

The CENTER UPDATE

“Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”

- Margaret Mead

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

The war in the Ukraine continues to dominate the news these days, and one wonders if there really is any other major news of international significance. And the question which follows is: will the major advance in weapons technology, which we now see as their initial major use in this war, affect religious-based conflict and violence in the world? We speak mainly, though not entirely, of the weaponization of drones in that conflict. With their use, as well as various forms of missiles, it follows that manned fighter airplanes themselves will become more and more irrelevant in combat. Result: lives saved in the air but potential loss of life and property increased on the ground.

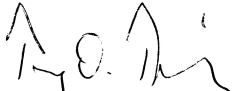
Though drones themselves are nothing new, their weaponization and transparency in a large war is. There are now - these unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) - militarily capable observation drones, weaponed drones and even suicide drones, being used regularly in that war. These so-called “combat drones” are small, large, fast and slow, with long distance and short distance capabilities. They can perform most of the functions of manned fighter planes and are much cheaper to build. They have become the most modern and easy way to kill and destroy. They are produced in numerous companies and countries and can easily be exported.

Will the impact of the use of the weaponization of this drone technology on religious-based violence increase or decrease our work to reduce it? On the one hand we see that this technology enhances the terrorist’s

ability to carry out their mission of violence - drones being cheap, easily available and easily portable. Of course, every new weapon has this potential to increase violence though not always as dramatically. On the other hand, the ability to reduce such religious-based conflict is increased - particularly, though not only, via observation and more rapid reaction to threats of violence. Observation drones can be practically invisible and operated remotely from distances half way around the globe. Religious-based terrorists can more quickly and more easily be watched as they plot their destruction. And, then, via weaponized drones, more easily and quickly prevented from same.

So, at the moment, it appears that it will just be more of the same - a trade-off - both sides have new advantages and new disadvantages. And, as we all know, it is not the weapon that causes violence and death, it is its various uses by we humans.

As the French say: “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose”.



Jerry U. Rowbridge

HOTSPOTS

The Middle East



The Islamic State group (ISIS) continues to command between 5,000 and 7,000 members across its former strongholds in Syria and Iraq, and its fighters pose the most serious terrorist threat in Afghanistan today. ISIS had earlier declared a self-styled caliphate in a large swath of territory in Syria and Iraq that it seized in 2014. It was declared defeated in Iraq in 2017 following a three-year battle that left tens of thousands of people dead and cities in ruins, but its sleeper cells remain in both countries.

In Afghanistan, the Islamic State group poses the most serious terrorist threat to the country and the wider region. ISIS has reportedly increased its operational capabilities and now has an estimated 4,000 to 6,000 fighters and family members in Afghanistan.

In the Middle East ISIS has maintained its “Cubs of the Caliphate” program, recruiting children in the overcrowded al-Hol refugee camp in Syria. In addition, more than 850 boys, some as young as 10, are in detention and rehabilitation centers in the northeast of that country. Likewise, some 55,000 people with alleged links or family ties to ISIS are living in “dire” conditions with significant humanitarian hardship there, and clearly susceptible to their recruiting activity.

The UN experts monitoring sanctions against this group, also known by its Arab acronym Daesh, said that during the first half of 2023, the threat posed by ISIS remained “mostly high in conflict zones” i.e. Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is clear that the overall situation is dynamic, and despite significant losses in the group’s leadership and reduced activity in Syria and Iraq, the risk of its resurgence remains.

Iran

A 90-year-old man was among dozens arrested in past weeks in a new crackdown by Iranian authorities against Baha’is, Iran’s largest non-Muslim religious minority. The Baha’is, whose faith is not recognized in the Islamic Republic, say they have been the victims of a new wave of repression over the past year.

In the latest crackdown, almost 60 Baha’is were reported to have been arrested in Iran in August said the Baha’i International Community (BIC), which defends the interests of members of the faith. Additionally,

another 180 incidents of persecution, such as interrogations or raids against businesses, have been recorded in recent weeks, BIC said in a statement. Included with the arrest of the 90-year-old were others with health issues, many who already spent 10 years in prison because of their faith, evidencing the government’s attempt to continue its efforts to destroy the Baha’i community in Iran,

The Baha’i faith is a relatively modern monotheistic religion with spiritual roots dating back to the early 19th century in Iran. Iran brands Baha’is “heretics” and often accuses them of being agents of arch-foe Israel, as the spiritual hub of the faith is currently headquartered in the port city of Haifa. ■

POTPOURRI

(What you may not have read or heard in the news)

United States

In many states there were increases in each major category of antisemitism — harassment, vandalism and assault. The ADL Center on Extremism found that harassment climbed 29% over 2021 to 2,298 incidents; vandalism jumped by 51% to 1,288 events; and physical assaults went up 26% to 111. The assaults were defined as physical attacks on Jewish people, or those perceived to be Jewish, alongside evidence of antisemitism. Orthodox Jews, who are usually more recognizably Jewish, were disproportionately targeted, accounting for 53% of the victims, and close to 60% of the attacks took place in New York City, mostly the borough of Brooklyn.

There was one fatality — Arizona professor, Thomas Meixner, who was targeted by an antisemitic attacker who believed Meixner was Jewish, even though he wasn’t. The states with the most incidents were those with large Jewish populations, led by New York with 580 instances, followed by California, New Jersey, Florida and Texas.

Antisemitic incidents at colleges and non-Jewish schools increased by 40%. The school incidents included the use of swastikas, such as drawing the hate symbol on paper and handing it to a Jewish student, as well as verbal antisemitic bullying and racist jokes. There was also vandalism including the messages “kill all Jews,” “Hitler was right,” and “Jews not welcome.”



Jewish institutions including synagogues were targeted in 589 incidents, mostly in the form of harassment, a 12% increase over the previous year. The most high-profile attack was the hostage crisis earlier this year at Colleyville, Texas. There were 91 bomb threats against Jewish institutions. ■

COSTS

There are at least three kinds of costs to individuals, businesses and governments from religious-based conflict and violence namely financial, economic and hidden. As an example of the latter, it has been shown from studies in Spain which have determined that exposure of expectant mothers to violence, especially terrorism, has detrimental effects on birth outcomes - in terms of average birth weight (lower), prevalence of low birth weight (higher) and number of “normal” babies born (lower). Due to space limitations, however, below we describe only actual and potentially calculable financial costs.

In the past we have described the financial costs to the United States alone of the Iraq and Afghan conflicts as they continued to accrue. Since the USA has removed most of its troops from Iraq and has completed the removal of its forces in Afghanistan those costs, while still increasing, will now reflect the cost of advisory support of local forces as well as other indirect costs as they incur. However, additional costs are now being incurred because of the threat by ISIS in Iraq, Syria, again in Afghanistan and other parts of the Middle East and Africa as well.

In Afghanistan the US military and civilian forces have, after 20+ years now completely left that country. Total costs for their period of stay are estimated to be circa \$1 trillion. This figure does not include the yet to be calculated costs of the final withdrawal fiasco August, 2021 where some 3 times the number of the remaining military troops had to, at the eleventh hour, be sent back there to rescue some 2,500 military forces and over 15,000 stranded US citizens and their families. The approximately \$1 trillion 20+ year cost substantially increased the interest on the national debt during that period as well. Total costs since 2001 for this debt alone are approximately an additional \$2+ trillion.

In Iraq costs are again increasing due to the recent and new insertion of “non-combat” troops, advisors and their support, as well as the initiation of

more and more air activity and humanitarian aid. Costs since 2003 total \$2.8+ trillion with an additional cost of \$610+ billion in benefits owed Iraq war veterans. Add to this circa \$4.1+ trillion of interest on expenses for the war since 2003.

The costs of confronting ISIS alone, (not the only instigator of religious-based conflict and violence) and not including Afghanistan, Syria or African countries, are \$53+ billion a year and are increasing dramatically each month.

Finally, total costs for combating religious-based conflict to the USA alone since 2001 are more than \$8,4+ trillion, not including the ensuing interest on US debt because of these expenditures of an additional \$1+ trillion.

Some may disagree with these totals or the way they are calculated, but it is fair to say that they continue to be astonishing. While they cannot be 100% accurate, they do at least, generally reflect the costs generated by these religious-based conflicts as borne by the United States. Note that these financial costs are for attacking the *effects* of religious-based conflict alone. None of these costs are associated with attacking its *causes* only its *effects*. ■

ABOUT THE CENTER

What the Center, as a totally independent NGO, does is unique. No other such organization has as its sole goal the reduction of religious-based conflict through a practical and specific approach which goes beyond tolerance. We believe this problem is larger than religions themselves, not within their total control, and one which cannot be solved by them alone. They need our help. Non-believers and governments alike must work to support them in this effort.

In this respect, the Center’s primary mission is education. To educate, we must first publicize the problem of religious-based conflict and show how it affects all of us - either directly or indirectly; either physically or financially - and in many instances, both. We then educate by offering an approach towards its reduction not heretofore recognized, showing how we must go beyondtolerance, the current mantra for its so-called resolution, if we are to succeed. We describe this step in practical, realistic, not altruistic terms.



The Center does not purport to be able to *resolve* this problem; rather we show how the people and their governments can approach it and eventually cause change in the direction of its reduction. Since humans are imperfect, we cannot expect to totally resolve the problem of religious-based conflict, but we can, through this method, substantially reduce it to at least manageable proportions.

You can help reduce religious-based conflict in the world – probably more than you think you can. Even though individuals have limited power when acting alone, when they act as part of a group with a common purpose, this power increases geometrically. By supporting the Center - morally, actively or financially, you do just that - have more impact. For those of you who provide your moral support, we thank you. For those who either as formal Volunteers or as individuals discuss with others the Center's work, we cannot be more appreciative. For those who have the financial means and make charitable contributions to support our

efforts, we are forever grateful to you.

Our cause is unique. Our message is spreading daily to more and more people and governments throughout the world. Our work continues to receive praise from those who know of it.

But we must reach more people and more governments in order to increase our impact. And in this process, we must not only publicize the problem of religious-based conflict, as well as its astonishing and growing costs to us all; but we must also explain why tolerance is not the answer to this problem. And, finally, we are leading the way towards *educating* the people and their governments, showing them *how* to attain this goal with a practical and realistic plan.



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THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

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