

# THE BEAT GOES ON— AND ON AND ON

BY GERALD E. MARSH

*“The key to understanding the current chaos in the Middle East is to recognize that the primary identity of its people is with their religion, sect, tribe, and family—not the states formed” following the breakup of the Ottoman Empire.*

**T**HIS IS NOT the first time that the Barbarians, today in the guise of the Islamic State, have descended on the Middle East. The first was the destruction of the irrigation canal system built some 4,000 years ago by the Sumerians in Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates, now part of Iraq. This occurred at the time of Hulagu, the great-grandson of Genghis Khan, who sacked Baghdad in 1258, executing much of the population. Under the rule of the Mongols, the practice of Islam was forbidden.

There was a Faustian bargain made by the U.S. with Saudi Arabia in the Bitter Lake agreement of 1945 between Pres. Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz ibn Saud: the U.S. would support al-Saud family rule in return for the free flow of oil to the West. As a result, the Barbarians today are a part of Islam—the extremist Wahhabi form from Saudi Arabia whose spread is driven by that country’s oil wealth. Even the mainstream press finally has made this connection.

David Kirkpatrick of *The New York Times*, in

his September 2014 “Memo from Iraq,” said that the leaders of the Islamic State “are open and clear about their almost exclusive commitment to the Wahhabi movement of Sunni Islam. The group circulates images of Wahhabi religious textbooks from Saudi Arabia in the schools it controls. Videos from the group’s territory have shown Wahhabi texts plastered on the sides of an official missionary van. . . . Wahhabi tradition embraced the killing of those deemed unbelievers as essential to purifying the community of the faithful. . . . Islamic State ideologues often deem anyone who supports an elected or secular government to be an unbeliever, even Islamists, and subject to beheading.”

That same month, *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman, three-time recipient of the Pulitzer Prize, quoted the liberal Saudi analyst Turki al-Hamad’s response—in the London-based *Al-Arab* newspaper—to the late Saudi King Abdullah’s call for Saudi religious leaders to confront Islamic State ideology: “They are unable to face the groups of violence, extremism, and beheadings, not out of laziness or procrastination, but because all of them share



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in that same ideology,” claims al-Hamad. “How can they confront an ideology that they themselves carry within them and within their mindset?” As Friedman put it, “They all embrace the same anti-pluralistic, puritanical Wahhabi Sunni ideology that Saudi Arabia diffused, at home as well as abroad, to the mosques that nurtured ISIS.”

Heba Saleh and Simeon Kerr in an October 2014 *Financial Times* article explained the foot-dragging of the Saudis: “The Saudi authorities . . . are anxious to avoid a potentially destabilizing examination of common ideological links between the extremist group [the Islamic State] and the Saudi religious school whose support underpins the legitimacy of the royal family. Wahhabism shapes most aspects of Saudi society.”



The U.S. has not been immune to the Saudi export of its intolerant form of Islam. According to testimony before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, non-Wahhabi Muslim community leaders estimate that 80% of American mosques—out of a total ranging between an official estimate of 1,200 and an unofficial figure of 4,000 to 6,000—are under Wahhabi control.

This does not necessarily mean 80% of American Muslims support Wahhabism, although the main Wahhabi ideological agency in the U.S., the so-called Council on American-Islamic Relations, has claimed that some 70% of American Muslims want Wahhabi teaching in their mosques. These mosques often are built with Saudi money that comes with strings in the form of Wahhabi teachers and books. These books are the foundation of a curriculum

of intolerance that contains a heavy dose of anti-Christian and -Semitic rant. They can be found throughout the U.S. in Islamic schools.

Had the Ottoman Empire remained neutral during the World War I, the history of the Middle East would have been very different. The lands from the Sahara to Persia would have continued to be ruled by the Ottomans and none of the disastrous divisions imposed after the war under the then-secret Sikes-Picot Agreement would have occurred. The states created under this agreement bore little relation to the actual identities of the populations or their geographic distribution.

The key to understanding the current chaos in the Middle East is to recognize that the primary identity of its people is with their religion, sect, tribe, and family—not the states

formed under this agreement. In the Islamic world, there are no deep roots for the concept of the nation-state. One of the avowed goals of the Islamic State is to reverse the divisions of the Sykes-Picot Agreement since it views these divisions as blasphemous.

The culture of the Islamic State is not without its attractions; engaging in jihad promises adventure and romance to young men and women who find no meaningful identity in their place in the modern world. Radical Islam gives them a sense of belonging and answers the fundamental questions about the meaning of life. It also teaches them that jihad is an ethical obligation, and is central to their newly minted Muslim identity.

Poetry, long a part of Islamic culture, has been used extensively by the Islamic State to



justify their especially brutal form of jihad. An example is a portion of Isa Sa'd Al-Awshan's apology for jihad, quoted by Robyn Creswell and Bernard Haykel in a June 2015 *New Yorker* article exploring the role of poetry in Islamic culture and radical Islami. Awshan explains that he wrote it "to clarify the path I have chosen and the reason for pursuing it.":

"Let me make clear every obscure truth, / and remove the confusion of him who questions. / Let me say to the world and what is beyond it. / Listen: I speak the truth and do not stutter. The age of submission to the unbeliever is over, / he who gives us bitter cups to drink. In this time of untruthfulness, let me say: I do not desire money, nor a life of ease. / But rather the forgiveness of God and His grace. / For it is God I fear, not a gang of criminals. / You ask me about the course I have pursued with zeal and swiftness, / You ask, afraid for my sake, 'Is this the rightly-guided path, the good road? / Is this the way of the Prophet?'"

Creswell and Haykel speak of Ahlam al-Nasr, a young woman known as "the Poetess of the Islamic State," as writing in her Raqqa diary that the Islamic State capital "is a place of everyday miracles, a city where believers can go to be born again into the old, authentic faith."

How then are those countries having an interest in the Middle East to deal with the so-called "Arab Spring" and the ensuing chaos brought on by it and the Islamic State?

Friedman opined earlier this year that he could think of only one way coherent self-governance could emerge in Libya, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria: an outside power would have to occupy them and spend the next 50 years trying to get them to share power as equal citizens. Given that King Abdullah II of Jordan has been unable to get his population—primarily and almost evenly split between Palestinians and Hashemites, who fled from Saudi Arabia after the Saudis conquered the Hijaz in 1926, ending more than 1,300 years of Hashemite rule—to identify primarily as Jordanian citizens rather than by religion, sect, tribe, or family, I doubt that Friedman's strategy would work. Friedman indicates that this well could be the case, and the only other possibility he could see is to "just wait for the fires to burn themselves out."

Friedman also talks about "containment, plus amplification." Something similar has been suggested by Audrey Kurth Cronin in her *Foreign Affairs* article last spring: "What's needed now is a strategy of 'offensive containment': a combination of limited military tactics and a broad diplomatic strategy to halt ISIS's expansion, isolate the group, and degrade its capabilities."

More concretely, we need a strategy to counter the attractiveness and spread of the Islamic State and the Wahhabi form of Islam that drives it. We must change the minds of those who already have embraced it. The most effective way to do this, and counter the spread of radical Islamic ideas, would be to have an international forum where moderate Muslims—who

believe in Islamic diversity and states where religion is not in control of how people live, and where people should have a say in how they are governed—could discuss these fundamental issues in Arabic and other languages within the Islamic world.

Participants should be given anonymity if requested. One way to create such a forum would be to introduce new radio and television broadcasts that would air throughout the Middle East and beyond. One might call it the Voice of Islam. This would help counter the now relatively sophisticated public relations efforts of the Islamic State and others that support their ideas. To have any credibility, the forum must be hosted by a moderate, non-Western Arab state. The only one that comes to mind is Jordan.

This type of forum also must be created for social media where many young impressionable people spend increasing amounts of time. Many volunteers have been recruited for the Islamic State via the Internet and this actively must be countered by moderate Muslims, both in English and Arabic. A major effort to do this is needed by Muslim communities of the West, and it is very much in their interests.

Because of media coverage of the Islamic State and the horrors being perpetrated by it in the name of Islam, many people in the West are coming to believe that this is the true face of Is-

lam, and the passivity of many of the Islamic communities in combating such barbarism only can help to spread this belief. A most graphic warning was given to the Islamic community back in 2006 when Danish and Norwegian newspapers published a cartoon of Muhammad portrayed as a terrorist with a bomb in his turban. The message was clear—this is what radical Islam has done to the world's perception of Islam. Instead of getting the message, Muslims around the world attacked the West, violently and in words, for its insensitivity.

Today, there is a massive flow of refugees to Europe as a result of the rise of the Islamic State and the chaos in the Middle East and Africa. Some Eastern European states are allowing only Christian refugees into their countries. Slovakia has refused to accept Muslim "migrants"—refugee appears to be too positive of a term.

They then agreed to allow a limited number only if they are devout churchgoers. A spokesman for Poland's Office for Foreigners, in referring to Warsaw's agreement to accept 2,000 refugees predominantly from Syria and Eritrea, said that "their religious background will have [an] impact on their refugee status applications." Points out the *Financial Times*: "Poland uses strict Christian criteria to select Syrian refugees." Others soon may follow.

## Forefathers of Terrorism

The origin of the division between Saudi Arabia (which would not oppose the religious orientation driving radical Islam and the Islamic State in particular) and Iran dates back hundreds of years. Given that this division is a key factor in formulating Middle Eastern policy, understanding its origin is crucial for evaluating whether the rift between the two Islamic sects can be healed in the near future.

During the time of the original spread of Islam, the Caliphate (from the title of Khalifa or deputy of the Prophet) was established to spread the message of Islam, the only condition being that the Caliph keep intact the heritage of the Prophet, but the office soon began to serve the interests of a small group of rich and powerful men.

As put by historian Bernard Lewis in *Islam in History: Ideas, People, and Events in the Middle East*, "By a tragic paradox, only the strengthening of the Islamic state could save the identity and cohesion of the Islamic community—and the Islamic state, as it grew stronger, moved further and further away from the social and ethical ideals of Islam." Originally, "the great conquests were an expansion not of Islam but of the Arab nation, driven by the pressure of overpopulation in its native peninsula to seek an outlet in the neighboring countries."

In the beginning, the designation of Arab and Muslim were synonymous but, as Islam spread, converts began to play an increasingly important role. The wealth of the conquered regions was disposed of by the Arab rulers, fueling the growth of a new class called the Mawali—any Muslim who was not a full member by descent from an Arab tribe. Their numbers increased rapidly, soon outnumbering the Arabs, but they did not share in the new economic wealth of the Arabs.

Lewis, in *The Arabs in History*, tells us, "The discontents of the Mawali found a religious expression in the movement known as the Shi'a (from Shi'atu 'Ali, the party of 'Ali, who was a cousin of the Prophet). Shi'ism began as a purely Arab and purely political faction grouped around the claims of 'Ali and of his descendants to the Caliphate. . . . Shi'ism was a social revolt against the Arab aristocracy, along with their creed, their state, and their hangers-on rather than a national revolt against the Arabs."

Shi'ism was brought into Persia by the Arabs to what then was the garrison city of Qumm. The surviving Persian feudal aristocracy retained its economic and social functions as well as its privileges. In return, they converted to Islam, giving up their native Zoroastrianism. The Persians and other Mawali brought to Shi'ism many religious ideas derived from their previous Christian, Jewish, and Persian backgrounds including the concept of the Mahdi, the "rightly guided one." While originally a purely political leader, the Mahdi soon developed into a Messianic religious pretender who would "fill the earth with justice and equity as it is now filled with tyranny and oppression."

Lewis explains the origin of the infallible Imams: "Shi'ism developed in its early days from an Arab party to a Mawala sect, and achieved a first resounding success in the accession of the 'Abbasids. This victory ended the importance of the line of Shi'ite pretenders descended from Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiya. Hence-

It would seem obvious that Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran have far more at stake in whether or not the Islamic State expands its territory than the U.S. These countries fully understand the complex political issues involved in moving against the Islamic State and are happy to leave it to the U.S. to act, hoping that American interest in maintaining stability in the world oil markets will force it to do so, but the U.S. cannot solve the problem of the rise of the Islamic State because it is not primarily a military problem. To quote French novelist Victor Hugo, "Invading armies can be resisted; invading ideas cannot be."

By now the U.S. should have learned the lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq. The war in Afghanistan and the second Iraqi war were executed brilliantly, but the post-war strategy in each was flawed deeply—primarily because, in today's world, military power cannot erase deep religious and sectarian divisions to build a civil society, one guided by the rule of law. This must be done by the people and rulers of the areas themselves.

Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran have the needed intelligence and military capability to deal with the Islamic State, but the greatest danger is that, even if they could find a cooperative basis for action, a very unlikely possibility given the religious divide with Iran, it could

break down in implementation—leading to internecine conflict. Acting unilaterally is very dangerous for each of these countries and would, at best, likely lead to proxy wars.

Turkey has had an ambiguous role with regard to the Islamic State, doing less than it could to stop recruits and supplies from moving to Iraq. Its principal goal is to prevent the movement from operating in Turkey and push it back farther into Syria and Iraq from the border, and to use the opportunity to attack Kurdish—PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party—targets.

The unspoken nonaggression pact between the Islamic State and Turkey—the latter had hoped to prevent the activation of known networks of Islamic State supporters within Turkey—appears to have ended. Turkey has begun to cooperate with the U.S. by allowing the use of the Incirlik Air Base and host facilities for drone strikes against Islamic State targets.

What are the policy choices for the U.S.? One option, although there is some question about whether it is de facto or de jure, already has been made via the nuclear "treaty" negotiated with Iran by Secretary of State John Kerry. However, it has raised some serious questions in Saudi Arabia—supposedly an American ally—about whether the U.S. is turning against that country by pursuing an opening with Iran, and considering its citizens' role in

9/11 and the rise of intolerant Islam, the Saudi hierarchy has good reason to fear this.

The second war in Iraq, under Pres. George W. Bush, was the beginning of the U.S. change of policy with respect to Saudi Arabia. It not only was about maintaining the free flow of oil from the region at a reasonable price but, after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, it concerned curtailing the support of terrorism and the export of Wahhabi Islam. In other words, the Iraqi war was about dealing with Saudi Arabia.

From the Saudi perspective, the removal of Saddam Hussein and the Baathist regime, followed by a chaotic occupation of Iraq, altered the balance of power in the Gulf region between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in favor of the Shiites, which probably was the U.S.'s purpose all along—a not-so-subtle warning to the al-Sauds.

The nuclear agreement with Iran will end the embargo and free up funds for that country to support proxy wars against Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region. In addition, the bringing of Iranian oil to market will help, along with the new reserves resulting from technological advances like hydraulic fracturing, to keep oil prices low.

Originally, Saudi Arabia refused to lower its oil production in what it characterized as an attempt to defend market share, but really with the purpose of trying to make shale oil from fracking less economical. While it succeeded somewhat in reducing the drilling of new wells, it is very unlikely that the producers will be put out of business. The same likely will be true when oil from Iran hits the market.

With oil prices low, the Saudis are in serious trouble. According to the *Financial Times*, Saudi Arabia needs an oil price of \$105 a barrel to balance its budget. To prevent the continued drawdown of its fiscal reserves, they have issued, since the summer, \$5,300,000,000 a month in bonds, and plan to do so at least until year's end. The requirement of an oil price of \$105 a barrel comes from the Saudi royal family's expensive social contract with its citizens—an enormous welfare burden. If they do not continue its funding there could be serious social unrest that may threaten the Saudi ruling family.

The second war in Iraq threatened Saudi Arabia by creating a Shiite entity on its border, while the freeing up of sanctions on Iran and allowing its oil to come to market greatly increases the power of Shiite Iran across the Persian Gulf. To put it succinctly, as the Saudis did in 1973, the U.S. is using the "oil weapon," albeit with plausible deniability. ★

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forth, the leaders of the Shi'a are of the Fatimid line, the descendants of 'Ali by his wife Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. The Imams, as these Shi'ite pretenders were known to their followers, were in their eyes the sole rightful Caliphs, but the powers they claimed were far greater than those of the 'Abbasids. The Shi'ite Imam was a divinely inspired religious pontiff, claiming infallibility and demanding unquestioning obedience."

Subsequent to this early history, Shi'ism split into several branches of which the Twelver Shi'a are the largest. They arose after the death of Imam Ja'far in 765 and generally are moderate in their doctrines, which differ little from Sunni Islam. The constitution of modern Iran states that the "official religion of Iran is Islam and the sect followed is that of Ja'fari (Twelver) Shi'ism," and that this principle was "eternally immutable." It also offers some protection to minority sects: "other Islamic denominations are to be accorded full respect," and it recognizes Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews, as well as the country's pre-Islamic religions as the only "protected religious minorities." The Zaidi, or "Five" branch of the Shi'a is the second largest branch and includes the Houthis of Yemen.

The other branch that arose after the death of Ja'far followed his second son Isma'ili and were known as the Isma'ili group, which inherited the extremist and revolutionary character of the earlier movement. Historically, they are known as the "Assassins," the followers of the "Old Man of the Mountain," and it is said that their center at Alamut in the Alborz Mountains was destroyed by the Mongols in 1256. Their avowed purpose was to disrupt and destroy the Sunni establishment.

The followers of the Old Man of the Mountain well might be considered the first of the radical Islamic terrorists we see today. How they operated may be relevant to the way young people are recruited to the Islamic State.

The Assassins modus operandi was described by Italian merchant Marco Polo, who passed through the valley of Alamut in Persia in 1273: "The 'Old Man' had enclosed and transformed a valley into a beautiful garden filled with every kind of fruit, and built elegant pavilions and palaces within the valley fashioned after the description that Mohammad gave of his Paradise. Runnels ran with wine and milk and honey and water. 'Lovely women for the delectation of all its inmates' played instruments, sang 'most sweetly,' and danced in a manner that was 'charming to behold.' A fortress guarded the only entrance to the garden and the 'Old Man,' who had chosen men from 12 to 20 years of age who 'had a taste for soldiering,' would introduce them into the Garden after he had drugged them into a deep sleep so that they awoke in Paradise. These were his Ashishin. When he needed one for a mission, he would have one of these denizens of Paradise drugged and they would awake in the Fortress. The 'Old Man' would tell the chosen Ashishin that after he completed his mission of assassination that he would be carried by Angels back to Paradise even if he died on the mission."

Historically, there are differences from Marco Polo's account. According to Lewis in *The Assassins: A Radical Sect in Islam*, the Assassins had "come from Syria, not from Persia. . . . 'Assassin' was a local name, applied only to the Isma'ilis of Syria. . . . The title 'Old Man of the Mountain' was also Syrian [and] seems to have been used only in Syria, and perhaps only among the Crusaders, since it has not yet come to light in any Arabic text of the period."

Although the majority of Isma'ilis today live outside of Iran, as of about 30 years ago, several thousand adherents remained in the northeast. They are considered to be heretics by the "Twelvers."