

A Strategy for Today's Middle East

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Recently the leadership in Washington announced that America did not have a strategy in place to deal with the violence in the Middle East. In this essay, I shall present a starting point if not a fully executable strategy. It may not be perfect, but acting on a less than perfect plan is better than global paralysis.

In developing a strategy, we need first to cull the facts from the innuendo, implications, inferences, theories, and emotionally based reactions to the actions, or inactions, of others.

What we know.

ISIL stands for the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant. For reasons unknown, that acronym was changed to ISIS then IS. The fact is that language plays an important role in situational analysis. Levant is an ancient reference to the entire Eastern Mediterranean including, at times, countries from Western Greece all the way around to Morocco. Keeping *Levant* in the name serves to keep the overall intent of ISIL in our minds. It helps identify the extent of the threat.

We know that the religion of Islam has undergone schisms or splits in the past just like Christianity has undergone schisms and splits. The resulting groups are called *sects*. In Islam, the two dominant sects are the Sunni and Shia. They have been at odds since around 632 AD when a dispute arose as to which Imam would take over the leadership role after the death of Muhammad. The dispute has often been violent.

We know that Islam has dogmatic law (Sharia) much like Christianity has dogmatic law (e.g. Canon law). The acknowledgement is important because of all seventy-three Islamic sects, not all espouse conversion by means of violence. The distinction serves to refine the identity of the enemy.

We know that the recent violence is the result of an increase in the intensity of the dispute between the Shia and the Sunni. This war is borderless and is theocratic.

We know that we are at war. We know that we are at war with two theocratic armies and not with any nation. The theocratic armies are also devoid of ethnic continuity.

We know that wars can be won by forcing the other side to surrender or by killing them all. Anything less is simply a pause in the hostilities.

We know that surrender requires an acknowledgment of having been beaten. We know that this will never happen in a mind driven by theocratic forces. It would require that the person surrendering must relinquish his theocratic beliefs.

Attacks on western nations are primarily demonstrations of power that the Shia and Sunni are using to establish their superiority. The attacks are, at this point, a recruiting tool. Our attacks on the jihadists serve the same purpose. Our attacks paint us as the evil infidel that their leaders seize upon to motivate and radicalize otherwise peaceful persons.

We also know that in the future, once the theocratic war is concluded, the western nations will be the primary focus of the next phase of violence.

Perhaps the most salient point in what we know as fact is that not all members of the Shia and Sunni religions support the use of violence. It is easy to surmise, therefore, that the people waging the war are not mainstream Shia and Sunni, but, as the name implies, are radicals. The distinction is important in identifying the enemy, not as Islamic, or Shia, or Sunni, but as two groups within those religions who are out of control.

Finally we know that our current situation is, in part, the result of the fact that *we* are fighting *their* war using *our* rules of engagement while they are using *theirs*. This disconnect is reminiscent of the American Colonial war for independence and the conflict in Vietnam. We have self-imposed rules of conduct in how we fight the war and they don't. The enemy is using western cultural rejection of abominations as a weapon against us.

In summary, the west (including America) is third party to a religious war being fought between two radical elements within two of seventy-three sects of Islam. America and the other western nations will become first party to this religious war if and when one of the two warring factions (radical Shia or radical Sunni) wins. Until then we are significant, but collateral, damage in that conflict.

Our strategy, therefore, must first prevent either of the radical elements from becoming dominant and *winning*. Air strikes, banking embargoes, supplying friendly forces (e.g. Kurds) with weapons and supplies will serve to achieve this first objective, but will not win the war because the actions will not result in having achieved the definition of winning provided above.

What has been missing from past strategies is the recognition that this is a theocratic conflict. Bombs can subjugate people, but they do not change a people's beliefs. To win, we must enter the theocratic conflict with theocratic weapons. Obviously attempting to convert the radical to Christianity or Judaism would only exacerbate the situation, so we are left asking ourselves what might qualify as a weapon in a theocratic war.

Oddly, the answer is quite simple. It is the Koran. It is the religious leadership of the other seventy-one sects of Islam. It is the religious leadership of the non-radical groups within the Sunni and Shia sects.

If we are to win and we do not wish to kill everyone in the process, that is if we choose to convince them to surrender, then we must change their minds. To do that, we must demonstrate that the radical interpretation of the Koran is inappropriate. Only a leader of Islam can do that.

Our strategy for winning, therefore, is to enlist the peaceful religious leadership of Islam. Those leaders who have proclaimed Islam as the *religion of peace* need to prove it.