

THE ROOTS OF CONFLICT BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES AND IRAQ

Joseph Coates from chapter seven of *Defeating Terrorism Developing Dreams: Beyond 9/11 and the IRAQ WAR*
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As a futurist, What can we learn if we trace back to the seeming historic roots of the Iraq War? What in the origins of Islam and its earliest clashes with the West foreshadowed 9/11 and the first and second Gulf Wars? How have the modern countries of the Middle East come into existence, and what has Western intervention been about? How do Afghanistan, al Qaeda, Egypt, Kurdistan, Iran, and Turkey relate to one another—and to us? Above all, what are the main lessons we might draw from the tale, and why is state-based terrorism arguably *the* biggest threat of all?—Editor

The origins of violent conflict among and between nations are like a banyan tree. A stem grows and eventually some of its branches drop shoots to the ground that, in turn, flourish and become subsidiary roots. International conflict, itself, is also like a banyan tree. There is no single cause for hostility among or between nations, although there usually is a single or a small cluster of trigger events that move the conflict to violence.

Iraq is the site of some of the oldest ancient empires, which were located between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in the area of Mesopotamia. Those ancient empires grew, flourished, were in conflict, went into decline, and passed into history. Without recounting all of that, let us look for a somewhat more recent root of conflict, the establishment of Islam, sometimes known as Muhammadanism.

Islam had its origins in what is now Saudi Arabia. It can in some ways be looked at as a successor religion to Christianity, the way that Christianity is a successor religion to Judaism. Islam embraces many of the Hebrew and Christian beliefs but also builds on a number of those beliefs. Abraham, the Jewish prophet, and Jesus were in a line of prophets of God, the most recent of whom was Muhammad. Historically, each of the prophets brought a new message and changes in beliefs. While many people held to the older religions, others embraced the new.

Muhammad lived from 570 until 632 A.D. The holy book of Islam, the Quran (or Koran), lays down the ideal life reflecting the will of God (known in

Islam as Allah) and requiring that Muslims (those adherent to Islam) engage in certain routine activities every day: for example, praying five times a day while facing the holy city of Mecca. It also requires, if possible, its adherents to make a trip to Mecca in one's lifetime. Islam is strongly family oriented and strongly believes that religion is or should be a critical component of the governance of a well-ordered society.

Without reviewing details, it is sufficient to note that Islam expanded rapidly, reaching its geographic apex in the fifteenth century when it extended from southern Spain, across all of North Africa, and east into what is now known as the Middle East and into India and Pakistan. It moved up the Mediterranean through Turkey into what is now the Balkans. Its eastern European expansion was halted in Austria, first in 1529 and finally in 1683, and its westward European expansion at Granada, Spain, in 1492.

The enormous scope of Islam was governed through leaders, the caliphs, who brought together religion and civic governance. This relationship is the opposite of what we in America see as a central feature of good government, that government and religion are unequivocally and distinctly different social functions. For us, government is forbidden to support any particular form of religion. Islam embraces the reverse of that basic belief.

With an empire so large, with the passage of time, with the increase of wealth, and with the differentiation of customs and interests, the different parts of the empire begin to break into

conflicting factions. The core and the central part of the Islamic empire which lies in the regions of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran, were crossed by international travel routes to and from India, China, and the rest of the Orient.

Inevitably, conflict arose because the Middle East is the site of the origins of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. What is now Israel was a crossover point of these three religions. The conflict led to the military ventures called the Crusades, three of which, in the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, attempted to recapture the Christian Holy Land from the Muslims. The Crusades built a barrier of hostility, fear, threat, and antagonism between the Christian West and Islamic East.

A very early source of conflict within Islam was the question of succession to the leadership of the religion. The principal split, between the Sunnis and Shiites, was over who was the legitimate successor to Muhammad. Today, most of Islam is composed of Sunnis and Shiites. In Iraq, during Saddam's reign, the Shiite majority (60 percent) was governed and repressed by a Sunni minority.

THE FLOURISHING BANYAN TREE OF CONFLICT

The long-term roots of conflict were not solely within Islam or directly religiously based. The Industrial Revolution never occurred in Islamic territories as it did in the West. Consequently, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the West grew tremendously in physical resources, skills, competence, military experience,

military power, and wealth.

In order to secure its new colonial empires, the West became more and more aggressive toward countries that affected its trade routes. They were often, incidentally, Islamic. To pacify or neutralize threats to its commerce, the West in many cases took countries or regions of countries under its control. The countries had forced upon them changes, concessions, laws, and rules to the advantage of the West and to the disadvantage and humiliation of Islamic people and countries.

That imperial aggression by Europe, notably by Great Britain and France, reached a peak at the time of World War I (WWI). The Ottoman Empire, centered in what is now Turkey, made a terrible mistake in WWI. It sided with Germany rather than the Allies. As a result, when the conflict ended, it lost most of its empire. The residual core became Turkey, and the empire disappeared. It had already been in advanced decay and was widely referred to in that period as "the sick man of Europe." The empire lost land in the Balkans, while other portions of the Middle East were set up as independent countries.

In bringing about change, the British and the French were not particularly concerned about the long-term development of these regions, but rather concentrated on the short-term advantages to themselves while dividing up the empire into independent nations or dependencies. For example, one trouble spot involving a large population known as Kurds should have formed Kurdistan. The postwar arrangements instead divided Kurdistan into parts assigned to what is now Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. That has been a chronic source of unrest since the Kurds are ethnically and culturally a cohesive group who have for seven decades looked forward to establishing their own nation.

The British set up and enforced the position of its own preferred government in what is now Iraq. That was unsatisfactory and led to a rebellion and a new government, which continued

for years and preformed badly. Still another rebellion led to the establishment of the Baath Party, which gained control of Iraq, and to the rise of Sad dam Hussein.

Other post-WWI settlements meant long-term trouble in Palestine. What is now Israel was set up in such a way that that British were in control of the area. They saw maintaining stability as a primary goal and did little or nothing to satisfy the desires of the local people for self-governance and independence. After World War II (WWII), with its Jewish holocaust, the massive exodus of the Jews from Europe who were looking for a new homeland saw Palestine as a logical place. Other places, notably South Africa, had been considered and rejected.

Massive migration of European Jews into what is now Israel aggravated hostility with the local Arab people, who saw these Europeans with better education and more skills as socially and economically isolated, but economically superior to them. This is hardly the condition for peaceful coexistence. The Israelis ultimately rebelled against British control, engaging in their own terrorist activities against both Arabs and the British governors. They eventually drove Britain out and set up the state of Israel. Other postwar political developments led to the independence of Syria and Lebanon on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean and the independence of Iran (known in ancient times as Persia), a very large Islamic country east of Iraq and southeast of Turkey.

A bit further east, with post-WWII independence, India broke into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. Pakistan itself was in two separate parts, one to the east of India and one to the northwest of India. That arrangement was unstable and led to the split into two countries: Pakistan, now to the northwest of India, and Bangladesh to the east of India, both Muslim states.

One can see how the geographic and rough-cut political situation following WWII fostered dissension, political dissatisfaction, unsatisfied nationalism,

and broken-up ethnic groups as continuing sources of political discontent.

OIL AS A NEW ISSUE

As if that were not enough, the banyan tree of conflict developed more new shoots and roots. An important event after WWII, focusing the economic attention of the rest of the world on the Middle East to a previously unheralded degree, was the discovery of massive deposits of oil in the Arabian Peninsula, now comprised of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and several sheikdoms along the Persian Gulf known as United Arab Emirates. Massive deposits of oil were also discovered in Iraq.

All of these areas became important politically to Europe and the United States because of the increasing consumption of petroleum in industrialized nations. At first oil provided fuel for automobiles, trucks, and airplanes. Its use quickly expanded into all forms of energy production: for example, in electric power plants.

The banyan tree of conflict has prospered since the founding and expansion of Islam, its encounters with the West, and its several periods of deterioration and breakup. The major interventions by Europeans, long after the Crusades, were to protect the Suez Canal and other trade routes to the Middle and Far East. This led to several countries being governed or controlled by France and Great Britain and other non-Islamic nations.

The end of WWI played a significant factor in bringing about hostility and conflict in Islam, since the postwar settlements usually involved arbitrary, unnatural geographic boundaries and the arbitrary imposition of governments. For example, the British forced a monarchy on Iraq. Similarly, the formation of a separate Lebanon and Syria, previously French protectorates, created hostility since the Syrians felt that Lebanon should be a part of Syria.

IRAN: CASE STUDY

Understanding the situation in Iran is a key to much of what has happened in

the Middle East. Iran, formerly known as Persia, was an absolute monarchy in the beginning of the twentieth century. It drew up its first constitution in 1906, and, in 1925, the Pahlavi Dynasty came into power. Persia's name was changed to Iran in 1935, and the second Shah Pahlavi came to power in 1944, pursuing goals of westernization of the military, resources, transportation, and other infrastructure.

Iran, rich in oil, became a focus of western oil companies' attention. It 'enjoyed substantial prosperity from the oil industry and developed a new middle and upper class. The rest of the population, 96 percent Muslim, did not enjoy uniform prosperity. The mass of ordinary people gained nothing, but saw too many of their traditional values continually being affronted, not just by the Westerners, who were a small part of the population, but by those Iranians who were adopting and adapting to Western modes of life and culture. It reached the point where some of the traditional religious leaders spoke out aggressively against this trend.

Most aggressive was the Ayatollah Khomeini, who was finally expelled from Iran by the Shah Pahlavi. He moved to Paris and over some 15 years sent recorded messages back to his home country, which were widely played, deploring the assault on the fundamental values of Islam. A movement grew more and more hostile to those supporting and promoting the Western cultural intrusion. Finally, the unrest became so great that the shah left the country and the Ayatollah Khomeini returned to set up a new government, based on fundamental religious principals. The hostility to the West focused on the United States. The unruly masses attacked the U.S. embassy in 1979, and Americans had to flee.

Today, 24 years later, the United States still does not have diplomatic relations with Iran, and President Bush has marked it as one of three countries on an "Axis of Evil." The important kernel of this story is how the rebellious masses under religious leadership have made the affront to the general Muslim

population's religious and cultural values a virtually universal issue throughout Islam. As the leadership either directly or indirectly allowed more and more westerners to move into their countries, often with a practical goal of developing resources, they failed to provide a broad sweep of benefits to everyone in the country. Those most fully committed to traditional Islam as a way of life were the ones most affronted and benefited the least from foreign intrusions.

TURKEY: CASE STUDY

No two countries are alike. The story of Turkey is very different from that of Iran. The shift of political power in Islam to the Ottoman Empire created new shoots of discontent and disquiet. The Ottomans emerged out of Anatolia (now Turkey) in the early fourteenth century to become the dominant power in the Islamic world, reclaiming and expanding old boundaries. As the Ottoman Empire eventually weakened and decay set in, local unrest flourished as a further aggravation of conflict.

The end of WWI and total military defeat led to the independence of Turkey and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. A new leader, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, saw only one future for Turkey, the suppression of the traditional social, economic, and legal constraints put in place by the Ottoman Empire and traditional beliefs. He began aggressive changes toward a secular society, more specifically a society in which religion and government were clearly separate from each other. He abolished the religious courts. He then banned the men's traditional hat, the fez, as a symbol of the old ways of living and behaving. Ataturk was in some ways the George Washington of modern Turkey.

However, the transition to a modern Turkish state was not easy. The new country included a large Kurdish region and population which has been a chronic source of problems. The Turkish Kurds, along with those in Iraq and Iran, have been seeking independent nationhood since well before WWI. In

any case, through thick and thin, Turkey has survived, with the armed forces often keeping the country together as it moved to an increasingly constitution-based democratic government. Turkey has come so far that it is now a candidate for joining the European Economic Community. On the other hand, it still has its Kurdish problem and is also facing a rising fundamentalist movement.

EGYPT: CASE STUDY

Egypt is quite a different case. The British took over Egypt as a protectorate and held that control through the end of WWII, despite recognizing Egypt's independence in 1922. Egypt is overwhelmingly Muslim, but includes a varied minority population who are relatively secure and stable. As with many of the Islamic countries, the military has played a critical role in national development because it has been the only force able to maintain internal stability.

As a practical matter, the military in the Middle Eastern countries were usually westernized in terms of the military equipment and technology they had and were often familiar with the ways of the West through training overseas. The military has often played a role in promoting stability and supporting democracy. In other cases, the military became monarchs of a new tyranny.

AFGHANISTAN: CASE STUDY

Afghanistan has been the site of conflict between Russia or the Soviet Union and Great Britain for dominance over the country. Entirely tribalized as it stands today, it is made up of mostly Sunni Muslims, but its ethnic groups, the Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Pushtans, are a continuing source of internal conflict who more or less maintained the country as a tribal society. It was consolidated into a kingdom in the eighteenth century.

In 1973, a military coup brought in a republican form of government which was favorable to the Soviet Union. The

United States, presumably operating through the CIA, worked hard to support internal guerrilla fighting against the pro-Soviet regime.

They finally succeeded in driving out the Soviet-oriented government. The UN-assisted treaty in 1988 facilitated withdrawal of Soviet troops. In the years of struggle, 2 million Afghans died and 6 million moved to neighboring countries for safety and security.

The religious fundamentalist group, the Taliban, fought the pro-Soviet government and eventually took over and instituted extensive, extremely conservative measures: for example, forcing women into very modest, traditional clothing. They forced schools to be much more fundamentalist in their orientation. They kept women at home and out of the work force and school. They forced the nation into an extremely strict and oppressive version of Islamic life.

The fundamentalists also offered a home base for Osama bin Laden who set up training camps and bases in Afghanistan's almost inaccessible highlands. Once it was established that al Qaeda, bin Laden's group, was responsible for the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the U.S. military moved in both to wipe out al Qaeda and the Taliban government that was supporting them. Another goal was to establish a stable, broadly based government in Afghanistan.

It is such a rugged country of very tough people that it has been difficult for Afghanistan to become a modern nation. It was and remains a tribal society with a highly questionable and ineffective central government. The extent to which reform has worked or continues to work and the rate of recovery in Afghanistan are outside the scope of this essay. U.S. intelligence has reported that by no means were all members of al Qaeda eliminated. Some escaped to other countries while others may still be hidden in Afghanistan. They are still very much a threat.

How does this tie in with Iraq? As previously mentioned, the banyan tree of conflict developed new shoots and roots

after WWI. Iraq was set up under British control with a more or less arbitrary form of government, with no popular support. Through a series of coups, there was a takeover by an extremist party, the Baath, whose influence spread beyond Iraq and throughout much of the Middle East. General Kassem, who succeeded the Hashamite monarchy, ran a relatively open government, even giving opportunities for bureaucratic employment to the Shiites and Kurds. He was overthrown and executed by the Baathists in 1963. The repressive, totalitarian Baath party took over in 1968 with Sad dam Hussein as second-in-command. He then became first-in-command and ruled with an iron fist.

A war between Iraq and Iran began in 1981 and ended in 1988 with the United Nations' brokered settlement. In 1991, Iraq invaded Kuwait to take control of its rich oil fields. The Iraqi government had long claimed that Kuwait was historically a part of Iraq. This led the United States to intervene, with UN support and multinational involvement, to drive Iraq out and liberate Kuwait.

Rather than continuing the fighting to crush the army of Iraq, the war instead ended too soon. One of the side effects was that the Shiites, who were strong in southern Iraq, were massacred on a large scale. They had rebelled and when the Americans withdrew unexpectedly, Saddam worked his vengeance.

The Kurd's story is not quite as bad, because when a no-fly zone was set up in Iraq, it acted as an umbrella protecting the Kurds from attack for over a decade. They prospered and flourished in an increasingly participatory society. The Kurds, however, remained suspicious of long-term U.S. interest because of the failure to help their rebellion in 1991. The Kurds had suffered tremendous horrors under Saddam, including the poison gassing of thousands of women, children, and the elderly in Saddam's punitive strikes against them.

While Saddam was leading a secular totalitarian state, he manipulated the religious commitment of the people to support the regime. He built his government around the people of his

"hometown" region who were Sunni, filling positions in the military and government with them. This more or less assured their loyalty because their prosperity and success depended upon Saddam maintaining command.

The U.S. government claimed after the actions in Afghanistan that al Qaeda, or at least some portions of it, made arrangements with Iraq to acquire support, including weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Incidentally, Iraq, by international treaty, was forbidden to have weapons of mass destruction, that is, chemical, biological, or nuclear weapons, which were all supposed to have been destroyed after the Iraqis were defeated in 1991. The U.S. government claimed that contrary to those agreements, Iraq continued to produce weapons of mass destruction and could become the main supplier of such weapons to dissident movements, such as al Qaeda, operating around the world including in the United States.

Sanctions were levied on Iraq by the UN to push it toward compliance with its international agreements. For example, the revenue coming out of Iraq oil sales could be used only for food and medical supplies and a limited number of other items for Iraqi citizens. The use of that money gradually expanded. In spite of numerous UN demands, Saddam's regime seemed to be in constant violation of the limitations on WMD. The U.S. position came to a head in arguing Iraq was helping al Qaeda and that they were going to supply weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups. Therefore, they had to be stopped. The weapons inspection system set up under the UN moved slowly and found no unequivocal evidence of such weapons.

The United States chose to build a coalition force to disarm and remove Saddam Hussein's government. The disagreement with the UN over strategy made the war a two-country enterprise. The United States and the U.K. led the operation and received support from some two-score other countries, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey.

THE ROOTS

The conflicts between Iraq, the UN, and the United States have many banyan tree-like roots. First is the old hostility that exists within Islam between the Sunni and the Shiites-the former backing and dependent on the Hussein regime and the latter oppressed by the Hussein regime. Second is the consequence of the structure of Iraq and the failure to establish a Kurdish state at the end of WWI, giving Iraq a hostile, independence-seeking group. Third is the rise of oil as an important international resource, focusing the advanced nations' attention on the need for a guaranteed, stable supply of fuel.

Fourth, the totalitarianism of the Hussein regime stifled any internal reform and drove the lucky few dissident leaders out of the country. Fifth, Saddam took advantage of the Israel-Palestine situation to provide vocal support and arms to the Palestinians while raising the general cry of Pan Arabism against Israel. In the 1991 engagement between the UN and Iraq, some missiles were fired into Israel. They had more propaganda value than deadly effect but over the years added some Pan Arabic support to Iraq as an enemy of Israel and therefore a friend of the movement. Sixth, the response of fundamentalists throughout Islam built hostility toward the West and support (or at least sympathy) for any nation seen as standing up to the Western powers, hence the widespread resistance to disarming the nearly universally recognized villain, Saddam.

Seventh, the legacy of Western imperialism in the Middle East raises immediate suspicion of any proclaimed

motives behind intervention. Eighth is the cultural gap between the Islamic world and the West. Western leadership, especially in the United States, strongly plays down the reality of deep-seated cultural differences. The tendency is to see the other parties as thinking, valuing, and acting by the same customary rules we do. That assumption could not be further from reality and is rich in troublesome surprises. Ninth, the shock of 9/11 politically required a vigorous U.S. response with a continuing effort to track down al Qaeda and its supporters.

A BROADER VIEW

While the section above noted specific factors leading to the flourishing of the banyan tree of conflict, there remains the question, are there more universal factors that move us into violent conflict? There are several. First, ideology blinds us to alternatives. Commitment to an ideology, be it religious or secular, easily leads to "I am right and you are absolutely wrong." Ideology tends to make the world black and white, yet the reality is that most of our activities are in a gray zone.

Second, as Henry Kissinger emphasized during his time in the Nixon administration, "the urgent tends to drive out the important," in political discussion. Elected officials in our own country live in a relatively short-term world with two, four, or six years between elections. Appointed officials can have even shorter tenure. In large businesses, focus tends to be on short-term improvement. The result is that we don't pay attention to the larger, longer, slower-acting forces, in anticipating

how they could affect us.

Third is the inability to honestly acknowledge and appreciate cultural differences. Our elected leadership may be unable or unwilling to anticipate how a culturally different group with whom we are in conflict may see our actions or what actions they may take in response to ours or how we might misunderstand each other.

Fourth is a tendency to demonize the enemy, particularly when we don't understand them. Demonization puts them outside the boundaries of humanity and hence avoids any significant consideration of their motives, leaving us with only one goal: to neutralize, eliminate, or paralyze them.

Fifth, throughout the Middle East, but also in Africa and Latin America, in the last century there have been endless cases of state-based terrorism. That is, government being the aggressor in using illegal and immoral force, and imposing social, physical, economic, and too-often cruel and viciously physical punishment or restraints on people in order to maintain the status quo.

The failure of international organizations to make an attempt to stop state-based terrorism may slowly change. Iraq is an example of where state-based terrorism has gone on for decades. The United States, along with the UN, had an opportunity to intervene and prevent government terrorism in Iraq after the first Gulf War in 1991, but we didn't. The world has yet to learn that state-based terrorism is by far the greatest source of widespread violence against innocent people.