17 Armed with the Power of Religion: Not Just a War of Ideas

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It is clear that religion, especially as it impacts violence, is no longer simply the purview of theologians and misguided adherents. Anyone remotely aware of current political and military issues in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, China, South Asia, or even the United States, knows that religion cannot be ignored. The U.S. military is fully cognizant of the role of religion in Afghanistan and Iraq. However, and this is important, anyone studying the current proliferation of armed groups in the global arena cannot help but notice that although religion always plays a role of some kind, it is never a single-factor explanation.

This chapter is based on the assumption that religion contributes to the lethality of armed groups. It is assumed that each member of an armed group has religion in a personal life-and-death way and that each group uses religious power to achieve its goals. Religious identity helps frame the "us" and "them," provides justification for the "cause," and contributes specific power currencies to the struggle. This is different from the "religion as ideology" framework—that in explaining everything, explains nothing.

The "religious factor" for armed groups can be overestimated or underestimated. Religion is overestimated when it is assumed to have predictive capability—"religion explains everything." It is underestimated when it is either ignored or misunderstood. The importance of "getting it right"—information, analysis, understanding, and knowledge—is undoubtedly one of the most important intellectual challenges of this century. It is undoubtedly the single most problematic, complicated, sensitive, volatile, and debated subject in the current strategic environment.

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Efforts to deal with religion—Islam, in particular—have often been inaccurate, inconsistent, and inadequate. This indictment has been leveled at the Defense Department, State Department, and even the American public. Some go so far as to say that "U.S. efforts are seen as naïve, lacking understanding of the Muslim world and [being] off target at best and dangerous at worst."[1] Prior to the events of September 11, 2001, religion was talked about in rather hushed, apologetic tones in the Department of State, the Department of Defense, and the Intelligence Community almost as if it were an embarrassment. There were no academic courses at any of the command and staff colleges that addressed the subject of religion and warfare; academics working for the Pentagon were not focused on religion; and even the best strategic analysis and intelligence professionals were not prepared to take on the topic. The fear was that individuals could not and would not be objective but would bring personal beliefs into the analyses inappropriately.

In the current strategic environment, religion is the topic du jour and has been elevated from playing a role to being a single-factor explanation of all violence. In fact, there seems to be a growing belief that in some way religion is responsible for the current strategic imbroglio around the world.[2] There is an uncomfortable trend to explain the motivation and intent of all armed groups in light of Al Qaeda or Islamic radicalism. A closer examination reveals the palpable falsity of this position. Armed groups, insurgencies, revolutions, and conflict certainly predate Al Qaeda. They are found in all religious traditions, in all parts of the globe, and "use" and "abuse" religion in different ways.

OVERESTIMATING THE POWER OF THEOLOGY

Religion is overestimated when the ideas incumbent in the theology are assumed to have predictive power. This is similar to the perspective held during the cold war that the ideologies of communism, socialism, totalitarianism, and anarchism determined the fate of societies and, as such, had to be fought either by a better idea (democracy) or by defeating the source of the idea—in the 1950s assumed to be the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China.

Religion, when viewed as ideology with a "God factor," is assumed to be the single most important determining factor in international conflict. In the current strategic environment, the so-called war of ideas pits the Western (Christian) way against the Islamic world and the Muslim way. There are assumed to be two paths to fight this religious ideology—either by a "better idea" or by defeating the source of the idea—in this case assumed to be centered somewhere in the Middle East.

Within the war of ideas, there is an implicit assumption that reason, persuasion, influence, perspective, and ultimately truth will persuade the peoples of the Middle East to abandon their atavistic lifestyle, give up their religious ideologies, and join the modern world. Islam, as theology, is often cynically described as backward, traditional, repressive, and prone to violence, and although the people of the Middle East might be OK, the theology of Islam holds them back or, worse, propels them to violence. In this scenario, so-called moderates are encouraged to help others understand the error of their ways. Alternatively, there is a suggestion that Islam go through a reformation, like Christianity, to "get with the program."

On closer examination, few scholars believe that theology can predict individual be-havior, and although religion contributes to the welfare of individuals and groups, as a single-factor explanation, it seldom provides more than general guidance for understand-ing individual/group behaviors. In the most obvious case, many people do not know the tenets of their religions, and if they do, are seldom the perfect adherents.[3]

In the counterinsurgency literature, religion is seldom mentioned as a contributing factor, in spite of the fact that the terrorist literature sui generis is replete with religious causality. In fact, the "religious terrorism" literature is virtually a growth industry. Most of that literature overemphasizes the religious factor by assuming that religious ideology or theology is the single motivating factor in armed violence—particularly in the Middle East. How religious factors as identifiable beliefs and behaviors contribute is seldom ad-dressed. In-depth analysis requires a closer look at the specific indicators found in local religious beliefs and behaviors as found in armed groups themselves and in their "sup-porting populations."

## FRAMING THE ISSUE OF RELIGIOUS FACTORS IN VIOLENCE

Religious factors in violence are underestimated when the power of religious beliefs and behaviors at the local level are not assessed as a type of sociocultural power. Religion is more than a set of ideas. It is a way of life complete with beliefs and behaviors integrated into the complex cultural patterns of peoples' daily lives. Instead of addressing religion as divorced from the reality of daily life, it is helpful to see religion as part of a complex cultural system.

Most people acknowledge that religion is a two-edged sword. Religion supports the most beautiful and idealistic of worldviews, yet is often associated with the most tragic situations of maximum human suffering. The principles of faith, hope, and love can be denigrated to cynicism, despair, and hate. That which should support life can support death; that which supports peace can be used to perpetuate war. It is suggested that reli-gion plays a role in all aspects of warfare. It is invariably linked to support for violence and support for peace. This is true not only of the principles and theological perspectives but of the religious power on the ground, the religious personages, and the religious insti-tutions that come into play in both lethal circumstances and mobilizations for peace.

Where beliefs or the strengths of beliefs are hard to measure and the effects of belief systems are inconsistent over time, the institutions, behaviors, and patterned ways of integrating religion into cultural systems are rather predictable. Beliefs and behaviors can be abstracted and understood by looking at the complex whole of the power of religion in the lives of individuals, groups, nations, and states. In this context, religious ideas pro-vide the framework for group adaptation to the social environment, and religious behav-iors are seen as related to all other aspects of group survival—identity, territory, language, economics, and authority (politics). These are individual and group behaviors that are knowable. In other words, they can be subjected to examination using historical-pattern analysis, variable analysis, and tests of reliability and validity. It brings religion down from the transcendent and gives it a human face.

The following diagram illustrates how religion translates into behaviors. Theology provides the mind-set and defines good versus evil. Codes for living identify rewards and

sanctions. Local beliefs result in observable behaviors that can be examined using a *power analysis*.

THEOLOGY ➡ CODES ➡ BELIEFS ➡ BEHAVIORS
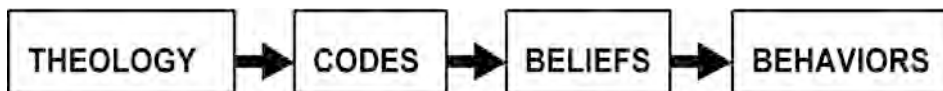
THE POWER OF RELIGION

When examining contemporary armed groups, a power analysis can provide insight, information, and guidance in regard to political and military activities. Religious factors are "power resources" in the sense that religious institutions and leaders control resources, define interpersonal relationships, establish and maintain group communication, and provide expertise. The resources include control over goods and services; organizational capabilities; social networks that are community based but may also be global in scope; and various types of support for political personages, agendas, and programs. The resources of religious personages and institutions are direct results of their numbers, reputations, coherence, and willingness to mobilize for political or religious purposes.

Religion is an important power broker in human relationships. Religion helps define the attributes of a good and trustable person; prescribe rules concerning how individuals transact social, political, and economic business; and identify "friend" and "enemy" according to a set of traditional and legitimate factors. When states fail, or particular political personages are delegitimized, religious personages often help define who a new political leader will be and when and under what conditions this leader will emerge. Most important, religious authorities are also assumed to be in touch with the power of a Supreme Being and therefore have special insight concerning social relations among God's children.

Religion provides for common language and means of communication among members of a group. Religious leaders communicate with authority; generally have written and spoken expertise; have access to media; and know significant music, poetry, and art forms of nonverbal, symbolic communication. Historical languages often provide a sense of continuity and may be used for motivation or in symbolic communication. Religious personages and institutions are often deeply involved in the education of children and the training of future generations. Parents rely on religious educational and medical institutions when the state fails to provide those resources. Religious leaders are often accustomed to keeping confidences or secrets and are trusted for their discretion. Most important, religious leaders are often more *believable* in local areas than political leaders from the central government and therefore have power above and beyond the sheer strength of numbers or observable resources.

Religious leaders, as force multipliers, have significant sociocultural power and are able to affect war and peace more than is commonly recognized. Religious authorities have expertise in many areas above and beyond that of the general population. They generally have an in-depth knowledge of people, places, and communities. They know the sensitivities of the community. They know the personal history of leaders and their families. They move easily in a community and have access to areas off-limits to others. Quite

literally, they know where the bodies are buried. In a very real sense, religious personages and communities know more about food, water, and health than others in the community. They are the individuals that people "go to" when all else fails. The following are four common sources of religious power:[4]

1. **Resources:** Most religious communities and institutions have the following resources:

- Churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other places of worship that own land, control money and banking, provide a center for social services, provide medicine and health services
- Control of membership in the group by providing burial space for individuals and families, control of inheritance through marriage and family law, provision of sanctuary for travelers
- Communications technology
- Historical repositories of information about individuals and the community
- Individuals who can be human resources deployed for any number of tasks
- Income
- Organization
- Law and religious tradition with rules or sanctions for appropriate social behavior
- Institutions that are both community based and have global reach.

Two examples may suffice: The *vakif* system in northern Cyprus is grounded in religious tradition and authority; it influences or controls inheritance, ownership of property, social services, marriage, and burial, and impacts the social and economic development of northern Cyprus. The Greek Orthodox Church does the same, albeit in a different pattern, for the Republic of Cyprus. Both impact the population in very real ways—ways not at all reflective of theology—only of the practical power of religion in a sociocultural context.

In another example, one of the first signals of impending violence in the Croatia-Serbia conflict was the ethnic cleansing of cemeteries by church authorities. The use of the symbol of the Ustache cross in Croatia, a Christian symbol but also the symbol of the Nazi Party in Croatia, is an example of the power of religious symbols quite divorced from theological principles.

2. **Interpersonal power:** Religious leaders are often more *believable* in failed or fragile states than political leaders and therefore have power above and beyond the sheer strength of numbers or observable resources. Regardless of which side they are on, religious leaders are expected to engage the topic of peace and use their inherent power to move toward a more peaceful world in order to be constructive. Most religions have the following interpersonal power:

- Shared history—communication shortcuts
- Shared identity—knowledge of "trustable"
- Shared rules
- Shared behaviors
- Shared learning
- Patterned interaction and exchange mechanisms
- Music, art, literature, enculturation, gestures, education, respect, assumptions and expectations.

To use a specific, nonattributable example: A missionary in one of the western African countries was compelled by his conscience to talk to the cruel, powerful dictator who was clearly abusing his power. The missionary used as his entrée into the conversation the fact that he had known the dictator's mother, and that she would clearly be disappointed in her son's activities and descent into violence and cruelty. It was reported that the ruler acquiesced—releasing prisoners that had been tortured and detained.

In another instance, Archbishop Makarios in Cyprus was clearly the leader not only of a religious community but of the Greek Cypriots. His activities and influence on the island had enormous consequences for both the Greek and Turkish Cypriots.

In 2007, the events in Myanmar pitted monks against the government. Their silence, vows of nonviolence, and public demonstrations were evidence of the power of religion to elicit regime change. In this case, Buddhist theology, which has ingrained principles of *just war,* was not invoked—only the principle and practice of nonviolence.

3.   Communication: Religious leaders communicate with the authority of "God" and the authority of "man." Most religions have the following power of communication:

- Vertical and horizontal communication
- Written and spoken expertise
- Access to media
- Symbolism—music, poetry, art forms
- Nonverbal communication—gestures and gutturals
- Use of symbols—written, linguistic, pictograph, literary.

In an example of communication, the religious poetry of Islam was used to communicate place and time during Desert Storm, 2001. As American troops advanced, the Iraqi indigenous population used a form of ancient poetry to indicate when and where the resistance would take place. In a different example, the guitar has been known as a religious revolutionary instrument since the early 1300s.

4.   Expertise: Most religions have individuals or groups with the following types of expertise:

- Knowledge of place
- Knowledge of problem individuals and families
- Knowledge of historical languages
- Medical knowledge
- Education (formal and informal)
- Knowledge of criminal elements and prison networks
- Knowledge of cults and radical individuals or groups
- Knowledge of cemeteries.

Graveyard ethnic cleansing was known in Croatia and Serbia. Although the graves were in church cemeteries, on some occasions the bodies were dug up and dumped in the appropriate "ethnic" enclaves. This particularly gruesome form of ethnic cleansing is not unique in human history.

It is often said that when militaries invade a town, the first people that come out to meet them are police, firefighters, and clerics. If the local government is removed,

religious leaders will appear as if by magic and assume responsibility for speaking for the people and with the "invaders."

THE CHANGE DYNAMIC

In addition to this "flat" analytical framework, it is important to follow through with the questions of how religious factors change and develop in response to

1. technical change and development,
2. climate and environmental changes—especially disaster areas,
3. internal or civil warfare, and
4. intervention by international forces in conventional or unconventional warfare.

Another way to analyze religious factors in conflict is to go directly to the form of violence used by an armed group and identify the specific religious content over the stages and phases of a particular conflict situation. In the preparation for war, religion contributes to the identities of friend and foe. In the heat of battle, religion contributes all of the power resources available plus solace and sanctuary, and, near the end of conflict, religious personages and ideas contribute to both theologically based peacemaking strategies and information and insight in very practical community matters. Over the course of an insurgency, religion will play different parts given the needs of the cultural foundations of the armed group.

CASES: HOW ARMED RELIGION CONTRIBUTES TO THE POWER OF ARMED GROUPS

Every situation that concerns the composition and activities of a contemporary armed group can be assessed with regard to religious factors, or lack thereof. Some of the more well-known situations include Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, Uganda, Peru, and Rwanda.

In Iraq, between 2001 and 2007, the religious factor was misrepresented and misunderstood. Religion was assumed to be a prime, single-factor explanation for violence and this turned out to be blatantly untrue. In 2001, the people of Iraq were reported to be no more theologically sophisticated than other people in other countries. It is entirely possible that most people knew the Seven Pillars of Islam.[5] It is also entirely possible that few could talk in depth about the nature of Allah, the history of the three holy cities, the reasons why some food items are "halal," or how Allah will judge children who die from war-related injury.[6] The Baathist regime was socialist although its members were identified as religiously Muslim. There was a separation between "church and state" even though the population was nominally Muslim.

After 9/11, however, it was assumed that since Iraqis were "Muslim" they were bound by the theology and religious practices in extremis. American military forces were given cultural indoctrination and teaching that invariably emphasized the Islamic "way of life." In other words, behaviors were assumed to have linear causality from the tenets of the Koran.[7] It was also assumed that all Muslims, therefore all Iraqis, were primarily motivated by their religion and "if you understood Islam, you would understand Iraq." This was misleading, faulty, and dangerously simplistic thinking.

According to a recently returned Marine, religion played almost no part in the Marine Corps' dealings with people in Anbar province. It was also thought that Muqtada al-Sadr

became an important religious leader because a clerical position could be unquestioningly inherited from a father. Working on this faulty assumption, the coalition leadership assumed al-Sadr had power and influence that he did not have. Sadly, it was something of a self-fulfilling prophecy when he assumed the influential role that the coalition assigned to him and became spokesman without the traditional authority and legitimacy. The fact that Iraq was a Muslim country seemed to derail traditional predictive analysis vis-à-vis everyday behavior let alone conflict and violence.

Many soldiers, Marines, and airmen were astonished to find out that religion did not define Iraq—it was merely part of the picture, but not the only part and not always the most important. There were any number of things which couldn't be explained on the basis of Islam or Islamic theology. For instance, it was impossible to find out whether road-side bombs were supported or not supported by the religious teachers or even religious leaders in Iraq. It was equally hard to assess the level of criminality and corruption on the basis of Koranic teachings. Genocide is not respected in Islam. Torture is not religiously justified. Foreign fighters who may have been fellow believers were generally not accepted by the sectarian tribal leaders on the ground. There were genuine disagreements about the authority of the tribe in relationship to the authority of clerics. And finally, if the *umma* is a theologically based principle, why are there such strong disagreements among the Kurds, Shia, and Sunnis?

In trying to analyze the "religious factor" in violence in Iraq, it is therefore necessary to see religion as theology, codes, beliefs, and behaviors in localized cultural areas. Religion does play a role in the violence in Iraq and it is important to be able to leverage that power in a positive sense, but also an understanding of how religious identity helps define Iraqi identity contributes to the understanding of foreign fighters that go to Iraq under the misguided assumption that fellow believers will welcome a "jihadi" and that they will be welcomed as brothers. A more realistic assessment based on cultural and religious analysis would indicate that even fellow believers, if they are of another ethnic, religious, class, or outsider group, would not be welcomed into a war zone where everyone is suspicious of everyone else and draws lines around the kin or tribal group.

In Afghanistan, religion plays a role but theology does not determine the behavior of individuals, tribal groups, or the country. The Taliban may have taken a strong religious stance, but that reflected the Pashtun culture, which had been interpreted and reinterpreted by theologians and practitioners, and changed as the Taliban leadership became more mature. The form and lethality of violence was that of a tribal armed group, motivated by a variety of factor, including the expulsion of English, Russians, and Americans as well as protection from the dominance of other Afghan tribal groups. Theology did guide the Taliban, but it was only part of the story. The rest of the profile includes the religious beliefs and behaviors of the Pashtun people.

Their relationship with Al Qaeda is instructive. When Bin Laden and his group were resident in Afghanistan, the Taliban claimed to be "religiously motivated." Restoring justice by jihad was the mantra. If Al Qaeda and the Taliban were both driven by similar Islamic theology, and if religion shapes armed-group behavior, then such analysis is seriously lacking in predictive power. Al Qaeda is an international jihadist group that uses

violence for specific international objectives. The Taliban were a tribal group that used Islam for the purpose of tribal dominance in the region.

African armed groups are variously identified with their respective religions but it is doubtful that theology alone can explain their relationships with their respective governments, other sociocultural groups in the area, or even the goals of their insurgencies. Clearly, religion is invoked by public speakers and political managers, but religion is not the only factor in motivation and intent. Religion plays a role. Religious actors use resources, interpersonal skills, communication assets, and expertise but these are only a part of the total complex array of social and cultural mechanisms.

In Sudan, there are two major disputes. The southern tribal groups have fought the central government in Khartoum for decades; the Darfur area is teeming with the violence of the *Janjaweed*.[8] The central government wants to control the borders—particularly in the south for several reasons. The south has natural resources, including petroleum, and there is an internationally recognized principle of "sovereignty" that upholds the government's right to control the landmass. However, the southerners are imputed to be Christian-animist and are "African" rather than Arab—so the cultural configurations of the dispute take on the elements of racism and prejudice. The southern Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA), or splinter groups thereof, fights with the government forces for autonomy, independence, freedom—and rights to the economic resources of the south. Religion plays a role specifically insofar as foreign aid is mobilized through the NGO (nongovernmental organization) community—particularly the Christians of the United States, England, and Canada. The message is that the government of Sudan enslaves the southerners as "part of Islam versus Christianity." That southern tribal groups have had various forms of slavery for centuries seems to elude the messengers. Religion is mobilized in the international context more than the internal context in this situation.

In Darfur, the *Janjaweed* may claim Islamic jihad but the claim rings empty: the economic destruction, exploitation, and basic brutality bears no relationship to a religious framework. All of this said, the religious community in Khartoum is extremely concerned and is trying actively to bring a halt to the violence. Although each of the religious communities denies its involvement in the brutality, and decries the other for its brutality, each seems appalled by the scope and level of the violence and, when clearer heads prevail, will contribute to the peacemaking process. None of the religious leaders claim that the violence is demanded or sanctioned by religious authority. In the case of Sudan, in both the south and Darfur regions, the role of religion is and will be to help restore peoples' lives, as they have been impacted by starvation, disease, and the basic destruction of their society. The refugee camps are supported by international organizations, both religious and nonreligious.

It is reported that Africa has some 15,000 "new" religions. Religion is a factor in the armed violence in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Chad. Other explanations, such as economics, politics, colonialism, and corruption, are also valid. Again, a religious power analysis contributes to the explanation but cannot explain all. In Nigeria, for example, it is easy to cite the Muslim north and the Christian south as the cause for conflict. In reality, the factors of tribal identity, corruption, the aftermath of the Biafran war, and sharing petroleum resources contribute to the explanation of violence.

Europe has its own set of problems. The armed groups in the news often claim religious motivation. Closer inspection reveals that terrorist acts have often included individuals or groups with serious complaints against the central government, lack of inclusion in economic and social life, and even the cry of racism. Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, France, and the United Kingdom have dissident groups that may mobilize around a religious identity but clearly have other complaints based on economic, political, and social exclusion.

The central government of China is concerned about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. A closer inspection reveals that the plight and position of the Uighur population is based on its relationship with China, not the rise of a new compelling ideology from the Arab Middle East.

CONCLUSION

Religion is an integral part of the daily life of most individuals and groups. It contributes explanations of life and death, purpose for living, and ideas about right and wrong. As ideology or theology, it is compelling and important and helps us explain the natural and supernatural. When it comes to armed violence, the theologies take on real life in beliefs and behaviors found on the ground. A *power analysis,* which looks at how religious beliefs and behaviors lead to violence, contributes to a more complete understanding of the operational environment. With this understanding, it should be possible to (a) understand and analyze the human-religious dimension of counterinsurgency, (b) use appropriate measures to counter the negative impact of religious factors, and (c) support the positive aspects of religious power to compel peace.

NOTES

1. Critics cited in "From Uncle Ben's to Uncle Sam," *Economist,* 23 February, 2002, 70.

2. There have been so many reports on Islam and Islamic violence that one observer wondered whether the Department of Defense was becoming the Department of Comparative Theology.

3. This is evidenced by the religious wars between 1400 and 1800 that engulfed all of Europe.

4. These are neither comprehensive nor exclusive lists—only ideas concerning the most obvious or known factors. Each armed group's religion can be assessed differently knowing that the group will choose that which resonates most clearly with respective group supporters.

5. The Shia Seven Pillars of Islam have three doctrines that are not included in the Sunni Five Pillars of Islam. "Seven Pillars of Islam (Ismaili)," Answers.com, www.answers.com/topic/seven-pillars-of-islam.

6. According to some reports, less than 20 percent of the Iraqis prior to 2001 attended Friday mosque services with any regularity.

7. Some of the teaching materials disseminated by the Defense Department were entitled "Arab and Muslim Culture." Although "Arab" may be an ethnic group with an identifiable culture, certainly Islam is a religion.

8. According to Human Rights Watch, "The term 'Janjaweed' has become the source of increasing controversy, with different actors using the term in very different ways. Literally, the term is reported to be an amalgamation of three Arabic words for ghost, gun, and horse that historically referred to criminals, bandits or outlaws. In the wake of the conflict in Darfur, many 'African' victims of attacks have used the term to refer to the government-backed militias attacking their villages, many of whom are drawn from nomadic groups of Arab ethnic origin." "Darfur Documents Confirm Government Policy of Militia Support: A Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper, July 20, 2004, " Human Rights Watch, hrw.org/english/docs/2004/07/19/darfur9096.htm#3.