

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

Why do we have religious-based conflict? And what can really be done to reduce it?

As the great interpreter to the West of the Hindu religion, Swami Vivekananda once said: “All forms of religion have an essential part and a non-essential part. If we strip from the latter, there remains the real basis for all religions and which all forms of religion have in common.”. As such, these are the questions every religion asks: “Where do we come from?” “Why are we here?” “What happens when we die?”. And each religion has its own answers for these questions. This is their essential part. Their non-essential part is their infrastructure - their hierarchy, their physical structures and their procedures, that is, their approach to promulgating that religion.

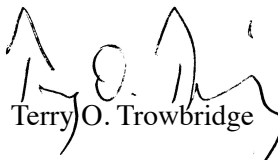
It is this non-essential aspect of these religions that causes religious-based conflict. It is this part which brings about an over-emphasis on their differences, while the essential part shows their similarities. Clearly, then, to work to further reduce religious-based conflict and violence we must find a way to restore the balance - the same emphasis - on both the essential and the non-essential aspect of each religion - rather than the over emphasis of those religious differences we now find embedded in the non-essential part of each religion.

There are at least two aspects which must be considered in working towards such reduction of religious-based conflict and violence. One is the restructuring of the formal educational systems in Islamic madrasas, the Christian schools and universities, for

example, and of course the control and reduction of the massive Internet articles and videos supporting religious-based conflict and violence. The second is the teachings from the pulpits of churches, synagogues and mosques which overemphasize religious differences. Clearly, at the very least and to begin with, such a two-pronged attack is required.

But even more is necessary, and we have discussed this before. There must be a major leader, from an important country, who will begin the the conversation - first internally, then internationally, explaining the benefits of less religious-based conflict - both economically and otherwise, as well as taking his stand in such important international forums as the United Nations. The overemphasis of religious differences must be reduced while at the same time not diminishing the importance of each religion! It must be a serious and long-term effort in order to bring noticeable results. Such an approach cannot bring the necessary results overnight. Though there has been noticeable progress made recently in reducing the current religious-based conflict, as discussed in earlier Updates, much more needs to be done to assure that progress has not been in vain, and that it will continue.

It is, regrettably, disturbing to note that, as the religious-based conflict and violence continues to decrease in other areas, it has, with increasing velocity, stormed into middle and southern Africa, the second largest continent on earth. While violence in other parts of the world has slightly decreased, there has been a 72% increase in religious-based conflict and violence in much of Africa just in the last year. The Center will continue to monitor this ongoing development.


Terry O. Trowbridge

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HOTSPOTS

Niger

At least 137 innocent people were killed in Niger's deadliest jihadist massacre which occurred in the Niamey area of this poor country. This attack brought the number of fatalities in the Mali-Niger border region to 236 in just over a week. Scores of people died in this deadliest jihadist massacre ever to hit Niger. A government spokesman, Zakaria Abdourahamane, had said they died in the raids in villages near Niger's border with Mali. Gunmen arriving on motorbikes attacked the villages of Intazayene, Bakorat and Wistane, shooting "at everything which moved," a local official said. The jump in the death toll would make these attacks the deadliest ever committed by jihadists in Niger. It brought the number of fatalities in the Mali-Niger border region to 236 in just one week.

The world's poorest nation according to the UN's development rankings for 189 countries, Niger is also struggling with Islamist insurgencies that have spilled over from Mali and Nigeria. Hundreds of lives have been lost, nearly half a million people have fled their homes, and devastating damage has been inflicted in the former French colony. Earlier in March jihadists killed 66 people in the Tillaberi region, attacking a bus carrying shoppers from the market town of Banibangou, and then raided the village of Darey-Daye, killing inhabitants and torching grain stores. That day, an attack claimed by the Islamic State group (IS) in the so-called "tri-border area" where the frontiers of Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali converge left 33 Malian soldiers dead.

Earlier in January, 100 people had been killed in attacks on two villages in the Mangaize district of Tillaberi. The massacre, one of the worst in Niger's history up until now, occurred between two rounds of the country's then presidential election.

Mozambique

The small, but important coastal town of Palma in northern Mozambique was overrun by Islamic terrorists in late March and the town was held for a week before the Islamists could be removed. Even so, almost the entire town was destroyed and many killed. Other local people as well as foreign workers were forced to evacuate the city and for three days another

200 had been trapped in a local hotel. Palma, the hub of a major LNG gas project, witnessed an estimated 35,000 local residents who managed to flee the area to nearby cities and towns, some after walking for four days carrying backpacks and plastic buckets with their belongings. It was the largest single displacement of people in northern Mozambique since the Islamists overran another Indian Ocean port town in Cabo Delgado province, Mocimboa da Praia, just over 50 miles south of Palma, last year.

The siege was a stunning escalation of the conflict in northeastern Mozambique by insurgent groups with ties to the Islamic State, which has made alarming inroads and sent waves of violence across the African continent in recent years. Over the past three years, this religious-based conflict between militants and non-Islamic government security forces in Cabo Delgado province has left at least 2,000 people dead and 670,000 more displaced, in one of the region's worst humanitarian crises. ■

POTPOURRI

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

Turkmenistan

In late January, police in the eastern Lebap Region again targeted Muslims who they believed were following their faith too closely, such as by praying every day. Police in Farap detained about 10 men and at the police station "used swear words and behaved crudely towards those they detained." The police forcibly shaved at least one man, made him drink alcohol, and fined him with no explanation. Additionally, police raided a home in January where about 10 men were praying the namaz. The men were taken to a police station, and it remains unknown what then happened to them. Police claimed they had violated lockdown regulations, though these remain unclear.

Saudi Arabia

There has been a notable reduction of anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist content in Saudi Arabian textbooks for the coming school year, a Jerusalem-based monitoring group found in a report recently released. While this report did not find that new tolerant material had been injected into the curriculum, it did find a substantial amount of offensive material had been removed. For instance, it found that the books no longer include a religious prediction of a war in which Muslims

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would kill all the Jews — a prophecy it said had served as a foundation for much of the anti-Semitic attitudes in the Muslim world. And the classic anti-Semitic trope that Jews, identified as “Zionist forces,” use villainous methods, including money, women, and drugs to control the world has been dropped.

Clearly, these new 2020 textbooks represent an institutional effort to modernize the Kingdom’s curriculum. Attitudes towards Israel are becoming “more balanced and tolerant. As an example, the removal of an entire chapter that was titled “the Zionist danger” that delegitimized Israel’s right to exist was removed. Certainly a step in the right direction. ■

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 (lower). Due to space limitations, however, below we describe only 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 is completing 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, other parts of the Middle East and Africa as well.

In Afghanistan, for instance the USA, even though their military are planning to exit by end of summer, spends enormous amounts of dollars a year for such things as training costs of the Afghan military as well as humanitarian aid. Costs are estimated to be circa \$60 million per year. Then there was the Department of Defense 2020 increase of \$243 billion to the base budget of the D of D. These figures, though not included, substantially increase the interest on the national debt. Total costs since 2001 are approximately \$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 \$2.0+ trillion with an additional cost of \$600+ billion in benefits owed Iraq war veterans. Add to this circa \$4+ 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 Syria or African countries where costs are increasing, are \$45+ 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 \$5.8+ trillion, not including the ensuing interest on US debt because of these expenditures of an additional \$818+ million.

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 may not 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*. ■

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 beyond tolerance, 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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Center For Reduction of Religious-Based Conflict
649 Fifth Avenue South, Suite 201
Naples, Florida 34102, USA
Telephone: (239) 821-4850; Email: centerrel@center2000.org