“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

We’ve alluded in the past to the various groups involved in religious-based conflict and violence other than al-Qaeda or ISIS. In this edition we will discuss one of the more significant ones. As the Wall Street Journal recently reported “The collapse of Islamic State’s (ISIS) caliphate has delivered a crushing blow to that extremist group, but the conditions that nourished that insurgency and others in war-shattered Syria and Iraq remain perilously in place.” (WSJ-3/25/19). These conditions are the continuing education to hate all “non-believers” as well as teaching conflict and violence as a solution. Rather than al-Qaeda and ISIS being eliminated they have been atomized and dispersed, morphing into various different organizations around the Middle East, Africa and Asia, with large numbers of jihadist sympathizers also developing especially in Europe and Great Britain.

Boko Haram based in Nigeria is one of the more significant offshoots. This Islamist group which has caused havoc in Africa's most populous country through a wave of bombings, assassinations and abductions - is fighting to overthrow the government and create an Islamic state. Boko Haram promotes a version of Islam which makes it "haram", or forbidden for Muslims to take part in any political or social activity associated with Western (non Islam) society. Its arabic name is Jama’a ahl al-sunnah li-da’wa wa al-jihad, which in English means "People Committed to the Propagation of the Prophet's Teachings and Jihad". Interestingly, the words “Boko Haram” are translated by the Hausa-speaking residents of northeastern Nigeria to mean “Western education is sin”. The group’s founder, Mohammed Yusuf, was trained as a Salafist preacher and adhered to the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya, a 14th century scholar who preached the tenets of Islamic fundamentalism. In 2009, the group took up the practice of takfir, whereby a Muslim would be able to excommunicate and kill other Muslims whom they deemed to be non-believers. In defending the right to kill “non-believing” coreligionists, they have also claimed that a non-believer’s (non-Muslims as well) supposed “ignorance” of Boko Haram’s tenets should not be “taken into consideration” before killing them. This indigenous Nigerian organization is determined to create an Islamic government ruled by Sharia law not only in Nigeria but in neighboring countries as well.

To achieve their goals, the group has carried out hundreds of large-scale attacks inside Nigeria. For example, an attack on the U.N. headquarters in Abuja in 2011, the abduction of nearly 300 schoolgirls in April 2014, and the multi-day massacre of the northern town of Baga and surrounding villages in January 2015 that killed approximately 2,000 civilians. In November 2018, Boko Haram attacked a military base in Borno state—looting weapons, equipment, and vehicles, and leaving more than 100 soldiers dead. To name just a few.

Currently they are not only active in Nigeria but also in the contiguous countries of Chad, Cameroon and Niger, and their terror has claimed additional tens of thousands of lives and displaced millions more in recent years. A long-time Al-Qaeda sympathizer, in spring 2015 Boko Haram pledged its allegiance to ISIS and changed its name to the Islamic State West Africa (ISWA).
Since 2009, Boko Haram has claimed the lives of more than 30,000 people, and displaced over two million people. And this is only a fraction of the religious-based conflict and violence endured on the African continent. More on this in our subsequent Updates.

Terry O. Trowbridge

HOTSPOTS

Sri Lanka

Peace was shattered on this tear-shaped island during an important Christian religious holiday (Easter) in April. Christian churches and areas inhabited principally by Christians were attacked by Islamists. More than 250 were killed and at least 500 wounded by at least nine suicide bombers of a domestic Islamist terror group named National Thowfeek Jamaath. Sri Lankan authorities said an international terror group (ISIS) had inspired and supported this obscure local Islamist group in carrying out this series of bombings. While anti-Muslim bigotry has swept the island in recent years, fed by Buddhist nationalists, the island has had no history of attacks by Islamists until now.

Syria

An Al Qaeda-linked jihadist group Hay‘at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) initially gained swaths of territory in the northern province of Idlib, usurping control from Turkish-backed groups connected to the National Liberation Front (NLF). The group initially formed at the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and “has remained a dangerous opposition force,” according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Last year, it was added to the U.S. State Department’s Foreign Terrorist designation given its association to al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat al-Nusra. They are considered to be anti-Iran, anti-U.S., anti-Russia - and also anti-Assad regime in Syria. HTS was previously known as Syria’s Al Qaeda (AQ) branch al-Nusra Front, and later named Jabhat Fateh al-Sham for its leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani. It has had an estimated fighting force of around 12,000 and has been the most dominant of all rebel groups operating in the region spreading religious-based violence wherever it operated.

POTPOURRI

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

The World

Christians suffered an increase in religious-based violence last year with several hundred million of their religion facing violence or oppression around the world - up circa 30 million from a year ago. A report by Open Doors, a Dutch charity, stated that a total of 245 million faced violence or oppression in 2018, with 73 countries listed as danger zones for Christians. China was named among the most dangerous places to be a Christian after new laws governing religious expression had led to raids and the demolition of scores of churches. Likewise, India has also seen a spate of violence against ultra-nationalists against non-Hindu minorities including Christians. Also, rising nationalism has led to similar persecution in other countries such as Bhutan, Myanmar and Nepal where national identity is tied to religion.

The World II

The number of Jews murdered in anti-Semitic attacks around the world in 2018 reached its "highest" level in decades after a mass shooting at a US synagogue in January. This marked the highest number of Jews murdered in religious-based violence since the attacks on the Argentinian Jewish community in the 1990s. And, for the second year running the number of anti-Semitic incidents in Britain reached a record high. And in France as well there was a 69% rise in reported anti-Semitic attacks and threats after what had been a two-year decline.

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 itself continues to exit, spends enormous amounts of dollars a year for such things as training costs of the Afghan military as well as humanitarian aid. Costs since 2001 are $1.07 trillion which has three main components. First is the $773 billion in Overseas Contingency Operations funds specifically dedicated to the Afghanistan War. Second is the increase of $243 billion to the base budget of the Department of Defense. Third is the increase of $54.2 billion to the Department of Veteran Affairs budget.

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 $818+ billion.

The costs of confronting ISIS alone, (not the only instigator of religious-based conflict and violence) and not including Syria or African countries, are $24+ 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 $5.90+ trillion, not including the ensuing interest on US debt because of these expenditures of an additional $673+ 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 charity, 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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