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The Impact of Religion on Intelligence

Following the rise of Westphalian diplomacy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, wars of religion gave way to wars of national interest, as nationalism superseded religion as the principal reason for fighting. Conventional wisdom up to and beyond World War II held that religion was only peripherally relevant to diplomacy, if and when it became related to national issues.¹ Under the existing rationalist paradigm that developed, “modernization” brought about a secularization of society, which would reduce the influence of religion as a category.² Following World War II and the emergence of some 130 new nations in the following fifty years, however, religion began to play a much greater role than before.

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948, even though under secular government, and its subsequent struggle to exist in peace with Arab states, developed into a major ongoing conflict in a particularly sensitive region of the world. What began as a battle for national existence took on a religious dimension that produced a breeding ground for terrorist groups. Some of these later evolved into nationalist groups favoring a Palestinian state, but the religious dimension spread out into other areas, and terrorism became a cottage industry across the region, taking on overtones of state and revolutionary strategy.³

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s rise to power in Iran in February 1979 brought aggressive anti-Western Islamic fundamentalism to power in a key state of the Middle East. In the subsequent twenty-five years, that event, plus the evolution of conflict in Afghanistan, reemphasized to many in the

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Islamic world the conflict between Islam and Christianity harking back to the time of the Crusades. As Islamic societies have become progressively less capable of dealing with the modern world, an increased amount of hatred has been transformed into Islamic radicalism, with a growing number of radical movements.⁴

The best-known of these movements, the Taliban and al-Qaeda, have been behind most of the serious terror incidents against the United States since the 1990s: the 1993 attack on the New York City World Trade Center, the 1996 bombing of the Kobar Towers complex in Saudi Arabia, the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Dar-es-Salaam, and the 2000 attack on the USS *Cole*. These were the warm-ups to the destruction of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 (9/11).

Ironically, Dr. Roy Godson's excellent 1989 book on intelligence requirements for the 1990s only peripherally mentions religious issues, and those citations came primarily in discussions of other matters.⁵ Even before 9/11, however, some materials were available, but these were not "big enough on the radar" to attract much attention. An American intelligence officer, writing anonymously in 2001, urged all Americans, not just his own intelligence colleagues, "to understand the historical and religious context in which bin Laden and his supporters have acted as well as why these forces emerged."⁶

Contemporary works on intelligence reform have been little better—Robert David Steele at least refers to the categories of religious opposition groups in his two books, but former National Security Agency director William Odom concentrates entirely on technical and management issues in his work on the subject.⁷

In fact, a principal disconnect in the foreign policy decisionmaking process has been the growing gap between regional specialists in diplomacy, the military, and the intelligence branches, and technical and geostrategic thinkers and ideologues. This is most evident in the unfolding of America's counter-terrorist policy in the period from February/March 2002 to the present.

After an initial focus on Afghanistan from September 2001 to the Battle of Tora Bora in early 2002, the neoconservative group clustered around Dr. Paul D. Wolfowitz in the Defense Department began to implement the strategy of democratizing the Middle East. These individuals did so without much regard for the views of the regional specialists in both the State and Defense Departments, or to those of the vast majority of American academia.⁸

The result was as sad as predictable: The Iraqis were overjoyed to see Saddam Hussein gone, but they did not immediately and docilely flock to the American banner, as the neoconservatives insisted they would. With too few troops to lock the country down, security quickly became (and remains) a severe problem, especially since the regional specialists who had