

The Middle East: *Problems and Promises*

By Fr. Dave Heney, February 2024

What went wrong?

Muslims remember a time years ago in the 8th century when Islamic armies conquered all of the Middle East, the North African continent, all of Spain and Portugal, and were even approaching Paris, France. This was the enormous Islamic *Caliphate*, or Islamic *kingdom* that dominated a vast region of the world. That Caliphate eventually collapsed, and France and Spain pushed Islamic armies back. The Middle East and North Africa were eventually subdivided and colonized by various European powers into separate States along borders arranged by those western rulers. Most states eventually became independent in the 20th century, again with governments that imitated western systems. Nevertheless, the loss of the Caliphate was perceived as a deeply humiliating loss of power and honor to this day.

Muslims recognize that the Middle East is now an economic and political disaster. Millions live in horrible poverty, with many living on just \$2 a day. Many politicians are corrupt and use power only to grow richer for themselves and their family. Devout Muslims wonder why is it that those who follow Allah, the One True God, live under such miserable economic and political conditions while secular western nations that are so dominated by sex, drugs, and immorality rule the world. How could Islam fall so low? *They wonder ...what went wrong!*

(See my article: "***Why do Islamic Fundamentalists hate America***" at daveheney.com)

In the early and mid-twentieth century, Muslim scholars, like Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sayyid Qutb, and others, believed that Islamic decline happened because *Muslims were not following original Islamic beliefs closely enough*. Muslims must return to a pure practice of the faith as it was at the time of Mohammed and especially avoid western cultural influence. They must return to rule by Allah alone rather than democracy which is rule by man. They developed a radical fundamentalist style that they believed would restore Islam to its former glory. The Wahhabi sect in Saudi Arabia and Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt are early examples of this new movement which would explode in recent years in even more radical and extremely violent styles forms such as Al Qaeda, ISIS, and Iran.

Radical Islamic Fundamentalists want the Caliphate back!

Religious sources and rivalries within Islam

The ***Quran*** is a sacred book which Muslims believe was dictated word for word by God to Mohammed over many years which he wrote down exactly as heard. It is considered the verbatim words of God and so has extraordinary authority over every aspect of life.

The **Hadiths** is a later book listing many of the sayings and deeds of Mohammed himself. For several generations after Mohammed, many of his followers collected remembered sayings and deeds into this book. Unlike the Quran, this book has a wide variety of authors and sources, some from many years after Mohammed's death. *It is in the Hadiths where most of the strictest Islamic rules and traditions are found.*

Mohammed did not designate a successor which led to serious controversy about who should lead this new religion in the future and how the two books should be understood. Eventually two rival factions emerged claiming that right to lead all Islamic faithful and interpret Islam.

Shia Muslims held that leadership should arise from *actual family descendants of Mohamed*. They are mostly in Iran, southern Iraq, and Syria, or about 20% of worldwide Islam.

Sunni Muslims held that the faithful *should guide themselves* according to the Quran and Hadiths. Sunni's dominate in all other Islamic states, or about 80% of all Islamic people.

Shia vs. Sunni rivalry; *after centuries of relative peace between these two factions, each group recently developed strands of radical and extreme Shia and Sunni fundamentalism that each seeks the final destruction of the other. This is not a mere political disagreement, but a final battle with extremists on each side seeking total victory. Most Middle East states have mainly either Shia or Sunni populations, therefore Shia states like Iran, Syria, and Iraq now oppose Sunni states like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan. This bitter and violent Shia vs. Sunni rivalry underlies much of what is happening between Middle East states today.*

Arab Cultural sources and Islam

Islam arose from within an **ancient Arab tribal culture** which has several deeply ingrained features, among those are Tribal Loyalty, Honor vs. Shame, Warrior Culture, Trading, Fatalism, Hospitality and keeping the Status Quo.

Tribal Loyalties Traditional Arab people see themselves first as family, clan, and tribe members and secondarily as state citizens. They value and reward loyalty to their family, clan, and tribe first, unlike western societies that value and reward personal skills and performance. Therefore Arab economic and political policies often feature favoritism towards tribal members over others. What we might call corruption is considered appropriate tribal loyalty and respect. Loyalty is often paid more to a tribal, clan, or family leader than a democratically elected official.

Religious affiliation, whether Islamic or Christian, is often a matter of loyalty to tribal, clan, and family lines. People tend to belong to religious communities because their entire tribe, clan, or

family does. Conversion to another religion is taken as disloyalty to your tribe, clan, or family, and is a serious betrayal, and in some radical Islamic communities, punishable by death.

Honor & Shame Honor is the *public perception* of one's reputation. It was the highest ancient Arab cultural value and desired even more than wealth. Honor comes from the *public perception* of strength, cleverness, domination, and power. Shame is the *public perception* of weakness, looking foolish, or losing in battle. In any conflict, there is only one winner and loser and never a "win-win" result. If one side grew in honor it must be at the expense of the other. Every effort was made to accrue honor and avoid shame. Even a question posed during normal conversation was a form of "battle" that the Gospels portray happening often between Pharisees and Jesus. When Jesus "wins" the Pharisees "lose" thereby increasing their anger.

Warrior Culture Ancient Arab tribal economies were often based on raiding neighboring caravans and nearby villages in sudden and swift attacks to destroy a competitor rather than an economy based on building a business enterprise with innovation or entrepreneurship. Careful strategy and planning were not needed in these brash and even reckless assaults. Success (and honor) often came from bold, fearless, and fairly short conflicts that were also opportunities to showcase much admired *personal* bravery and strength.

Trading The Middle East area was centrally located in the ancient world. For centuries caravans connected East and West with long threads of trade that exchanged spices and horses from the East with market goods and even literary classics from the West. Since every negotiation was a form of "battle" people valued bargaining and negotiation skills. Getting a "good deal" or making the other side look foolish greatly increased one's honor.

Horse breeding was an especially honored profession. When trading for horses, an ancient Arab maxim was "to always choose the strongest horse."

Fatalsim This describes a unique view of God's (Allah) role in the Islamic and Arabic world. Allah is seen as all powerful and controls *all* events, *whether good or bad*. If *anything* happens, it is because "Allah wills it." This sometimes limits personal responsibility, e.g., if a building collapses from faulty design, or people die from a terrorist's bomb, it is seen as "the will of Allah," rather than the builder's or terrorist's fault. This feature has prevented the normal "Lessons learned" exercises so common in the West when something goes wrong, and the ability to improve any process.

Hospitality A harsh desert area where life giving resources were scarce developed a wonderful custom of hospitality, protection, and provisions for nomadic guests who might perish if not welcomed into a nearby desert encampment. Guests were welcomed and protected no matter what their status. However, this feature also ensured the Taliban in

Afghanistan would not turn over Osama bin Laden to the US after 9-11 because he was a guest in their country.

Status Quo Traditional Arab peoples are still strongly guided by these features. Tribalism tends to be conservative and likes to maintain the status quo. *Innovation and entrepreneurship*, the hallmark of American and European economic and political success, were not encouraged in the Middle East. Therefore, many Middle Eastern states have not developed strong democratic institutions or enjoyed prosperity from the new global economy such as China and India have enjoyed.

Middle Eastern behaviors and events are a combination of all these cultural features that arise from the Quran, the Hadiths, and a pervasive and enduring ancient Arab tribal culture. Sometimes what we see in the Middle East has more to do with these Arab cultural features than anything else. Islam is kind of a devout but thin veneer on top of a deep seated Arab tribal culture. Knowing how to distinguish and recognize these features helps to understand events in the Middle East today.

Modern Radical Islamic Fundamentalism

Today, massive poverty and income inequality between the West, and Middle Eastern Islamic countries, has led to the rise of even more *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism* that demands the very strictest version of Islam as the best way to restore the ancient Islamic Caliphate.

These latest radical forms include terrorism, violent persecution, and military force as “Allah approved” methods to use against any who oppose establishing the ancient Islamic Caliphate, whether western nations or Arab states that use western political systems.

Any person or state that is not radical fundamentalist is considered an enemy and must be eliminated. Secular western nations and the US are the “far enemy” while westernized Muslim nations who have adopted western ways and behaviors are the “near enemy.” Radical Islamists are actually not anti-Semitic, but are ferociously anti-Israel because it is simply a non-Muslim state in the land of Mohammed, and so must be completely destroyed.

Sharia Law is the application of the strictest understanding of Islam to an entire community’s formal moral and legal systems. Some of Sharia Law comes from the *Quran*, but most comes from the *Hadiths*, which are not the direct words of Allah but the remembered and collected words and deeds of Mohammed himself. However, they are often vague and ambiguous sayings that can be interpreted many different ways. Radical Islamists use the strictest and harshest understanding, especially for even the smallest of infractions.

Disobeying Sharia law in Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shia Iran can result in scourging, dismemberment, and even stoning to death. In the most extreme forms, the penalty may be even harsher e.g. burned alive, buried alive, beheading, or dropped from tall buildings. Following Sharia Law can result in an afterlife of intense physical and sexual pleasures.

There are many radical groups that compete with each other in increasingly violent ways for Radical Islamic leadership against the West and within Middle Eastern Muslim nations to restore the Islamic Caliphate. ***Here are brief summaries of a few of them.***

Iran. In 1979, a radical fundamentalist Shia group led by Ayatollah Khomeini was the first radical Islamic group to actually take over a modern state; the government of Iran. It was the first time radicals now had the massive resources of a wealthy state to fund terrorism around the world. They especially consider the USA as the “The Great Satan” and its main enemy with whom *it can never make peace*. Many of the roadside bombs that killed or maimed US forces in Iraq were designed and made in Iran. Iran supports *Hezbollah*, a Shia terrorist group in Lebanon, the Shia Syrian government, and the Shia Iraqi government. Iran is also developing nuclear weapon capability which has united Israel with all other Sunni Middle East states that consider this nuclear capability and Iran’s other terrorist sponsoring behavior a mortal threat.

Al Qaeda is a Sunni group that tries to restore the Caliphate by first attacking the “far enemy” or decadent western culture as embodied by the USA. Al Qaeda uses the terror tactic of the unexpected bomb in a crowded area to frighten non-Muslims into submission. It is mainly funded by wealthy Sunni Arab donors. It was no accident that Al Qaeda attacked the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on 9-11 as a way of destroying both the USA global business enterprise and its military capability. After its initial defeat in Afghanistan it moved to Iraq. After its defeat there by US and coalition forces in 2009, it moved to Syria and eventually became ISIS (The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria).

ISIS is a Sunni group that tries to restore the Caliphate by actually capturing land, cities, and national resources from the “near enemy” like Muslims governments in Syria and Iraq. They are funded by the sale of captured oil resources, looting of banks, extortion, and kidnappings. As a sign of ancient religious credibility, they adopt many historical names, behaviors, and even military tactics from the time of Mohammed, such as beheadings, strict Sharia law, and swift and unexpected terror raids and attacks. Dying in this cause also guarantees physical pleasures in heaven. ISIS considers all Muslims who do not follow the most fundamentalist understanding as heretics for which the consequence is the cruelest public execution. ISIS broadcasts these atrocities on the internet to frighten neighboring villages and convey a fierce warrior image of unstoppable power.

Besides taking land, ISIS is now adopting Al Qaeda terrorism methods and encouraging Muslim people around the world to initiate their own “lone wolf” attacks on vulnerable but high value western targets that will ensure extensive worldwide television coverage.

The ISIS goal is to inaugurate a “final apocalyptic” battle between the west, (the USA) and the forces of radical Islam, at the end of which, Islamic prophets of old will intervene for final Islamic victory. Their early televised atrocities were designed to entice western retaliation and so begin that final apocalyptic battle, which they believe will occur near the Syrian town of Dabiq. (The ISIS recruiting magazine is called “Dabiq”)

Their initial stunning success at land acquisition and brutal tactics has contributed to their fierce and “winning warrior” image. The absence of a strong western response contributes to that sense of invulnerability and inevitable Radical Islamic success.

Young Arab men around the world are attracted by the prospect of excitement, adventure, success in battle, personal honor, money to send home to families, fulfilling a noble religious Islamic cause, even possibly receiving a wife, and the prospect of eternal physical and sexual pleasures in heaven!

Hamas is a Sunni group that developed from The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and is now located in the Gaza Strip. It has political and military sections both dedicated to Israel’s destruction. It has received billions of dollars for years, especially from Iran and Turkey. Much of it went into military supplies and digging tunnels into Israel for terrorist infiltration. They often launch poorly aimed short range missiles into Israeli farmland. They also use innocent citizens as human shields by placing military arms and missiles in schools, hospitals, and marketplaces. In the 2014 Hamas war against Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan broke with Hamas and sided with Israel! In the last four Hamas wars, Egypt brokered ceasefires. In the 2023 War, Israel will fight to permanently remove Hamas from the Gaza Strip.

Hezbollah is a Shia group located in southern Lebanon along the northern Israeli border; an area they practically run as a private mini-state. They are funded almost entirely by Iran. Their last major offensive against Israel was in 2006, which led to a draw. Recently, they have mainly been preoccupied trying to defend the Shia Syrian government from ISIS and other armed factions and so have focused all their efforts there rather than anti-Israeli action.

Taliban are a Sunni group located mainly in Afghanistan and just inside Pakistan. They originally harbored Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda training camps according to the Arab virtue of hospitality and would not turn him over to the US after the 9-11 attack. Although out of power now, they still have an uneasy relationship with the new democratically elected Afghan government. They also keep their activities centered in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and receive

much funding from the Heroin crop grown in Afghanistan. They continue to look for opportunities to return to power in Afghanistan.

Religious Persecution Many of these radical Islamic groups are violently *intolerant* of any other faith, especially Jews and Christians. Although Radical Islam reveres Jesus as a Prophet, it condemns to death any who believe He is divine and the Son of God. The Christian community is widely scattered throughout the Middle East, with large minority populations mainly in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Israel. Christians are under tremendous pressure in Iraq and Syria, but better protected in Egypt, Lebanon, and certainly Israel. Terrorism and persecution especially in Iraq and Syria has caused most to emigrate in great fear for their lives. Radical Islamic persecution has involved horrific tortures, including beheadings and even crucifixions. It would be a profound tragedy if Christianity were to disappear from the Holy Land.

Convert to radical Islam or die *No amount of western diplomacy, polite discourse, foreign aid, good behavior, appeasement, or respectful negotiations by western nations or even lukewarm Muslims can change that permanent enemy status that Western nations, Christianity, and Jews have by simply being non-radical Muslims. Only devout radical Islamic fundamentalists are accepted. Everyone else, even Muslims, must either convert to this radical Islamic fundamentalism or be eliminated!*

Modern & Ancient Radical Islamic Customs

Many of these militant groups want to restore the Caliphate precisely as it was at the time of Mohammed. They use ancient religious terminology and religious practices of that time, such as beheadings, sharia law, and strict moral codes to establish credibility with that time period.

They also take advantage of the modern “battleground” of your television set in your home. A graphic and violent news video coming into your home of an exploding bomb in a crowded marketplace filled with women and children horribly massacred or the capture of an Iraqi city with the tortuous death of thousands of innocent civilians can instill fear around the world.

ISIS is especially skillful with social media to both publicize their extraordinarily violent and cruel executions and to recruit new members from around the world.

All these groups are in a desperate and increasingly violent competition with each other using both ancient and modern means to be the dominant radical fundamentalist Islamic force in the world today. Images of dominance and power are the “currency” of this extremist culture. We can expect each to seek more spectacular terror events to showcase their power. How does it attract recruits from around the world? Why would young people, especially travel to this area to join ISIS or any of the other terror groups?

Cultural Importance of the “Strongest Horse”

In Middle Eastern Arab culture, which has a long history of horse breeding and trading, as well as a warrior tradition, there is a well-known saying that guides much of Arab life. When choosing horses... *always go with the strongest horse*. They ask today, “Is the USA or ISIS or Al Qaeda or Iran or Russia the strongest horse?”

If Al Qaeda or ISIS or Iran *appears* stronger, then Islamic youth looking for excitement, spiritual purpose, and adventure, *and to be on the winning side of strong warriors* will join the fight. If the US coalition appears stronger, then Arab youth will not join. Since Al Qaeda is mainly a terrorist organization of isolated cells around the world, it is harder to defeat. Its aura of success depends on successful attacks by small bands of terrorists, such as the “Charlie Hebdo” events in Paris, or Fort Hood massacre in Texas.

However, ISIS is a land army, with no air force or navy. It’s aura of success depends entirely on capturing and maintaining of land and isolated towns and villages. These are easy to capture but hard to hold and maintain. In addition, ISIS has yet to fight a modern well trained combined air and land military force. If ISIS begins to lose land to Iraqi and US Coalition forces, or if local people rise up and rebel from their harsh rule, it will immediately lose its “aura” of being the “stronger horse.” Everyone will see it as the losers they actually are.

The USA as the Stronger Horse: After 9-11, the US carefully analyzed the immediate and global causes of this horrible attack and made the thoughtful assessment that our real enemy was not the individual 19 hijackers but the rise of radical Islamic fundamentalism across the Middle East. This parallels the decision of the USA in December 1941 when it wisely determined not to target the 300 Japanese pilots who bombed Pearl Harbor but rather the entire Japanese Imperial Military System that ordered that sneak military attack. In World War II, the goal was always *global and comprehensive*; to dismantle the entire Japanese military government and the entire Nazi Germany military government. The size of these global threats determined the size of the US response which was truly a world-wide effort. It was not a “police action” to arrest individual Japanese or German leaders but an effort to change entire cultures.

The US and all its allies in 2001 determined that Radical Islamic Fundamentalism was gaining the resources of wealthy oil rich States, like Iran, Iraq and Libya, but also in heroin rich Afghanistan. All these states were dictatorships with no accountability to their citizens, leading radical leaders like Iraq’s Saddam Hussein, the Iranian Ayatollahs, the Taliban’s Mullah Omar, and Libya’s Muammar Khadafy to use state resources for terror against the west. In addition, they all were a threat to Israel, the only true democracy in the Middle East and our longtime ally.

Therefore, the US embarked on a comprehensive multi-nation program to change the entire region of the Middle East from an area prone to radical Islamic fundamentalism arising from a sense of historical decline, to a region that would enjoy political and economic prosperity, especially for the immense populations of poor and disenfranchised people. They entered as the stronger horse.

Afghan and Iraq Invasions

The invasions of both Afghanistan and Iraq were an attempt to change the culture of violent Islamic religious extremism to an indigenous and home grown *Middle Eastern style democracy* to allow for fairer power sharing between Shia and Sunnis, and a *free-market capitalism* to help these Middle East states join the global economy and finally enjoy the prosperity that families around the world enjoy. The underlying purpose of both efforts was *regime change* as both governments in Afghanistan and Iraq supported radical Islamic fundamentalism. That was considered the main mortal threat to the people of the United States, and the world, and so both efforts received strong congressional approval.

In 2002, after initial and swift military success in Afghanistan, led by Afghan tribes with American Special Forces support and US Air force airstrikes, free elections were held that brought forth a new government along nascent Afghani democratic and capitalist ideals. Al-Qaeda forces soon left the area and moved to Iraq.

The underlying basis for the US Iraq invasion was clearly the regime change of Saddam Hussein who was supporting Islamic extremism and not principally about weapons of mass destruction (WMD). The basis of the WMD rationale was to build a coalition in the United Nations which does not recognize regime change as a cause for UN action. However, the UN supported the US led coalition against Iraq because Iraq had previously invaded Iran, invaded Kuwait, used WMD several times before on its own citizens, and was becoming increasingly bellicose again toward the west. After many years of active western intelligence surveillance, all western intelligence agencies were in agreement that there was sufficient and reasonable cause to believe that Iraq had WMD capability, inventory, and motivation, leading to a solid UN resolution authorizing the use force against Iraq to stop its aggression.

In 2003, after the swift initial success of the US invasion of Iraq and overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime, Muamar Khadafy, perhaps thinking he was next, and respecting the “Strong Horse” tactics of the USA led coalition, surrendered his entire stockpile of WMD. Prospects for Middle East peace looked good at that moment. Interestingly, Iran also suspended for a time its own nuclear weapons program, perhaps thinking they would be next as well.

However, Sunni Al Qaeda forces successfully continued a violent insurgency in Iraq, mainly against Shia civilians and Shia religious shrines, again to help Sunni Islam conquer Shia Islam.

The situation seriously deteriorated into chaos for several years. Many of the recently disbanded Iraqi army joined the insurgency. *Hundreds of thousands* of innocent Iraqi civilians died in Shia-Sunni violence along with over 4,000 Americans. People around the world were horrified at the carnage and struggled to understand. Consequently, the entire war effort became part of a bitter presidential campaign in 2004, leading to confusion and uncertainty among both Americans and our Arab allies about American goals. Our Arab allies in the Middle East did not know who to trust or with whom to align themselves.

Nevertheless, in 2006, US Army General David Petraeus assessed that the key to success was to enlist Arab Sunni tribal leaders, the real source of authority in Arab culture, to the anti Al-Qaeda cause. ***This also placed the real solution to Sunni Radical Islamic Fundamentalists in the hands of Sunni Muslims themselves.*** They would be advised and led by US military planning, but would be the army that would rather quickly defeated Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The USA sent a “surge” of thousands of American troops to partner with Arab Sunni tribal chieftains against Al-Qaeda in Iraq. As a consequence of this massive military show of strength, many Iraqi tribal chieftains in the large Anbar region of Iraq recognized the US as the “Stronger Horse” and switched sides from Al Qaeda to the US, and ordered their tribes to follow. After this famous “***Anbar Awakening,***” Al Qaeda quickly left for Syria.

A similar “surge” of US forces occurred in 2009 in Afghanistan with similar successful results.

From 2009 to 2013, the US Administration frequently affirmed that Iraq and Afghanistan were finally “peaceful and prosperous.” Internationally recognized fair elections in Iraq installed a relatively inclusive government with both Sunni and Shia factions. The Middle East was finally on the verge of success.

If Arab governments could secure the safety of their citizens with strong and confident measures and develop a more just economic and political system that brings prosperity, justice, and religious freedom to the region, the need for a Islamic Caliphate would fade for both ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Iran. The Arab Spring in 2010 revealed that this change is exactly what the vast majority of young Arab people across the Middle East desperately wanted.

The Arab Spring of 2010-11

In 2009, Iranian youth erupted in widespread demonstrations across the country against the radical Islamic government over obvious and massive fraud in the elections that year. They appealed for US help, which was refused. The demonstrations were eventually violently crushed.

In late 2010, Arab youth erupted again in powerful but peaceful demonstrations; this time *throughout* the Middle East called the **Arab Spring**. *Why did this happen?*

The Middle East today remains largely poor and underdeveloped. About 50% of the Middle East is under the age of 30 ...*and 50% of them are unemployed!* In that culture, a young Arab man cannot get married unless he has a job, and there are not enough jobs. Despite high economic growth, Arab people know that much of their country's wealth goes to a small elite upper class, or elder tribal members, or the leader himself. Millions of Arab youth simply want to get married and start a family and deeply resent their poor status especially when they know so much economic wealth goes to corrupt government, military, and even tribal officials.

Muslims and Christians in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt joined together in late 2010 and early 2011 to overthrow corrupt governments and demand a more just free market system so that everyone could participate in the rising global economy. *Amazingly, there were no anti-Israel or anti-American chants or even pro-Islam chants from the millions of Islamic youth who demonstrated across the Middle East at that time.* The Arab Spring was a heartfelt expression of both Christian and Islamic Arab youth across the Middle East for economic viability and political stability ...for the noble and honorable purpose of simply having a family!

The revolutions were successful in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. However, when the newly democratically elected leader of Egypt, Mohammed Morsi, made the economy even worse, promoted Islamic fundamentalism, and even attacked Christians, the whole country rose up in opposition and he was peacefully but swiftly removed a year later. The present leader, Abdel Sisi, a devout Muslim, has united Muslims and Christians together again and has begun significant economic recovery. He even attended Christmas midnight mass as a sign of solidarity with Christians!

The Arab Spring revealed that the vast majority of Arabs, and especially Arab youth, do not support Islamic Fundamentalism and seek only a better and honorable life for themselves and their family. In Egypt, ordinary Arab citizens, both Christian and Muslim successfully removed a corrupt civilian leader, and later a radical Islamic leader. The Egyptian and Tunisian Arab Spring revealed that the people themselves can reclaim their countries for a better future that is politically, economically, and religiously free.

The Syrian-USA "Red Line" and Rise of ISIS

Syria is an Arab country with significant Shia, Sunni, and Christian populations that have recently lived in relative peace. The latest Shia leader, Bashar Assad, has dictatorial powers but has attempted to support all groups. Nevertheless, Sunni Syrians rose up in the spirit of the Arab Spring seeking even more political, economic, and religious freedom.

Assad learned from his Shia ally Iran and the Iranian military brutal and deadly response to the Iranian Green revolution of 2009. In the same way, Assad brutally crushed the Syrian Spring, which then continued as a full military fight between government forces and various armed Sunni factions taking advantage of the general chaos to fight a Shia regime. The brutality of the fighting has only lured even more brutal groups to each side, with Shia and Sunni governments as supporters. The Syrian Spring has collapsed into a “fight to the death” between Shia and Sunni radicals, with the Syrian people the unfortunate victims of both sides.

Millions of Syrians became displaced both within and outside the country, mainly in camps along the Jordanian, Lebanese, and Turkish borders. Recently, refugees have sought safety in Europe and even the US.

Each side used increasingly violent tactics, including poison gas by the government in 2013 against Sunni rebels. The US had earlier declared that the use of poison gas was a “red line” that Syria must not cross or face retaliation. The USA backed off that threat which has had enormous and long lasting consequences in many areas. It was a “negotiating battle” that the USA was seen to have lost to Shia Syria, Iraq, and Iran.

Sunni Muslims believed the USA let Assad off the hook to appease Shia Iran with whom negotiations had begun earlier on the Shia Iranian nuclear program. Sunni Muslims perceived American weakness and its tilt toward Iran as a clear signal to Assad and the various armed Sunni factions that promises from the US were not reliable, and that the US *would never intervene with force*. This tilt toward Shia Iran also strengthened the Shia Iraqi government that continued its suppression of Sunni tribes.

Groups like ISIS recognized immediately that they were safe from attack from the US. ISIS swiftly filled in the gap left by the absence of US forces, the weakness of the Iraqi Army officer corps, and the chaos in Syria. ISIS also capitalized on Sunni resentment of the Shia Iraqi leaders anti-Sunni policies. Their new charismatic leader, al-Baghdadi embarked on a successful program of land and town acquisitions.

Military success often comes from effective and inspiring leaders who can accomplish their missions and provide for their troops. ISIS had a charismatic and forceful leader along with highly professional former Saddam Hussein military officers who could effectively lead and supply their troops. Their rapid success led to a well-deserved reputation as the “winning warrior” and “stronger horse” as compared to the US, Syria, and Iraqi forces.

Why did the Iraqi Army fail to stop ISIS?

Iraq has both Sunni and Shia populations. However, the rapid withdrawal of US forces and loss of influence led to the collapse of this inclusive Shia-Sunni government that had just become

solvent and successful in 2009. In the absence of US direction, the new Shia Prime Minister removed both Sunni politicians and many of the US Army highly trained professional Iraqi officers from the military and installed incompetent political appointees, and even his own corrupt relatives.

The Iraq Army collapsed in the face of ISIS not because of cowardice or a lack of will but because their recently installed officers were grossly incompetent. Military success is almost entirely based on effective leadership which was entirely missing. The officers that were highly trained by the US Army were replaced with incompetent political appointees. They failed to supply their troops with food, water, and especially ammunition. No army anywhere can fight without food, water, ammo, and competent leaders.

Recently, American and coalition forces fighting ISIS are now rapidly trying to replicate what had worked so well in Iraq in 2008 and 2009, namely, the recruitment of Sunni tribal leaders and Kurdish forces that are trained again by US forces who will produce troops for the fight. However, the continuing fallout from the Syrian-Red Line debacle has eroded the credibility of the US with the tribal leaders with whom we would like recruit.

The Shia Iranian Nuclear Program

Iran began a program years ago to build a nuclear weapon which became a source of “honor” for the Shia Iranian people. *This is a serious escalation of the traditional Shia-Sunni rivalry!*

The problem is that neighboring Sunni regimes, like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, will want one too. *Sunni states will not tolerate a Shia state getting a nuclear weapon without their getting one as well, and they can simply buy them from North Korea, Russia, Pakistan, or China.* This will lead to an uncontrolled Middle East nuclear arms race. None of these regimes have a good track record of arms security, so who knows where these nuclear arms might end up! It is easy to see how various terrorist groups could have easy access to them.

In addition, Iran has continuously expressed the goal of eradicating Israel and its 8 million people. Israel clearly considers Iran an enemy, and has considered a preemptive strike against its nuclear facilities.

To counter this threat against Israel and the whole of the Middle East, the US along with strong resolutions from the United Nations displayed “Strong Horse” diplomacy with severe economic sanctions against the Iranian regime. It worked! *The Iranian government desperately asked for negotiations to alleviate their severe economic plight.*

Iran entered into complex negotiations with the US over its nuclear program, but still continued its bomb making capabilities and support for worldwide terrorism.

The recently signed agreement is not a formal treaty but rather a lower level Presidential Agreement. Any future President can disavow it.

Reasons for the Agreement: US negotiators *want to cooperate with Iran* and believe this treaty is the best way to slow down Iranian nuclear capability. They believe compromise and cooperation between opposing nations is possible, and recall the good effects that came in the 1970's from Nixon's trip to China and the "Detente" policy of economic and commercial engagement with the Soviet Union.

They also believe that ending sanctions and legitimizing the Iranian Government will moderate its involvement in terrorism, and help Iran fight ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

Both Russia and China are the strongest proponents in that they are eager to sell large military systems and weapons to Iran.

Proponents also believe they can catch any Iranian cheating with relatively fast inspections that can happen "anywhere and anytime." However, they also acknowledge that inspections of any specific nuclear site can take over 20 days to actually commence if Iran objects.

Finally, the US believes it is in our interests to reintegrate a large powerful Middle Eastern country into world affairs rather than have it outside and unapproachable. The eagerness of many other nations to re-engage with Iran in trade helps support that argument.

Reasons against the Agreement: Opponents want to *end the radical Islamic Iranian regime*, not cooperate with leaders they cannot trust and believe cannot change, and believe seriously and cruelly oppress their people. They believe there is no comparison with examples of China and the Soviet Union during Cold War.

In the 1970's and 1980's, both Chinese and Soviet Union leaders were guided by faded communist theories that most of their own leaders no longer even believed. But Iran has devout religious leaders with deeply held extreme religious beliefs that cannot change and that completely guide government policy. These leaders believe Sharia law comes directly from God so no compromise is ever possible, especially with the "Great Satan USA" and so Iran will continue its war against the USA and Israel, and use nuclear weapons.

Opponents also recall that in the 1980's the US wanted to *end Communism once and for all* and led a robust arms race that bankrupted and deeply weakened the Soviet Union, which inspired Poland and other Eastern European states to revolt, leading to the final communist collapse in 1989. Similarly, they believe most Iranians do not accept the radical Islam of their leaders and actually want the same type of direct US confrontation to end the Iranian government that the US used to collapse the Soviet Union.

Finally, opponents believe that in the absence of “anywhere-anytime” inspections, Iran will certainly cheat on the Agreement provisions and continue to build a nuclear capability. Iranians believe the US will never use force against it, and so can cheat easily with no consequences.

What about sanctions relief? Iran will receive around 130 to 150 billion dollars as its foreign assets are released. All Middle Eastern countries believe Iran will not use that cash to help Iranian people or the domestic economy, but will use it to fund its military support for Iranian militias in Iraq, Syria, as well as Hezbollah, and Hamas, and its constant war against Israel and the USA. In this period of easing of sanctions Russia and China are eager to sell new weapons systems to Iran.

Every Sunni Middle Eastern nation opposes this treaty, except, of course, Shia Iraq and Syria, which are client states of Iran. They rest believe that Iran will use the newly released funds for terrorism, and will easily cheat on the agreement, prevent inspections, and continue to build a nuclear bomb.

Iran desperately sought negotiations because of powerful and successful Western sanctions. They were economically weak and close to collapse when they sought out negotiations. However, Iranians soon discovered that the US desperately wanted a nuclear deal more and so Iran successfully held out for better terms. They are now perceived as having outfoxed the USA in the highly prized Middle Eastern art of negotiations.

The Basic Question is; Can diplomacy alone change Iran’s behavior, or will diplomacy need to be backed with some kind of force, either economic, military, or both?

What is the promise? ...free markets, free people, and freedom of religion

The Middle East continues to be rocked by competing Shia and Sunni extremist Islamic factions, the desperate plight of millions of poor people including millions of war refugees, and the violent regime of terror against the west. People throughout the region struggle to find answers to several important questions:

- ***Why is the Middle East so poor?***
- ***What is the true understanding of Islam?***
- ***What is the proper place of Islam among other faiths in the world today?***
- ***Can Islamic countries join the world economy and keep their faith and culture intact?***

Whenever Islamic answers have included global violence and terrorism, the west gets involved to fight back, as it should. That role has evolved over the years but it can never end as long as the threat is there. How we see the size of the threat determines our response. Most have seen the threat to be large and existential, leading to a corresponding large and comprehensive

political, economic, and military response. Those who see the threat is small favor smaller police-like actions of arrest and trial of individual terrorists.

Demographic divide offers a promise of peace: The millions of Iranian youth that revolted in 2009 against fraudulent elections and the millions of Tunisian, Libyan, Egyptian, and Syrian youth that formed the Arab Spring in 2011 revealed that there is a clear demographic divide in the Middle East. While many of the older generation of religious and state leaders are guided by radical Islamic fundamentalism and ancient Arab culture, much of the 50% of the Middle East that is young wants only the simple dignity that comes from having a job that ensures the viability of a marriage and family. They care nothing of the caliphate.

Even if Al-Qaeda and ISIS are defeated Radical Islam will remain. Responsible Muslim leaders can help by delegitimizing that radical interpretation of Islam. That means preaching against ISIS and Al-Qaeda version every week, every month, and for years.

The global economic system is moving ahead with or without the Middle East. To the extent Arab and Islamic states can participate in a way that keeps basic values, avoids the worst of western cultural influence, promotes the rule of law, ensures real democracy, *freedom of religion*, and economic prosperity for Middle Eastern families; then peace may be possible.

The final answers must come from leaders within the Arab world and Islam. The west will certainly help as friendly global “neighbors” but the path to responsible world citizenship lies with them.

Israel & Palestine: *problems and promises*

By Fr. Dave Heney

What is the problem?

Before WWI, the entire Middle East was part of the Ottoman Empire, centered in modern day Turkey. The Turks largely neglected political and economic development of the Middle East and simply exploited it for its mineral resources. Already quite poor and undeveloped, the region became even poorer.

During WWI, the Turks allied with Germany. The British and French promised statehood and prosperity to the Arab tribes if they would rise up against the Turks. This successful effort was led in part by British officer T.E. Lawrence, the famous “Lawrence of Arabia.” However, France and Britain later cynically divided the land for themselves instead. France took what is now Lebanon and Syria, while Britain took what is now Iraq, Jordan, and Israel. The latter two areas were one area called Palestine. In 1921, the area east of the Jordan River became the country of Transjordan. The area on the west remained Palestine, an area filled with both Jews and Arabs.

For many years Jewish and Arab settlers continued to move into Palestine. However, in anticipation of statehood one day, the Jewish settlers slowly developed the infrastructure of a state, with factories, industries, farms, roads, schools, hospitals, a University, and even resurrected ancient Hebrew as a modern language.

In 1947, the United Nations divided what is now Israel into semi-equal Jewish and Arab population areas, with Jews and Arabs predominant in each area. The goal was to make neither side dominant in the overall region which would hopefully lead to cooperation between Jews and Arabs with a small new future State of Israel. However, when Israel became a state in 1948, neighboring Arab countries immediately attacked in a massive military confrontation. Israel was militarily successful and annexed even more areas for better defense in the future. Palestinians in those areas either migrated within the country or emigrated, losing their homes and property.

In 1967, seeing signs of an massive and imminent Arab invasion from Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, Israel launched a pre-emptive strike which was successful and led to Israel’s control of the entire West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Sinai Peninsula, although none were ever formally annexed as part of Israel. In 1973, Egypt and Syria suddenly attacked Israel again but were decisively beaten. As a result, Egypt and Jordan signed formal peace treaties with Israel that remain

effective today. Israel returned Sinai to Egypt in 1974. While Israel still nominally controls the West Bank and Gaza, it has ceded almost total control of the Gaza and various levels of control in areas of the West Bank to the Palestinians.

The legacy of the wars against Israel has revealed that Arab states cannot successfully confront Israel militarily. While Israel and Jordan honored their own peace treaties, other Arab countries changed their anti-Israel tactics to individual acts of terrorism, suicide bombings, unguided missiles from Hamas and Hezbollah, and rock-throwing demonstrations. Israel responded by establishing settlements of Israeli citizens into the West Bank, and establishing various zones of military and political control and checkpoints throughout the West Bank.

Key Issue: Israeli Security vs. Palestinian Sovereignty

Palestinians have felt since 1947 that they have lost sovereign control of land, especially in the West Bank and Gaza that they want back. Israelis have felt that they are surrounded by mortal enemies who have invaded Israel several times, continue acts of terrorism, and seek its total destruction. Therefore, Israelis want reliable and trustworthy safety and security. The actions of both sides have been to achieve these deeply felt aims; *reliable safety for Israel and recognized sovereignty for Palestinians*. Sometimes those actions have been through peaceful negotiations and sometimes it has been through violence and war.

Three Possible Solutions

- **ONE STATE OF PALESTINE:** Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran want the entire region to be one state of Palestine, with no Israel at all. The State of Israel would be totally and completely destroyed.
- **ONE STATE OF ISRAEL:** Conservative Israelis want the entire West Bank, Gaza Strip, and Israel to be one Israeli state with no Palestinian “state” entity at all, however, Palestinians would still be able to live within Israel.
- **TWO STATES OF ISRAEL & PALESTINE:** The official US, United Nations, European Union, and Russian position is to have a Two-State solution with a safe and secure Israel from attack and a prosperous and sovereign Palestinian State.

Israeli Settlements

After the 1967 Six-Day War, as a way to bolster its defensive position from total annihilation from invasion or terror attacks from the West Bank, Israel began to allow Israeli citizens to build new fortified settlements there. It was in effect, extending its national border further away from Israel proper. Palestinians, however, feel that Israel is confiscating land that belongs to

them. New large settlement building has now largely ceased, with the exception of extending existing settlements with new adjacent neighborhoods to accommodate population increases of those original settlers. Most settlements are near the Israeli border, with the highest group and largest settlements near Jerusalem itself.

The Palestinian Authority

Beginning in the 1994, Israel ceded some control of the West Bank and total control of Gaza to the new Palestinian Authority (PA), which is the political entity that was developed by successful Palestinian and Israeli negotiations (The Oslo Accords) and that runs Palestinian affairs to this day. In the West Bank, various areas have different levels of Israeli and Palestinian controls, with many checkpoints and security barriers between them.

There are two main political parties in the Palestinian Authority; **Fatah**, which is located in the West Bank, and **Hamas**, which is located in Gaza. *Hamas* has consistently attacked Israel over the years from its bases in Gaza with rocket attacks and terrorist infiltration. Hamas wants a Palestinian one-state solution and the destruction of Israel. The US considers *Hamas* to be a terrorist organization and will not negotiate with them. *Fatah* is more moderate and has joined with Israel and the US on many issues of governance, security forces training, and economic progress toward a two-state solution.

Ironically, Hamas and Fatah have frequently fought militarily with each other over the years with many casualties on both sides. The Palestinians remain deeply divided between these two groups, with both claiming to represent Palestine, but actually making realistic negotiations for peace with Israel more difficult. The two groups have polar opposite positions. *Fatah favors a two-state solution with Israel and Palestine side by side and Hamas wants a one state solution with the complete destruction of Israel.*

The Intifada (uprising) and Israeli Security Fence

In the year 2000, Israel and Palestine came the closest ever to peace brokered by the US, but it failed when Yasser Arafat, the President of the Palestinian Authority, refused to sign the agreement. The Palestinians then launched several years of violent terrorist attacks and bombings against Israeli people in cafes, restaurants, and busses in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Over 1,000 Israeli citizens perished, which compared to the population of the United States is equivalent to over 50,000 Americans. No country anywhere can tolerate such atrocities from another country.

As a direct consequence of the intifada, and to prevent infiltration of terrorists from the Palestinian territories, Israel built a long Security Fence completely around the West Bank and

its border with Gaza. About 90% of the Security Fence is an electrified chain-link fence with camera monitors. In more highly sensitive urban areas it is a high concrete wall.

The Security Fence has made Israelis feel much safer and has contributed to a faster progress on a peace plan. The Security Fence has been virtually 100% effective, stopping all terrorist infiltration from the West Bank and Gaza.

While stopping terrorist bombings, the Security Fence remains a source of tension today in that it divides Palestinian workers in the West Bank from their jobs in Israel. It is irritating and even humiliating for those who must cross and tense and even dangerous for those who must guard it. The process of crossing every day sometimes becomes an occasion of needless bullying by Israeli soldiers and emotional protests by workers.

The route of the Security Fence is also controversial in that it sometimes divides villages and farms and prevents easy travel for families.

Present Plan for Peace: Pre-1967 Borders with Land Swaps

The main peace plan of the United Nations, USA, Europe, most Middle Eastern states, and even among Palestinians and Israelis is that Israel will return to its pre-1967 borders and cede control of the West Bank and Gaza to a new Palestinian State. In addition, some areas of the West Bank that have large Israeli settlements will go to Israel and other areas will go to the Palestinians, in "Land-Swaps." The Palestinians will accept the right of Israel to exist and stop all attacks, and the Israelis will respect the sovereignty of the new Palestinian State.

What is delaying this plan is the presence of the terrorist group Hamas in Gaza. The majority of Israeli politicians will not negotiate with a group that seeks their destruction, nor will Hamas negotiate with Israelis. Hamas wants Israel destroyed and is not interested in any peace plan at all. The Iranian nuclear program has also helped create a climate of instability in the area, also threatening Israel's sense of security.

What is the promise? ...As Israel found success, so can Palestine

Before Israel became a State, Jewish people were the victims of worldwide persecution and discrimination, especially in Europe. In the decades before WWII, Jews were utterly alone and unsupported in the world community. Many immigrated to Palestine and located mainly in small clusters in the north on undesirable swampland purchased at great price from Arab and Turkish owners. With remarkable initiative, they soon created large factories, schools, farms, and businesses. *Long before they were a state, they built the infrastructure of a state.* They were ready for statehood success, and so could successfully beat back consecutive massive attacks from Arab countries in 1948, 1967, and 1973.

What are the Abraham Accords?

Today, Israel has a booming entrepreneurial economy with a very high standard of living with a fair and lively parliamentary democratic system. They are by far the most successful democratic and capitalist state in the Middle East in every category, economic, political, and social.

All surviving Arab governments remember the Arab Spring Revolts and fear further youth unrest and so are focused on creating jobs and economic progress. This economic focus helped Saudi Arabia surpass Egypt as the leader of the Arab world. The Saudis are rapidly shifting their economy away from oil and into other sources of economic revenue for their young people.

Arab nations want to share in Israel prosperity, so in 2019, the US government began a peace treaty process, called *The Abraham Accords*, between Israel and Arab nations. So far, Morocco, Bahrain, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates have made peace with Israel. Egypt and Jordan made peace decades ago. Saudi Arabia also began the process for peace with Israel as well. About five other Arab nations also signaled their willingness to make peace with Israel soon.

The recent Hamas-Israel war is the attempt by Iran to stop Israel-Saudia Arabian peace, at the cost of thousands of lives. Israel has called on all Gazans to evacuate combat zones and almost one million have. The rest cannot be considered innocent as they aid the Hamas army. Saudia Arabia has declared several times that their peace with isral will come when the war is over.

Today, Palestinians are clustered in areas of the West Bank similar to areas of Jews in pre-statehood Israel. Unlike Israel, Palestinians have the sympathies of most world leaders around the world and have received billions of dollars in aid over the years, yet very little has gone to schools, roads, factories, hospitals, and businesses. In the Gaza Strip almost all foreign aid goes to underground tunnels and armaments. The corruption of Palestinian leaders has seriously hampered Palestinian economic and political success.

The global economic system is moving ahead with or without Palestinian leaders. If they were to build the infrastructure of a state before they have a state, as Israel did in the 1930's and 1940's, Palestinians could achieve the same prosperity and success as Israel has enjoyed for all its citizens, ...which would love to have a successful, vibrant, peaceful, and sovereign community right next door with which to trade. A new State of Palestine, at peace with is neighbor Israel, could be a beacon of economic prosperity for its own long-suffering citizens who long for a good life for their families. Both countries could then lead the whole Middle East into a more promising future that respects the religious freedom of Muslims, Jews, and Christians.

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