalism and hatred. Nigeria also has a long history of religious strife.

Some of the most virulent conflicts were those stirred up by Muhammad Marwa, a Muslim preacher from Cameroon who settled in Kano, a large city in north-central Nigeria, and attracted many followers. Marwa's objective was the purification of Islam and establishing Sharia law. He raged against Western education and its products.

His bitter condemnation of the Nigerian state led to him being known as Maitatsine, a Hausa word for "he who damns." In 1982, a government crackdown on Maitatsine and his followers led to violent riots that killed some 4,000 residents of Kano, including Maitatsine. But his movement lived on and in the following year resulted in continued riots in which 1,000 more were killed.

The mantle of Maitatsine was picked up by a charismatic preacher named Mohammed Yusuf in Maidiguri, capital of the Borno state. He had studied in Saudi Arabia and demanded justice for the poor through Sharia law. He was well-educated, spoke English and lived lavishly with four wives and drove a Mercedes-Benz. Yusuf was often arrested, but always released through the intervention of politically powerful friends.

A spellbinding speaker, Yusuf denounced modern ideas of evolution, round earth

and even the evaporation of water. His group, fashioned after Afghanistan's Taliban, began to be referred to by Nigerian journalists as Boko Haram, which translates as "Western education is forbidden," because of the group's rejection of the West's ideas.

The most recent spark for violence between Boko Haram and the government came in late 2009 when police watching a funeral procession through the streets of Maiduguri saw many mourners riding motorcycles without helmets which was a rule the police were determined to enforce. Boko Haram members resisted, as one must remove traditional Islamic caps to wear a helmet. The police attacked the funeral procession to arrest those not wearing helmets. Three died. Riots erupted.

A few days later, the police surrounded Yusuf's compound, arrested him and took him to the station. To make sure Yusuf was not released again by his supporters, he was executed. In the days following Yusuf's murder, riots continued and the police killed many of his followers including family members, racking up a death toll of over 1,000. The aftermath of Yusuf's murder was captured on a cell phone video and broadcast over northern Nigeria, assuring his status as a martyr and giving impetus to Boko Haram.

Yusuf had initially believed that an Islamic state based on Sharia law could be achieved without violence. His deputy and successor, Abubakar Shekau, argued that success would require an armed struggle and the group increasingly resorted to the murder of their critics and opponents. He normally communicates through videos speaking in Hausa and Arabic and the occasional English phrase. In one of his public videos he said, "I enjoy killing anyone God commands me to kill the way I enjoy killing chickens and rams."

Military/Political Failures

The flames of the terrorist insurgency are being fed by a failure of Nigerian security forces, the army and police to effectively stem the violence. The once respected Nigerian military forces are often blamed for ineffective battles with the insurgents, but demoralized Nigerian soldiers claim they lack food and ammunition and are often outnumbered and outgunned by Boko Haram. Over one hundred Nigerian Army officers and men are awaiting death sentences by firing squad for alleged mutiny and desertion.

Seventy percent of Borno State is now controlled by Boko Haram and the insurgents' occupation of villages surrounding the state capital city Maiduguri is now complete, putting Boko Haram in position to press an attack on Maiduguri, a city of over 1 million and recently home to many of the 1.6 million refugees displaced by Boko Haram.

The insurgents are believed to want Maiduguri as their capital of a new Caliphate state because of its central role in the founding of Boko Haram last decade. It has a largely Muslim population but also a substantial Christian community.

Bishop Oliver Dashe Doeme, the Catholic Bishop of Maiduguri, has been a reliable source of information for me on Boko Haram and the siege of his city. The Bishop regularly visits villages decimated by Boko Haram. He also has been an outspoken critic of the Nigerian Army and President Goodluck Jonathan.

Contact with Maiduguri is difficult as there are only a few hours of electric power each day and Internet communication is intermittent. But the Bishop sent me the following e-mail: "We thank God that we are able to reach the new year among the living. I celebrated new year masses in Mubi (a village recently captured by Boko Haram) and good number of our members have come back. I was amazed by the faith of our people. In all the parishes I went, people came out in great numbers to welcome me.

"But the Boko Haram members are still on the rampage. You have heard what happened in Baga. Even though the group has been repelled one wonders for how long we will continue like this. Yet, we trust that God will not let his children down. He is our ultimate hope. We trust that one day God will put an end to this terrorism."

Bishop Dashe has organized a program of aid and rehabilitation for the hundreds of widows and orphans of those killed in Baga and other villages under siege by Boko Haram.

"The widows suffer a lot once the husbands are gone," says Bishop Dashe. "Our major target is to help them take care of their children, for many of them are left with six to ten children with no work and they need assistance."

The Baga attack was not the only terrorist atrocity in Nigeria last week. On Saturday, in the main Maiduguri market, a girl around ten years old had explosives detonated that were strapped around her body, killing 16 and injuring 27. It is not known if she triggered the explosion herself or if it was remotely detonated by others nearby.

To the west of Borno in Yobe State, two female suicide bombers rode three-wheeled bikes into the market in Potiskum and detonated explosive vests killing five and injuring more than 40. In November, another female suicide bomber killed 48 young boys in a Potiskum school.

Boko Haram has recently sent scores of women as suicide bombers into areas where crowds gather. They are believed to be the women taken prisoner in raids by the

insurgents and children of Boko Haram insurgents. Although it has not yet been proven, some of the female bombers may be girls kidnapped from a school in Chibok last April.

Anger at Washington

Tensions in the U.S.-Nigeria relationship are at their highest level in years. Western diplomatic sources in the Nigerian capital Abuja told me a vigorous U.S. response to Nigerian requests for aid in tracking the kidnapped Chibok girls was apparently thwarted when "actionable intelligence" from drone flights was turned over to Nigerian military commanders but ignored.

The lack of response was blamed on mutual mistrust between U.S. and Nigerian officials. American military officers did not include raw intelligence data because they believed that Boko Haram had infiltrated the Nigerian security services.

Fifty U.S. Army Special Forces trainers started work last July with a battalion of Nigerian Army troops, most of them recruits who were not associated with the army's questionable human rights record. But after several months training and before the troops started training with "crew served weapons," the training was halted as it could not be decided who would supply the weapons.

After an impasse of two months, the U.S. sent an official letter to the Nigerian government suggesting the training be resumed. The result: the American team was ordered to leave Nigeria.

Nigerian government officials angered by what they say is a lack of American military aid despite U.S. promises are reported to have sought training for their troops from Russian Special Forces. A deal for 12 attack helicopters is being negotiated by the Nigerian government with the Czech Republic and Belarus.

France, Britain and the U.S. had been Nigeria's main military partners, but gradually backed off from Nigeria's quirky and corrupt military which could be prickly about meeting conditions for military assistance, giving Western trainers full access to military bases and improving their human rights record.

James Hall, a retired Colonel and former U.K military attaché, recently told the BBC that the sale of military equipment to Nigeria is prohibited by U.K. law because of the army's human rights abuses. Similarly in the U.S., the Leahy Amendment is a human rights law sponsored by Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont that prohibits providing military aid to units violating human rights "with impunity."

Presidential Election

The Baga attacks come just five weeks before Nigerian presidential elections which are likely to lead to more bloodshed and thus further threaten the country's stability. The election is scheduled for Feb. 14 with the incumbent Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) led by President Jonathan, a southern Christian, facing General Muhammadu Buhari, a northern Muslim of the All Progressive Congress (APC).

The PDP has won every election since Nigeria went from military to democratic rule in 1999, but the APC formed last year from a coalition of opposition parties, now threatens that dominance.

In the last election in 2011, violence left more than 800 people dead in the 12 northern states. There are indications that this year's campaign could see severe violence as well. Illegal weapons are flooding the country and many politicians have armed their supporters.

Analysts also say the contest will be close with President Jonathan vulnerable over his handling of Nigeria's endemic corruption and his inability to counter Boko Haram's violence.

On the campaign trail, opposition candidate Buhari recently asked, "Shall we continue in a situation where 250 of our daughters have been abducted and the government has been unable to rescue them or provide credible information about what steps they are taking?"

Last week, two campaign buses adorned with photos of President Jonathan were set ablaze by angry youths in Jos, a large city in central Nigeria.

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Behind the War with Boko Haram

Exclusive: Last April, much of the world was horrified when the Boko Haram rebels of northern Nigeria kidnapped more than 200 schoolgirls and vowed to marry them off. But the violence in Africa's richest country has a complex back story of religion, ignorance, corruption and injustice, as Don North explains.

By Don North

Nowhere in northern Nigeria is there a bolder symbol of Western values and education concepts that the militant Boko Haram rebels have vowed to eradicate than the American University of Nigeria in Yola of the northeast Adamawa State.

With the U.S. and Nigerian flags flying side by side, AUN is a modern university for 1,500 mostly African students and a faculty from over 30 nations set amid desperate poverty and a population with an estimated 80 percent illiteracy rate. It is also a campus near the frontline of a worsening conflict that threatens this fragile foothold of advanced learning in Nigeria, an oil-rich western African nation of 174 million people divided by extreme disparities in wealth as well as by religion with a mostly Christian south and Muslim north.

AUN is just a few hours drive from the war between the Nigerian military and the Muslim fundamentalist Boko Haram, which translates as “Western education is forbidden.”

It’s hard not to miss the analogy of the phrase “barbarians at the gate” coined by the citizens of the ancient Roman Empire when Attila the Hun and his Mongol hordes camped in the suburbs preparing a siege after having laid waste to much of Europe.

In the two months since I have been a visiting professor of journalism at AUN, I have watched with some concern as graphic maps bleeding red ink indicate the steady expansion of Boko Haram. There are almost daily reports of attacks on schools and colleges by suicide bombers and the killings of teachers.

Since 2004, the most reliable survey of deaths due to both Nigerian government and Boko Haram operations to date is 25,322. It is estimated Boko Haram now occupies 20 percent of Nigerian territory mostly in the three northwest states, a land mass the size of Maryland and a population of more than two million. Boko Haram has declared the captured territory part of an Islamic Caliphate with its capital Gwoza, Borno State.

Just 90 miles to AUN’s north, Boko Haram captured the village of Mubi after routing the 234th Nigerian Army infantry, which fled over the Cameroon border. But the frontlines of the conflict have been fluid, with Mubi retaken this week by a mixed force of local vigilantes, hunters from neighboring villages and Nigerian security forces.

Meanwhile, Boko Haram reportedly overran the mostly Christian town of Chibok about 120 miles north of the AUN campus. Since Friday evening, there has been no contact with Chibok’s residents as it is believed the insurgents cut down cell phone towers as they do in captured villages.

Spotty Attention

While the conflict between the Nigerian government and the Boko Haram rebels has received only spotty attention from the world's news media, the one exception was the global outrage in April over Boko Haram's kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok. Though more than 50 escaped, the fate of the rest has remained a mystery even as their plight was highlighted by international women's rights advocates, including U.S. First Lady Michelle Obama. The case became the subject of the Twitter hash tag, "Bring Back Our Girls."

According to some reports, the girls who remained captives may have been separated and hidden in the remote Boko Haram base in the Sambisa forest or across the border in Chad and Cameroon.

Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau announced his intention to sell the captives into slavery and, in a recent video, indicated that he had "married them off." He also claimed that more than 100 of the mostly Christian girls had converted to Islam.

The Nigerian government's response to the kidnapping led to widespread criticism of President Goodluck Jonathan. For 19 days after the mass abduction, the government didn't appear to have noticed. Then, President Jonathan accused unnamed northern political enemies of being behind Boko Haram and the abduction. To confuse matters more, the President's wife Patience accused the girls' parents of inventing the abduction to embarrass her husband.

A report issued by Human Rights Watch in Abuja, the Nigerian capital, recently gave a harrowing account of the insurgents treatment of a growing number of captured girls, now estimated to exceed 500 since the insurgency began in 2009.

In interviews with 30 of the abduction victims including some Chibok girls, HRW wrote that the insurgent captors regularly rape and abuse them, force religious conversions and marriage on some, and force others to support fighters in combat by carrying arms and ammunition.

Bring Back Our Girls

American University of Nigeria President Margee Ensign, a veteran educator from Sacramento, California, has been an active advocate of the "#Bring Back Our Girls" international campaign to find and free the Chibok prisoners. She established a foundation to launch "#Educate Our Girls," a fund to bring 58 of the girls who escaped from Boko Haram captivity to AUN for an education.

A few months ago, Ensign and AUN's chief of security Lionel Rawlins, a former U.S. Marine, made a dangerous drive north through Boko Haram-controlled territory to bring 15 of the girls back to the AUN campus at Yola.

Ensign has strong views on how to defeat Boko Haram. "Terrorism thrives where hope and opportunity languish, and the escaped Chibok girls now studying at AUN are a strong reminder of the transformative power of education," she said. "Education may be scary for the thousands of Nigerians who are afraid to send their children to school. A society without education is even scarier."

The Nigerian founder of AUN, Atiku Abubaker, a philanthropist and former vice president of Nigeria, has promised to bankroll the education of other girls who escape the clutches of Boko Haram. Abubakar is a candidate for president in 2015, running on the opposition All Progressive Congress (APC) ticket.

Atiku Abubaker's is a classic Horatio Alger story set in Nigeria. The barefoot poor orphan met a group of U.S. Peace Corps teachers in Yola and got an American education. Abubaker parlayed that education into a career in Nigerian politics and making a fortune in the oil industry.

Though the fury about last April's mass kidnapping has subsided lost amid other international crises and outrages Boko Haram has continued to commit atrocities. After storming the village of Garta near the border with Cameroon on Oct. 23, Boko Haram slit the throats of village men and boys and abducted 60 more women.

AUN has its own security force of 350 security guards trained and led by Rawlins. But tensions run high amid rumors of Boko Haram advances. The military has declared a 9:00 p.m. curfew in Yola, where there are only a few government-operated refugee camps to handle the estimated 100,000 who have fled insurgent attacks. Most refugees are crammed into homes of their relatives, sometimes ten or more to a room.

In Yola, there are now massive traffic jams and often long lines at banks and gas stations. The Christian churches and the Muslim mosques work in concert to distribute food to the destitute refugees. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), 700,000 people have been displaced externally and internally by the conflict.

None of my students have fled the campus in fear, nor have they been cringing behind their ivory towers, instead immersing themselves in the pressing concerns of the community. AUN students help hand out basic food supplies purchased by religious charities, the U.S. Embassy in Nigeria and USAID.

American Concerns

The Nigerian government recently reported seeking arms purchases from South Africa and the Czech Republic, charging that the U.S. government had blocked

arms orders for the Nigerian Army. Since then it was widely reported in the media here that Americans were undermining the country's war on terrorism.

But U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria James Entwistle chose the American University of Nigeria as the site to reassure Nigerians of U.S. support in their struggle against Boko Haram. Entwistle, a seasoned State Department Africa hand, denied Nigerian press reports that the United States is not doing enough to contain Boko Haram.

"I disagree completely with these headlines," he said. "We are currently training an infantry battalion of Nigerian troops, who when their training is complete will deploy to the northeast to fight Boko Haram."

Entwistle, while reaffirming U.S. support, cautioned that human rights abuses by the Nigerian forces were a consideration affecting Nigeria's requests for arms: "The kind of question we have to ask is will it be used in a way that affects the human situation. If I approve, I'm responsible for that. We take that responsibility very seriously."

Ambassador Entwistle admonished Nigeria not to think the war against Boko Haram could be won by buying high-tech equipment. To achieve results, he said the country must take the welfare and behavior of its troops more seriously.

Entwistle also admitted there were still open questions about Boko Haram: "Who are these guys and what do they want? I don't think we really understand them."

He observed that Boko Haram had gone from being a small insurgent group with a couple of guns to a very effective conventional force: "An open question we have to look at carefully is where is the military expertise coming from? How in the last year did they become more effective."

These are questions being asked throughout Nigeria today as Boko Haram fighters expand their area of influence capturing a string of towns and villages in Borno state. At the same time, the Nigerian government appeared to have been hoodwinked when officials announced negotiating a ceasefire with Boko Haram in secret meetings in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Boko Haram leader Abubaker Shekau ridiculed the government in a video. Appearing in combat fatigues and standing before a background of armored cars mounted with anti-aircraft guns, which the insurgents have been using lately in ground assaults, Shekau said, "We have not made ceasefire with anyone. It is a lie. We will not negotiate."

Behind Boko Haram

Accurate reports of Boko Haram successes are difficult to confirm as the insurgents announce occupations of territory and the Nigerian Army denies it. Nigerian journalists are not allowed to embed with Nigerian forces and few reporters venture into disputed territory to observe firsthand. The resulting confusion, contradictions and lurid rumors printed in much of the Nigerian press have left the populace confused and indifferent.

One source I have found reliable is the Catholic Bishop of Maiduguri, Borno State, Oliver Dashe. By email the Bishop has confirmed to me that at least 60 villages and more than 20 towns are currently occupied by Boko Haram. He estimates more than 30,000 refugees are crammed into Maiduguri, a city of about 1 million, with another 40,000 hiding across the border in Cameroon.

With recent advances, Boko Haram rebels have virtually encircled Maiduguri. In skirmish after skirmish, the insurgents have simply walked in, seized and plundered towns, killed men and boys and kidnapped the women. The poorly armed government security forces often flee, not willing to stand and die for a nation whose legitimacy is widely seen as compromised by the corruption of its elites. Because of scorched-earth policies and human rights violations, the Nigerian army and police are often feared as much as Boko Haram.

Contributing to the crisis is the fact that many military officers are political appointees, whose promotions are based on ethnicity and loyalty to politicians, not on their ability as warriors.

"The refugees are being neglected," said Bishop Oliver Dashe. "Many corrupt government officials never pass on food, clothing and relief supplies to them and many end up dying of hunger and disease."

The Catholic bishop considers the Nigerian Army part of the problem instead of the solution. "Many Boko Haram sympathizers in the military dish out information on Army plans to sect members," he claimed. "Some times funds for junior officers such as allowances, upkeep and arms purchase go into private pockets. The government must deal with the corrupt officers."

The Bishop confirmed that Boko Haram has obtained armored tanks, personnel carriers, rocket launchers and anti-tank weapons. These high-tech weapons are presumed to have come from Nigerian or Cameroon armories, stolen or supplied by Boko Haram sympathizers in the military.

Unreliable Sources

The outspoken bishop has also been critical of the government of President Goodluck Jonathan. "The inaction of the government and their silence is very disturbing," he wrote. "There is a disconnection between what our so-called

leaders in Abuja [the capital] report in the media and the reality on the ground.”

While the Bishop said Boko Haram has killed many Muslims, he placed their goal as Islamicizing northeast Nigeria and said the movement has “an international face and connections.”

Much of Nigeria’s news media is itself divided along ethnic lines and, outside of a handful of responsible news outlets, is addicted to lurid allegations and dark conspiracy theories. Some even portray Boko Haram as a government plot to destroy the largely Muslim north, while others suspect northern politicians are secretly supporting the insurgents to discredit President Jonathan, a southerner and Christian.

The presidential elections scheduled for February 2015 may prove to be the most bitterly contested since Nigeria returned to civilian rule in 1999. Conducting free-and-fair elections that the government has promised will impose additional strains on the security forces and providing election security could require drawing troops from the north, giving Boko Haram an advantage.

The danger presented by Boko Haram extends far beyond Nigeria, which although a troubled state is the most populous and wealthiest in Africa. Boko Haram may have regional ambitions. A consolidation of its successes in Nigeria’s three northeastern states would give Boko Haram a strategic springboard to invade neighboring Niger, Cameroon and Chad weak states that would have difficulty surviving a serious siege.

Investigating the History

Using sources from the database in the library of the American University of Nigeria as well as consulting several of Nigeria’s more responsible newspapers, local security advisers and diplomatic sources I have traced Boko Haram to its origins 34 years ago.

Its genesis began with a handful of Muslim clerics who followed the extremist Islam of the Saudi Arabian Wahhabis and Salafists. Boko Haram morphed slowly into its form today feeding on the poverty and illiteracy of northern Nigeria to form its ideology of fundamentalism and hatred. Poverty-stricken and disillusioned youth believing they had nothing to lose began to huddle under the black jihadi flag.

Nigeria also has a long history of religious conflict. Some of the most virulent were those stirred up by Muhammad Marwa, a Muslim preacher from Cameroon who settled in Kano, a large city in north-central Nigeria, and attracted a large group of followers. Marwa’s objective was the purification of Islam and

establishing Sharia law. He raged against Western education and its products.

His bitter condemnation of the Nigerian state led to him being known as Maitatsine, a Hausa word for "he who damns." He became close to declaring that he, not Mohammad, was Allah's true prophet.

In 1982, a government crackdown on Maitatsine and his followers led to violent riots that killed some 4,000 residents of Kano, including Maitatsine. But his movement lived on and in the following year resulted in continued riots in which 1,000 more were killed.

The mantle of Maitatsine was picked up by a charismatic preacher named Mohammed Yusuf in Maidiguri, capital of the Borno state. He had studied in Saudi Arabia and demanded justice for the poor through Sharia law. He was well-educated, spoke English and lived lavishly with four wives and drove a Mercedes-Benz. Yusuf was often arrested, but always released through the intervention of politically powerful friends.

A spellbinding speaker, Yusuf denounced modern ideas of evolution, round earth and even the evaporation of water. His group, fashioned after Afghanistan's Taliban, began to be referred to by Nigerian journalists as Boko Haram because of the group's rejection of Western education.

Touching Off Violence

The most recent spark for violence between Boko Haram and the government came in late 2009 when police watching a funeral procession through the streets of Maidiguri saw many mourners riding motorcycles without helmets which was a rule the police were determined to enforce.

Boko Haram members resisted, as one must remove traditional Islamic caps to wear a helmet. The police attacked the funeral procession to arrest those not wearing helmets. Three died. Riots erupted.

A few days later, the police surrounded Yusuf's compound, arrested him and took him to the station. To make sure Yusuf was not released again by his supporters, he was executed. In the days following Yusuf's murder, riots continued and the police killed many of his followers including family members, racking up a death toll of over 1,000. The aftermath of Yusuf's murder was captured on a cell phone video and broadcast over northern Nigeria, assuring his status as a martyr and giving impetus to Boko Haram.

Yusuf had initially believed that an Islamic state based on Sharia law could be achieved without violence. His deputy and successor, Abubaker Shekau, argued that success would require an armed struggle and the group increasingly

resorted to the murder of their critics and opponents.

The Nigerian security forces thought Shekau had been killed at the same time as Yusuf and other Boko Haram followers, until he appeared in videos several months later. However, as late as the end of 2012, Shekau had not been seen in person since the day Yusuf died three years earlier. He normally communicates through videos speaking in Hausa and Arabic and the occasional English phrase. In one of his public videos he said, "I enjoy killing anyone God commands me to kill the way I enjoy killing chickens and rams."

Nigerian security analyst Abdullah Abubaker said, "Shekau is now one of the world's most wanted men with a price of 7 million US dollars on his head. He's a fearless loner, complex, paradoxical, part-theologian, part gangster. Since he took over Boko Haram has become more radical with more killings."

As a person and a leader Shekau is swathed in myth, but not charisma. He is no Lenin, Mao or Castro.

Medieval Practices

The rise of Boko Haram has heightened the state of insecurity in Nigeria with the increasing incidence of deadly bomb attacks on police forces, government officials, places of worship, public institutions and innocent civilians, even in the Nigerian capital Abuja.

The flames of terrorist insurgency are being fed by a failure of Nigerian security forces, the army and police to effectively stem the violence. The violence is fed, too, by endemic corruption and military brutality, continued economic challenges, high levels of poverty, illiteracy and inaccurate reporting by most newspapers, government spokesmen and the military.

Boko Haram's main base of operations is believed to be a large tract of jungle and scrub vegetation called the Sambisa forest near the Nigerian border with Cameroon. There are no roads in or out of the hideout.

Although Boko Haram cling to tactics and philosophies not seen since the Middle Ages, their one exception is the production of videos and distribution through Western social media, particularly Facebook YouTube.

The few insights on their operations are glimpsed in these videos produced by a special production crew. They are closely watched by Nigerian security forces even though Boko Haram is suspected of manipulating and falsifying some of the videos they produce. Sanitized versions recently seen on YouTube are still chillingly brutal and reminiscent of medieval rituals of punishment.

Slick Video

A new video showing the beheading of a captured Nigerian Air Force pilot is clear and well produced compared to earlier grainy and low-resolution productions. The video shows a man kneeling in a camouflage vest with his hand in a sling. A Boko Haram soldier hovers over him with an axe which is later used in the beheading.

Speaking in English, the captive identified himself as a Wing Commander in the Nigerian Air Force and said he had been on a mission over Borno State when his jet was brought down.

"We were shot down and our aircraft crashed," he said. "To this day I don't know the whereabouts of my second pilot." The video also showed burned aircraft parts with Nigerian military markings apparently signaling the insurgents' ability to shoot down military planes. Although the Nigerian Air Force acknowledged an Alpha jet aircraft missing on Sept. 11, they denied the man apparently beheaded was the pilot.

However, friends of the executed pilot have posted his photo in the cockpit of a fighter bomber at Yola Air Base on Facebook on the page titled Nigeria Army Support Group. They identified him as Wing Commander Chimda Himeda.

In one of the videos, scenes of strict Sharia law being carried out are featured in new Boko Haram territory. A man and woman accused of adultery are stoned to death, and there are additional beheadings in front of the black jihadist flag. The crowd chants "Allahu Akbar" as the whippings and stoning increase in tempo or as the axe falls on necks.

Combat Footage

One older video that clearly shows Boko Haram's attitude in combat begins with a pep talk by the commander. "You should look for victory or martyrdom," he says. "A martyr knows he is going to die, knows there are enemies, but goes to the battlefield anyway, without fear of death because he loves God and knows God will smile on him."

The attack begins at dawn. Hundreds of Boko Haram are videotaped walking through the bush. They begin firing AK-47's. When they receive return fire, they do not change pace or even look for cover. They keep walking almost casually into the fusillade.

Bullets whistle over the cameraman's head. "Allahu Akbar," he shouts continually as around him fighters are being cut down.

Suddenly the camera goes down on its side. “They’ve killed me,” says a voice presumed to be the cameraman.

It is that sort of fanaticism that makes Boko Haram such a threat to Nigerians who hope for a future of education and modernity. Ready to die for their cause, the Boko Haram rebels are a difficult foe to either engage in peace talks or defeat.

Yet, beyond the danger from Boko Haram, there is also the ineptness of the government, as noted by one widely trusted Nigerian, Wole Soyinka, a playwright and poet, a winner of the Nobel prize for literature in 1986.

“This is a government which is not only in denial mentally, but in denial about certain obvious steps to be taken,” Soyinka recently wrote. “It’s not only the President and his advisors, it’s a certain section of the nation, some of whom enjoy for various reasons a nation in a state of chaos. They profit by it, and in fact some are guilty of provoking the situation. The international community must come to the rescue of Nigeria, as the government has failed the people.

“It is not just a Nigerian problem. ... This is a global problem.”

Don North is a former war correspondent in Vietnam and the Middle East for ABC and NBC News. He is currently visiting Professor of Journalism at the American University of Nigeria, Yola. He is the director of Northstar Productions, Inc. in Fairfax, Virginia, and author of the recently published *Inappropriate Conduct: Mystery of a disgraced war correspondent*. The opinions in this article are those of author Don North and do not necessarily reflect the opinion or views of the American University of Nigeria.

Standing in an Adversary’s Shoes

Americans are notoriously disinterested in history, preferring to focus on the present and often reacting to the latest crisis. But the past can teach important lessons including the need to understand an adversary’s perspective and to avoid unnecessary conflicts, as ex-U.S. diplomat William R. Polk explains.

By William R. Polk

Months before the Cuban Missile Crisis was upon us, I made a tour of Turkey. There I visited a U.S. Air Force base where 12 fighter-bombers were on “ready

alert." Of those two were always on "hair trigger alert," with engines running and with the pilots sitting in the cockpits. Poised for take-off, each was armed with a one-megaton bomb and programmed for a target in the Soviet Union.

Nearby, on the Black Sea at Samsun, I watched on radar planes from an RAF squadron probing Soviet air defenses in the Crimea. And elsewhere in Anatolia, in supposedly secret locations, a group of American "Jupiter" missiles was aimed, armed and ready to be fired.

Were these weapons defensive or offensive? That is, were they a threat to the Soviet Union or a defense of the "Free World." My colleagues in the American government thought they were defensive. They were part of our "deterrent." We had put them there to protect ourselves, not to threaten the Russians.

The Russians thought otherwise. So, in response, they decided to station some of their missiles in Cuba. Their strategists believed that in balancing ours on their frontier, theirs on our frontier also were defensive. We thought otherwise. We regarded their move as unquestionably offensive and nearly went to war to get them to remove their missiles.

At a "few minutes to midnight," we both came to our senses: we stood down our Jupiters and the Russians removed their weapons from Cuba.

The first lesson to be learned in this near catastrophe was *try to understand the opponent's point of view*. Knowing what the other person thinks is always sensible – as we know and act in daily life – even if one does not believe that the other person is right or even if one does not intend to be guided by what he discovers. Unfortunately, as history teaches us, this is a lesson rarely applied in foreign affairs.

As I pointed out in the months before the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Russians had a point: the missiles we had in Turkey were obsolescent. They were to be propelled by liquid fuel. That form of fuel required several minutes to be ignited. If they were to be used, they had to take off before Soviet missiles or aircraft could destroy them on the ground. That, in turn, meant that they could only be "first strike" weapons. By definition, a first strike is "offensive."

I urged that we get them out of Turkey. We did not do so. Our military considered them an integral part of our strategic defense. We left them there until the Russians put their missiles into Cuba. Then, we took them out. We got rid of ours only when they got rid of theirs. So, in a sense, the Missile Crisis was tit-for-tat. I thought that was a very foolish way to endanger the world!

Another Lesson

There was another lesson to be learned from the Missile Crisis. Our strategy and the Soviet strategy both assumed that the leaders of each state were not only fully informed but also rational. Being *rational*, they would not actually do what they *knew* would completely destroy the world.

Neither we nor the Russians accurately then pin-pointed how a confrontation was likely to happen. We both just assumed that "the delicate balance of terror" would be maintained short of actual combat. That was the ultimate gamble. Was the gamble sensible?

I was convinced that it was not. What it did, I thought, was to confuse two very different motivations. This was and may again be crucial to our survival so let me make it clear.

Obviously, both we and the Russians were in part motivated by "interest of state." That is, neither side wanted its country to be destroyed. Our strategy of mutual deterrence aimed to protect our country; that was the aim of even the most bellicose of the nuclear hawks.

While they sneered at the slogan "better Red than Dead," they secretly were influenced by it and assumed that its opposite form influenced the Russians. They were right. Their counterparts in the Soviet system, as I learned during later meetings with my Russian counterparts at the Soviet Academy of Science, shared the basic motivation.

The Russians may not have had a catchy slogan to sum it up, but like us, they realized that both the United States and the Soviet Union would have been ruined in a nuclear exchange.

Those of us, both Americans and Russians, who were informed about nuclear weapons knew the meaning of that statement. You probably have heard it before, but allow me to remind you:

In a nuclear exchange, at least 100 million people would have been immediately incinerated; perhaps five times that many would have been so badly wounded, burned or radiated that they would shortly die; most of the world's cities would become just contaminated ruins; the whole Earth would have been covered in a thick layer of smoke impenetrable to the sun so that temperatures would fall and the ground would be frozen to a depth of about three feet; there would be no available liquid drinking water. Since graves could not be dug in the frozen ground by the (few) starving and emaciated survivors, the whole Earth would be covered by rotting corpses.

Therefore, sensible men, both Americans and Russians, would do all we could to avoid it. That was the basis of the theory of mutual deterrence.

But, when “interest of government” was factored into the equation, the equation lost coherence. That is because it is, after all, not *countries* but *governments* that make the decisions of war or peace. Once the personal motivations of rulers had to be considered, our strategy made far less sense. Consider why this is so.

The governments of both the United States and the Soviet Union – like all governments – ultimately rest on the perception by their supporters that they are acceptable. Often this means just “patriotic.” And, as we know, the definition of patriotism varies widely. What seems sensible and patriotic to one person or group may seem like cowardice or treason to another.

Killing ‘Weak’ Leaders

If rulers egregiously flaunt their incapacity, corruption or lack of patriotism, they build resentments that can, and often do, result in breakdowns, *coups d’État* or even revolutions. In the course of these actions not only governments, in the abstract, but rulers as individuals are often killed.

So, quite separate from the “interest of state,” leaders have strong reasons to protect themselves. And almost always the best – sometimes the only – way to do this is to be “tough,” to “stand tall,” to force the other fellow to “blink.” Being a “peacenik” even in times of peace is dangerous; in a crisis it can be lethal.

This divided interest between what was required in the national interest and what political leaders might have to do to stay in power or even to stay alive became evident both in the Missile Crisis itself and was made even more clear in a “war game,” what the German General Staff called a *kriegspiel* or simulated combat, that was conducted in the Pentagon shortly thereafter.

The Kennedy Administration organized the war game to extend the Missile Crisis into a scenario of what might have happened next. Briefly put, the game posed the possibility that the Russians had not removed their missiles from Cuba or had otherwise provoked the United States and that the United States had decided to take action.

In the game, “Blue Team” – the United States – “took out” a Russian city with nuclear weapons. So, those of us on “Red Team” were required to face the question of how we would respond. We were trying to think like our Russian counterparts and were given access to all the information our intelligence services had amassed on them and what we thought they knew of American capabilities.

We and our principals took our roles very seriously. At the most senior level of our government, we were charged with coping with what amounted to a second

missile crisis. To illustrate what might happen, we were provoked to make fateful decisions. And we had to do so "in real time."

Between the Blue Team attack and Red Team's response could be only a few minutes. Otherwise, Blue Team might have fired other missiles to wipe out "ours." Our team decided that there were four possible responses:

First, we could, at least theoretically, do nothing. Chairman Nikita Khrushchev would announce to his people that he was sorry for the damage and the loss of a hundred thousand or so fellow Russians, but that there was nothing he could do. If he ordered a counterattack, it would bring upon Russia unimaginable devastation. So, he had decided to just accept the humiliation and the pain.

Was this realistic? The members of our team, who were among the most experienced and best-informed men in our government, decided that such a move would have caused Khrushchev to be shot in an immediate *coup d'État* and that whoever took his place would unquestionably have fired the Soviet missiles anyway.

So inaction or even a long delay was impossible. Regardless of "interest of state," the "interest of government" – just staying alive – would have prevented it. The chairman of our team, the admiral who was the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, agreed that he would have been among the coup leaders if he were Russian.

Losing a City

The second possible answer was tit-for-tat. The Russians could have launched a retaliatory missile to "take out" a comparable American city, say Dallas or Cleveland or Boston. That would have incinerated an equivalent number of Americans, a few hundred thousand or so, and pulverized the city.

We had to imagine what then would have happened. We tried to picture President Kennedy going before the television cameras to inform the American public that the crisis was ended: we destroyed one of their cities and they destroyed one of ours. So we were even.

"Sadly," he would have had to go on, "if any of you had relatives in Dallas (or Cleveland or Boston), you just don't have them any longer. They have been evaporated. Let us now go on with our lives and forget the unfortunate events of the last few days." It is not hard to imagine what would have happened to him and his Administration.

Alternatively, in a third option, the President could have then moved a step forward into hostilities by knocking out a second Russian city. The Russians could have similarly responded by destroying a second American city. Was this

possible or likely?

We quickly saw the flaws in this course of action: First, the much touted military advantages of a first or unexpected strike would have been lost. Each side had been roused to fury, but neither would have been incapacitated.

Second, once "escalation" had begun, there would be no stopping point. The second city would be followed by third, fourth and others. In my experience even with the crisis in which no missiles were fired, I was sure no one could have withstood the strain.

Toward the end of that week, we were all utterly exhausted. And, speaking for myself at least I was not sure any longer of my judgment. It seemed clear to us on Red Team that within days or even hours, the exchanges would have escalated into general war. We found no justification for step-by-step retaliation. That left only the fourth option.

The fourth option was general war. Our team concluded that a massive attack on the country of "Blue Team" was inevitable. Immediate and all-out nuclear bombardment of the United States offered the only hope that the Russians could disable the American forces before they could do massive damage to Russia. Unanimously, we signaled our decision.

The game master, Professor Thomas Schelling of MIT and author of *The Strategy of Conflict*, told us that we had "misplayed" the game. He did not believe we had correctly predicted the Russian reaction. But to find out, he asked us to assemble the next morning to discuss our action.

When we and most of the senior officials of our government gathered in the War Room of the Pentagon, Schelling said that, if he thought there was any justification for our decision, he would have to give up the theory of deterrence. We replied that the theory had been proven to be flawed by the very game he had designed. Simply put, it was that *rulers* not *nations* decided man's fate.

Beyond the game, what actually happened was both crucial, perhaps even vital, but little considered. In real life, America did not "take out" a Russian or even a Cuban city. *We found a way for both of our governments to avoid losing face or being overthrown and to do what we needed to have happen so that the Earth was not destroyed.*

We stood down our missiles and they stood down theirs. Castro was furious. Mao was dismissive. But Kennedy, against the advice of the hawks and with the help of Adlai Stevenson, opened a way that Chairman Khrushchev could accept ... and stay alive.

Wisely, he stepped back from the brink. He could afford to do so – probably just barely – because of Kennedy’s decision to remove the Jupiters. His hawks did not overthrow or murder him. But, for his wise action, they never forgave him. As a sign of their disgust, they got their revenge after his death: his body was not buried with full honors in the Kremlin Wall like the other Soviet leaders’ bodies had been but was relegated to distant and “unpatriotic” obscurity.

Lesson: if the aim of strategy was to stay alive it was safer to avoid combat. Wise diplomacy was more effective than the battle ax.

Virtually Automatic

The Cuban Missile Crisis was long ago and the issues were complex so let me dredge up a more recent and simpler case to illustrate perceptions of attack and defense and to show that the decisions on what to do about them can be taken without grand strategic judgments, ideology or even anger but can be virtually automatic. That is especially true if they are taken too late. I turn to piracy in the Indian Ocean.

Surely, we believed, the Somali pirates gave us a clear case of aggression against which we must defend ourselves. As we saw them, they were an ugly, brutal bunch of terrorists. And since they had taken up arms, so must we. Indeed, by the time we recognized that there was a problem, arms seemed to be the only possible answer.

A frequent saying in government circles is “never mind the cause; we have to act with what we see on the ground today.” Often, by that time, there is little scope. So without further ado, we shoot from the hip. But pause a moment to consider how the problem arose and how the Somalis saw it.

Somalia was one of those countries that never became a nation-state. Traditionally, it was a collection of societies – like indigenous peoples in the Americas, the rest of Africa and much of Asia. (So understanding it may be of value to us elsewhere.)

Then in the late Nineteenth Century, France, Britain and Italy invaded the country and set up colonies which they euphemistically termed “protectorates” and began to challenge or replace local institutions, rulers and alliances. (As also happened in much of the “Third World.”) In the aftermath of the Second World War, we foreigners turned most of the area into a UN “trust” under Italian control. After 15 years, parts of it were recognized as an independent nation-state.

“Nation=statehood” was a concept that had grown over several centuries in Europe. It was wholly alien to the Somalis. They were not a *nation* but lived in

collections of extended families which were only sporadically and vaguely related to one another, and none of their leaders had any experience in forming or managing the apparatus of a state.

Indeed, given the generations of foreign rule, none of them had any experience in government. And being poor and "underdeveloped," their societies lacked the minimal organizations we take for granted in nation-states.

So, like many African and Asian countries, Somalia went through a series of coups. Those leaders who survived and came to the fore were often the most violent and unprincipled. They enriched themselves and their gangs while the general population survived in chronic poverty and even hunger. Indeed, in 1974 and 1975, a severe drought led to widespread starvation. Somalia's one great asset was the sea and its most productive inhabitants were fishermen.

Then beginning in about 1990, huge "factory" ships from several Western nations and Japan began to arrive along the coast. Violating international agreements and using sonar and radar to locate fish and huge nets to catch them, they virtually "fished out" the previously rich waters. It has been estimated that they took billions of dollars worth of tuna and other edible fish and killed or otherwise disposed of every other kind of sea life.

Worse, they plowed up the underwater formations where the fish bred and dumped overboard thousands of tons of toxic and even nuclear waste. Soon, the sea and beaches of Somalia were just lifeless extensions of the inland deserts. The Somalis again began to starve. It did not take long for the fishermen, who after all were sailors, to turn into pirates.

We were outraged. Piracy is a heinous crime. We knew that because we have all grown up on stories of Captain Kidd and Blue Beard. Soon the press was filled with lurid accounts of the seizure of yachts and even of big ships and the kidnapping of their crews. Ransoms were paid, but European and American governments came under pressure "to do something."

So we began to patrol the Indian Ocean with our navies. Military action seemed to be the only possible response. The Somalis were committing a vile form of aggression. They were terrorists. That was perfectly clear. At least to us. Very few officials, businessmen or even journalists asked why the Somalis were acting in such an outrageous fashion.

Of course, the answer was simple: the fishermen were desperate. And, inevitably, the more desperate or more determined among them turned to violence. Warlords in Somalia as in Afghanistan soon took command. Well before "Blackhawk Down," we were killing Somalis and they were killing one another. Violence bred violence.

To our military, the Somalis were the bad guys. So the only answer seemed to be force. But force did not work there any more than it did in Vietnam, Afghanistan or Iraq. Faced with the choice of starving or stealing, the Somalis chose as you or I would have done in their place.

Perhaps some attempt to *anticipate* the problem raised by illegal destruction of their main natural resource might have been "a stitch in time..." Knowing the *sequence* of events and attempting to understand why the Somalis became our adversaries might have saved thousands of lives and billions of treasure. But we paid little or no attention to their view of aggression and defense. At least, one could argue, until too late.

Other Applications

From little Somalia, there are at least three lessons of wide application to American foreign policy. While we, the rich and powerful, can sometimes work our will on the poor and weak, our actions have consequences. The consequences will often be costly to us and painful to them. Worse, they may radiate throughout their societies for generations. Or even spill over into wider areas.

Leave aside the costs we, the British and the Russians incurred in another far-off land, Afghanistan about which I have often written. Consider instead the more pervasive but subtle issues that we see in much of Africa, some of Asia and even parts of Europe and Latin America.

The turmoil we see in all those areas, I argue, is largely a result of the forced transition from *society* to *state*. Forcing societies to become states and so to fit our definition of how they should organize themselves and how they can interface with us often does not work and even more often leads to the very results we had sought to avoid.

Looking at the "failed states" in anger or despair, we forget our own past. We should remember that it took our ancestors generations to begin to create the skills, cadres of dedicated people and public institutions that made nation-states possible.

Thomas Hobbes told us how expensive the task was in England while in France, Germany and Italy it took centuries longer and cost much more. In the Balkans, it is still incomplete. Indeed, to the degree it was accomplished, it was the result of periodic and ghastly wars. Obviously, it hardly started in much of the world.

We Westerners have made up the rules for the world in which both we and the "underdeveloped" live. The rules presume a world of nation-states. But the Somalis are not and never have been a nation-state, so they did not have the

mechanisms that meshed into the gears of the modern, Western-inspired international system.

They could not, for example, access the world court to enforce the laws on fishing in their waters. They could not organize a government that could overpower the warlords or the pirates. (When they tried to do so with their traditional means, Islamic brotherhoods, we prevented them because we saw those organizations as dangerous terrorists.) We had trouble even identifying who or what they were by legal, political and diplomatic criteria.

And, like most African societies, Somalia was “post-colonial:” that is, its experience for generations had been *being ruled* rather than *ruling itself*. In short, it was thrust into a situation to which European nation-states had adapted only after generations and only then imperfectly. It was asked to act like a nation-state when it lacked the experience, the people and the will to do so.

And, despite what the neoconservatives have preached, we lacked the knowledge, the means or the acceptability to do the job for them. Inevitably, more went down in our attempt to impose our will upon them than our “Black Hawk.”

The Islamists

I turn now to the most complex and most urgent of our problems, our conflict with the Islamic *Salafi* movement and various mainly Muslim states. The *urgency* is obvious as we are on the brink of yet another war.

The *complexity* arises from several causes: first, to understand them requires some appreciation of a coherent but to most of us an alien way of life, belief and organization. Few people in our governments or even in our universities have taken the time or made the effort to comprehend that system.

Second, relations with that other way of life stretch back over centuries and widely over a vast area of the Earth; so there is great variety. And, third, our lives have been in part conditioned by the same factors that I mentioned in Somalia – our power, wealth and dynamism and their weakness, poverty and relative lethargy.

Even a motivated and intelligent reader would find little help in the media or in the deluge of “quickie” books to see a sequence in may appear to be random events or to understand the point of view of our adversaries among the one billion Muslims.

So each time we run into opposition, we face the question: “do we shoot?? People who seek simple answer usually say “yes.” If you have a gun and you think you

are in danger, the obvious thing to do is to use it. We have done so, or threatened to do so, just in recent years, in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Balkans and Libya and have been complicit in the acts by others in Palestine, Indonesia and various other parts of Africa.

All of these are Muslim or Muslim-related conflicts. Several of our intrusions were multiple so that, overall and often, we have convinced many Muslims that it is not only their *politics* but their *faith* that we have identified as our enemy.

This view of our relationship has a long history, dating back to long before the Crusades, and it has been periodically reinforced over the centuries. I will be short and will hit only the main points:

Throughout most of the last thousand years, both in Europe and in Africa and most of Asia, there was relatively little movement inside and among societies. More people catch the train from Washington to New York in a single day than traveled that far in the 500 or so years of the Middle Ages.

Most people, both in the West and throughout Africa and Asia, were, by our standards, almost unimaginably poor. Many lived on the edge of hunger. Few had even what we would call rudimentary skills. The economy was at the subsistence level. Money hardly existed. Tools and even clothes were handed down generation to generation.

There was little trade beyond the distance a person could walk in a day except along rivers and along the seacoast. And that was minimal. We get a sense of this life by the story of one exotic food: sugar was such a luxury that Columbus's patron, the great Queen Isabella of Spain, gave one of her children a sugar cone as a grand Christmas present.

Then just on the eve of the Renaissance, Europe began a commercial transformation. Borrowing from the practices of Muslim East, first the Italians and then the Dutch set up banks, adopted the practice of letters of credit and learned how to spread risks through multiple ownership and insurance. In a variety of activities the latent energy of the Europeans was released.

Each successful experiment led to the next. Boats became stronger so the acquisition of more Atlantic fish, particularly the cod, to overcome European famines, taking of African slaves to work the new sugar plantations and (after 1492) importing silver for coinage became possible.

The first true factories were set up to make rope for sailing ships. Piece by piece, step by step, Europeans forged ahead. By the Eighteenth Century, Europeans mastered a source of energy in coal and embarked upon the Industrial Revolution.

Muslim Worries

Even before the effects of this revolution were pervasive, perceptive Muslim leaders felt the ground slipping under their feet. They had reason. Napoleon had begun the wave of Western conquest when he conquered Egypt in 1798. He destroyed its then government and tried to convert the Egyptians to the ideas of the French Revolution. He did not succeed in planting those ideas, but he played havoc with the existing institutions.

Quite suddenly in the years around the turn of the Eighteenth into the Nineteen Century, the balance between Europe and the Middle East was overturned. What has been called "the impact of the West" began to overwhelm Muslim societies, undermine their economies and alter their customs. In a study I did at the start of my academic career, I found that in Lebanon when industrial Europe came into contact with the cottage industry of the East in the 1830s, the Middle East reeled under the blow.

In the one year of 1833 an estimated 10,000 workers were forced into idleness in Damascus and Aleppo; by 1838, urban men were wearing fezzes imported from France and drinking from glass made in Bohemia; by a few years later, even the Bedouin's headdress was made in Birmingham. New ideas from the West changed clothing styles so that the key luxury import from the further East, the Cashmiri shawl, went out of fashion.

By mid-century, the old Baghdad-Damascus caravan was finished. By 1854, the French and Austrian steamers, plying the coastal Levant towns, had, in the words of the British consul, "annihilated the local carrying trade." Routes of trade were forgotten or even reversed: Aleppo traditionally got its coffee from Yemen and then began to get it from Santo Domingo via France; pepper which had come to Beirut from the East via Baghdad was, after the advent of steam, sent to Baghdad via Beirut.

Meanwhile in India, the British were chipping away the foundations and territory of the great Mughal Empire. Starting in Bengal, they began a march across the subcontinent and, as they went, they sometimes replaced and often modified laws, customs, governmental procedures and relationships among Muslims and Hindus and between both of them and Europeans.

Tremors of the "impact of the West" radiated through the Islamic world. In response, the first great movements of *salafiyah* began to be organized.

I have elsewhere defined *salafiyah* but briefly put, it was the Muslim version of the Protestant movements within Christianity in northern Europe and New England. Protestant reformers in Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries Europe thought that

it was necessary to “purify” their societies by going back to origins in order to create a solid basis from which to advance.

That concept sparked the great commercial and intellectual revolution in Holland, Belgium and North Germany that laid the basis for modern Europe. Muslim *Salafis* similarly sought to go back to original beliefs, clearing away innovations, to establish a firm basis on which a “pure” order could be reestablished and the future secured. [See Consortiumnews.com’s “[Understanding Islamic Fundamentalism.](#)”]

Recapturing Dignity

The *Salafis* were not so interested in commerce as the Lutherans, Calvinists and their various offshoots; their underlying objective was to recapture the power and dignity of the days when Islam was a world leader. They believed that by stripping away the shroud of dark ages and returning to “purity,” that is, to the original, Quran-inspired religious belief and social practice, they could advance toward a dignified, powerful and Divinely-ordained future.

Several of these early *Salafis* created vast, enduring and far-flung societies – virtual religious empires – that were the most vigorous and popular movements of their times.

Among their leaders were the Arabian Ahmad ibn Abdul Wahhab (the founder of Wahhabism); the Algerian/Libyan Muhammad bin Ali as-Sanusi (the founder of the North African Sanusi Brotherhood); the Sudanese Muhammad Ahmad al-Mahdi (the founder of the African Mahdiah movement); the Iranian Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (who inspired movements throughout the Ottoman-Turkish, Qajar-Iranian and Mughal-Indian empires); and the Egyptian theologian Muhammad Abduh (whose students taught millions of young Muslims all over Asia and Africa).

Until fairly recently, we in the West have known little of these men and their movements, but they were as influential among their peoples as Luther and Calvin were among Westerners. And, as we see, their influence is growing among today’s 1 billion Muslims.

The early Muslim movements did not stop the “impact of the West” nor did they appeal to the Christian and Jewish populations of their areas. The Christians and the Jews eagerly accepted the Western intrusion and generally profited materially, intellectually and politically from it.

However, toward the end of the Nineteenth Century a few, mainly Lebanese Christian, members of the western-educated elite began to try to define a political doctrine that could overcome religious difference. Their purpose remained essentially the same as in earlier *salafiyah* – protection against

Western intrusion – but they focused more sharply on the political and military challenge.

They thought that, if they dropped or at least obscured the criteria of religion and focused on something they all could share, the desire for liberty, they could gather together and become strong. The philosophical or emotional answer, they thought, was the same one that was then rallying Christians in Italy, Germany and France and beginning to affect the Jewish peoples of central and eastern Europe – *nationalism*.

Nationalism, as understood by the Arabs, was at first a geographically limited concept. The word adopted to encapsulate “nation” also meant “dwelling” or by extension “village” (Arabic: *watan*). Ironically, it is a reasonable Arabic translation of the word “national home” used by the early Zionists (Hebrew: *heimstaṯt*).

The Zionists used “national home,” as they said, to avoid frightening the British by admitting that they aimed to create a nation-state in Palestine. That was not the intent of the Arabs. They wanted to frighten the British and French into leaving their lands. For that purpose they had to devise a different concept and use a different word (Arabic: *qawmiyah*).

Their efforts led them over the past century through other definitions of nationalism including pan-Arabism and a sort of socialism. All of these efforts came up short. None accomplished what the people sought, an acceptable degree of parity with the West (including Israel). All that was left was what they had started with, religion.

Self-Defeating Outrage

So we see today a return to *Salafiyah*. And again the parallels with the rise of European Protestantism are suggestive. Europe in the age of Luther and Calvin was violent, bitterly divided and intolerant. Horrible crimes were committed by all parties in the name of religion in the Thirty Years War. Then and later hundreds of thousands died before passions cooled.

No outside force the only ones close enough and powerful enough being the Catholic Church and the Spanish empire ameliorated or possibly could have ameliorated the process or calmed the tempers. When the Church and/or Catholic states used force as they did, for example, in the Netherlands, parts of Germany and the British isles, their efforts further inflamed the furies.

Today, when religious beliefs are also intertwined with post-colonial angers, thwarted ambitions and relative deprivation, passions are perhaps even more sensitive than they were in the Thirty Years War. If, as I believe, this is true

or even if it is only a part of the whole story, the ability of outsiders to affect the course of events is similarly restricted.

Worse, it is likely to be even self-defeating. The more we intervene, the more intense and long-lasting is likely to be the reaction. The more violent our intervention the more long-term damage we are likely to do.

The record of the past few years is compelling. The numbers of displaced, wounded, killed, of stunted children, of widespread misery, of the loss of civic decency and the rise of terror among the survivors, of the set-back to the feeble growth of legal, social, cultural and political institutions, of blasted infrastructure which took decades to develop, of the enormous wastage of financial and human resources desperately needed throughout the world and of the often alarming and dangerous impact on fragile ecosystems all of these make evident the dangers of intervention in situations in which we lack the knowledge, the tools and the acceptability that we often think we have.

As the terrifying "joke" of the Vietnam war put it, "we destroyed the village in order to save it." And even when we did so to stop the ugliness and viciousness of "the bad guys," we often resorted to tools and practices that were hardly more humane: like many Americans I carry in my memory the picture of the little Vietnamese girl running down a street on fire from napalm.

We used napalm later also in Iraq. Was it more humane than poison gas or cutting off peoples' heads? Decapitation is surely barbaric. But let us not forget that the French did that publicly until the eve of the Second World War; the Saudis still do it and the Iraqis actually decapitated Saddam Husain with a rope rather than a sword.

If I had to choose my form of execution, I believe I would find decapitation preferable to being burned alive. Is carpet bombing which kills the bystanders or chemical defoliation which can induce cancer and birth defects less horrible than suicide bombing? Were Saddam Hussein's or Gaddafi's prisons more cruel than Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo? If any of those comparisons redound to our credit, they surely are very narrow calls.

Another Problem: Ourselves

And they raise another problem: what they do or did to those of us who were involved in doing them. It isn't only the victims but is also the perpetrators who are harmed by violence. The pilot who pushes the release button does not see what his bomb does; so maybe he is protected from a sense of horror or guilt by ignorance, but the sniper can sometimes see the head of his victim explode.

The Special Forces or Green Beret soldier apparently, in the words I have heard

them say, positively delight in their power to inflict pain and death. What is the long-term effect of such experiences on our own society and culture? Surely, they cannot be beneficial.

Thus, for our own sakes as well as for the sake of the people we assert our ability to guide, I strongly believe that we would be well advised to stay out of conflicts we should by this time have learned that we cannot solve but which we know we have the ability to make far worse.

This is not, of course, to suggest that we wash our hands of the world's problems or that we stop trying to help the victims. We can and should help. Better, my experience teaches me, it would be to help at arms' length through the UN, regional associations, foundations and NGOs, but all of these need the money and talent we have so often wasted in military ventures. Think what the \$4 trillion or \$5 trillion we threw away in Iraq and Afghanistan could have done!

We are spending less today in fighting the Islamic State but, even without "boots on the ground," our activities there are costing over \$1 million a day. As the months stretch into years, so will the millions become billions.

The sorrows and tribulations of the people in the world's trouble spots should be our concern. But we must not "destroy the village to save it." We must put aside the gun. That is the first step. Then we must allow the healing and *restraining* processes to take effect within troubled societies – as history teaches us they are likely to do.

How soon that will happen depends in part on how much pressure we apply. The more we intervene militarily the longer it is likely to take. The "mission accomplished," as we now see, was never accomplished despite years of combat. It is still not accomplished. Surely, we have learned that lesson in Afghanistan and Iraq. Or have we?

As hard as it will be for us and our political leaders to accept, we must recognize that there are no shortcuts. What we hope to see happening is more likely to happen if we allow the troubled peoples to set their own course. Then, to the degree that they have scope to act without being accused of being unreligious or unpatriotic, the more intelligent, less violent and more constructive of their leaders are more likely to be able to restrain the more destructive; our actions, by threatening to pin upon them the label of weakness, incapacity and treason are apt to make their efforts impossible. Or get them killed. That is, the same process is active here that we saw in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Also, as we saw in that crisis, we should be constrained to working within the

same parameters we set for other nations. The bottom line is avoiding aggression. Of course, we must defend ourselves. But, as recent history makes clear, defense and aggression often are hard to distinguish. What is defense to one is often aggression to the other.

Mutual respect and mutual forbearance should be our objective. This is not, as Mrs. Thatcher would have said, to "go wobbly," to appease, to pussyfoot or to be just weak-willed liberals. It may be a matter of life or death and certainly can help us avoid catastrophes.

But, we should realize that adopting a strategy of avoiding conflict will often be difficult. Public angers are far easier to whip up than to dispel. Demagogues multiply like rabbits and sometimes we follow them like lemmings. All the polls tell us how ignorant we are as a people. And, looking around us, we must ask ourselves where we can find today the wise leaders we need to guide our actions. I confess that I cannot identify them.

So it is not surprising that today we are moving away from coherent, well-reasoned and effective *strategy* and indulging in scattered, short-sighted and unsuccessful *tactics*. We jump from one crisis to the next with little thought on how we keep repeating our mistakes.

There is truth in the old saying that when one is in a hole, his first step ought to be to stop digging. We need to pause and take our bearings. We need to do this for our sakes as much as for "theirs."

I end on a very personal demonstration of a proof for what I have written: when many years ago I was first visiting such Asian and African lands as Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, both Sudans, Libya and Algeria, I was welcomed – as an American – with open arms. Today, I would be in danger of being shot.

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Understanding Islamic Fundamentalism

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

By William R. Polk

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

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

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

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

In a fundamental aspect, their teachings and movements resembled those set off in northern Europe by Luther and Calvin. These Christians and Muslims shared a belief in the absolute authority of the unalterable word of God as presented in

the original texts. Their task was to go back to discover the “pure” message and lead their followers to implement it. However much they differed, both the Muslims and the Protestants were in this sense *salafis*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Source of Militancy

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

Born in an Egyptian village in 1906, Sayyid Qutub got his early education in a primary school in the village and then in a secular school in Cairo. During his twenties and thirties, he wrote a charming memoir on village life and a not very successful novel but gained a reputation as a literary critic in Egyptian periodicals. Then, just before the Second World War, he became a minor official in the Egyptian Ministry of Education. From that post, he received a scholarship to study the American educational system. He spent two years mainly in Colorado and California, but traveled widely throughout the country.

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

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

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

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

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

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

He differed from the secularists in believing that they could find it only by returning to first principles whereas the secularists wanted to forget the past and rush into Western-style modernity. Thus, he believed and many Muslims came to agree with him that ventures into nationalism and socialism, the main currents of thoughts in the 1950s and 1960s, were bound to fail to bring strength and dignity. They did. And their failure opened the way for the return of Muslim Fundamentalism.

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

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

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

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

Misreading History

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

Moreover, the time of the four "Rightly Guided Caliphs" lasted only a short time. However, not only for Qutub but also for virtually all Muslims, those few years were the Golden Age. It is for this reason that the more extreme of today's Syrian *jihadis* speak of their aim as reestablishing a caliphate. In that age, Fundamentalists believe, "pure" Islam was coherent, all-embracing, just, available and God-given.

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

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

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

And since conversion was easy, peoples with even more distant ethnic backgrounds eagerly joined its community. Its emphasis on equality and its lack of racism made Islam attractive, for example, to millions of downtrodden untouchables (*dalits*) of India for whom Hinduism meant perpetual slavery. Such conversions also brought ideas and habits alien to the Quran and *Hadith* into Islamic

practice. These “intrusions” were often easily accepted but from time to time, they and those who followed them were the subject of bitter reproach or violence. We see this today, as for example in the Syrian Sunni Muslim hostility to the deviant Shia Muslim sect of the Alawis.

What so infuriated the Orthodox Muslims about the Alawis was that they were “almost Muslims.” That is, heretics in the Islamic family. This is or should be understandable to us. Historically, we see that reaction of religions to heresy has often been more violent than intolerance of a different religion. That is, I think, because heretics are considered more dangerous than true outsiders. The Inquisition, as we know, spent most of its energy sniffing out Christian deviation, crypto-Jews, Judaizing Christians and Muslims who only pretended to be Christians (Marranos and Conversos) .

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

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

A Pluralistic World

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

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

This is an issue posed by the Syrian rebellion have the Alawis harmed the

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

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

“But [if such people are the aggressors] kill them wherever you encounter them and expel them from where they had expelled you, because tyranny is more insufferable than fighting

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

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

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

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

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

The Syrian Struggle

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

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

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

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

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

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

To disguise their real objective and to win over the natives, these powers use deceptive media to portray their rule “as non-coercive and world-encompassing ...

[and to portray the native] people as subservient to it not only through fear, but also through love because it spreads freedom, justice, equality among humanity, and various other slogans.”

In assessing blame for this condition, Naji indicts not only foreign powers and their venal local henchmen – although they are the major culprits – but also to the mass of the people. Naji takes a dim view of them: “Notice that when we say that the masses are the difficult factor We know that they not generally dependable on account of [how the foreign imperialists and native turncoats have shaped them and we realize that there will be] no improvement for the general public until there is victory. [Consequently, our strategy] is to gain their sympathy, or at the very least neutralize them.”

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

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

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

Stages of War

Since war is thus justified, it must be carefully planned and executed. It has several stages. The first stage is “vexation” of the enemy aimed at creating chaos in which the forces of the foreign powers and their local proxies are

distracted and exhausted and the Muslims learn that they have power and learn how to use it.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Management, he says, is not the aim. It is only the means. What is to be managed is power. Here Naji tries to draw lessons from the Russian campaign in Afghanistan. The Afghans could not defeat the Russians in formal battles because the Russians had overwhelming military capacity. What the Afghans had to do was to provoke them so that their forces over-extended themselves and were caught in wasting, unwinnable conflict, which bankrupted their economy and lost the support both of their own people and the government they sought to protect. America, he thought, will fall easily into this trap.

America's Impulse

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

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

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

“So [the correct tactic is to] diversify and widen the vexation strikes against the Crusader-Zionist enemy in every place in the Islamic world, and even outside of it if possible, so as to disperse the efforts of the alliance of the enemy and thus drain it to the greatest extent possible. For example: If a tourist resort that the Crusaders patronize in Indonesia is hit, all of the tourist

resorts in all of the states of the world will have to be secured by the work of additional forces, which [will cause] a huge increase in spending.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Making the enemy “pay the price” can occur anywhere: “if the apostate Egyptian regime undertakes an action to kill or capture a group of *mujahids*, the youth of *jihād* in Algeria or Morocco can direct a strike against the Egyptian embassy and issue a statement of justification, or they can kidnap Egyptian diplomats as hostages until the group of *mujahids* is freed. The policy of violence must also be followed such that if the demands are not met, the hostages should be liquidated in a terrifying manner, which will send fear into the hearts of the enemy and his supporters.”

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

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

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

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

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An endnote:

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

Israel's Growing Intolerance

The central contradiction in the cozy U.S. relationship with Israel is that the American system rejects religious and ethnic preferences and Israel embraces them. This intolerance is growing as ultra-Orthodox Jews direct discrimination against women, as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar notes.

By Paul R. Pillar

From time to time we hear news from Israel that reflects growing religious intolerance there. An [attention-getting story](#) from a little more than a year ago concerned ultra-Orthodox men in the community of Beit Shemesh spitting on an eight-year-old girl and calling her a prostitute because her modest dress was not modest enough to suit them.

An immediate thought such incidents engender is how remarkably similar this is to the religious intolerance displayed by Muslim fundamentalists, including ones in Arab countries surrounding Israel. There is the same effort to impose sectarian preferences on a larger society. And there is the same gender discrimination involved in efforts to constrain and subjugate women.

The very high birth rate among the ultra-Orthodox, and thus their growing demographic and political weight, underlies increasing intolerance in Israel. But there is more to it than that, in a state that defines its existence and character in terms of single religion or ethnicity. This definition not only implies second-class status for citizens not of that religion but also enlists the power of the state in the sectarian aims of whoever gets to specify in more detail the nature of the dominant religion.

It is that same power of the state, which was not involved in the incident with the spat-upon schoolgirl, that is the most noteworthy aspect of [an incident this week at the Western Wall](#). Ten women, including two American-born rabbis, were arrested by Israeli police for praying there while wearing prayer shawls traditionally used by men.

This was not a demonstration by the women or an attempt by them to disrupt the peace. It may be disturbing enough for some that even a rabbi could not pray as she wished at a Jewish holy site. What should be even more disturbing is that police on the public payroll are enforcing such intolerance.

This incident and others like it inspire two further observations. The first is just to underscore the irony of the convergence of behavior by religious fundamentalists in Israel and those in Muslim-majority countries. Israel, given its current political direction, has walled itself off from its neighbors and accepts estrangement from them.

Israelis say we should be concerned about increased political roles assumed by religious fundamentalists in neighbors such as Egypt. And yet at the same time there is an increasing amount of behavior in Israel, supported or condoned by state power, that looks just like the behavior of those other fundamentalists.

The other observation is that this convergence with one of the more intolerant and ignoble aspects of life in the Middle East is part of a divergence of Israel from the values of its superpower patron, the United States. The notion of shared values has always been a leading rationale for the extraordinary patronage bestowed on Israel.

That notion always has been flawed, and it is becoming decreasingly credible. One of the basic flaws involves religion, with one state defined in terms of a particular religion and the other based on a separation of church and state.

Of course, there are fundamentalists in the United States who try to erode that separation, whether it is school boards messing with textbooks, employers wanting their personal religious beliefs to shape national laws regarding health care, or a fervently Christianist candidate (Rick Santorum) making a serious run for the presidency last year. But overall the establishment clause of the First Amendment is still operative.

A federal court in Minnesota reaffirmed that clause last month in dismissing a lawsuit contending that Hebrew National kosher hot dogs are not really kosher. That's not the business of courts, this court properly decided. What makes a hot dog kosher is a religious question to be decided by rabbis in the private sector entities that certify such things. In the United States it is not a matter for judges, police or anyone else on the public payroll, any more than proper wearing of a prayer shawl would be a matter for them.

Freedom of the press is another First Amendment freedom where Israel diverges significantly from the United States. There is an irony here, too, in that there is freer discussion in Israel, including the Israeli press, than there is in the

United States about basic issues of Israel's direction and its relationship with the United States.

But on many other subjects the Israeli military censor heavily restricts what can be reported, as demonstrated by [a story this week about a Prisoner X](#) who mysteriously died in a high-security Israeli prison. In the most recent [press freedom index](#) calculated by Reporters Without Borders, Israel ranks 112 out of 179 nations worldwide. The United States is 32nd.

Then there is the issue of gender equality. In the United States the status of women has been improving at least since enactment of the Nineteenth Amendment. In many ways Israeli women enjoy more equality than in many other countries, but with the growing impact of religious fundamentalism on gender issues it would be hard to say that current trends in Israel are going in the same direction as the United States.

Finally there is the issue on which there is the greatest divergence, which concerns political rights for all regardless of ethnicity or religion. True, there are elements in the United States that are trying to mess with this one too, by making it harder for some segments of the population to exercise their right to vote. But with the United States there is nothing remotely comparable to the wholesale denial of political rights for entire ethnic groups that there is in territory controlled by Israel.

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