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

- Margaret Mead

In Our 20th Year

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FROM THE DIRECTOR

With this issue of the Update we begin our 20th year of publication and we are grateful to all who have supported us through the years and made our continuing progress in this endeavor possible.

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED why there is so much terrorism in the world? And, did you know that almost all the violence and loss of life in the world comes - directly or indirectly - from religious-based conflict? Further, as we know, it is almost never referred to in that way, rather simply called terrorism or violence. Have you ever wondered why?

Terrorism merely describes the “act” not why or what the reason for that act is. Thus when the word is used - as it is over and over again - the reader or listener has no idea WHY the act took place. And if we don’t know why the act took place, the word or the problem is not really defined. And, if there is no definition of the word/act, we cannot really defend against or resolve the problem of terrorism when that is what we call it. On the other hand, if we describe the act(s) as religious-based violence - which they really are - we know exactly what we are talking about and can genuinely begin to work on solving the problem. So far, the world, most instances, has not even come close to doing this! So how can we reduce the so-called “terrorism”, which is increasing, in the world?

Clearly it is either through lack of understanding, simply being ill informed, or some kind of unrealistic sensitivity to the feelings of others’ religious beliefs that we do this. And, for whatever the reason it delays, if not precludes us from really attacking the problem of religious-based conflict and violence.

Fortunately, through the unique efforts of the Center, the world is slowly changing this approach to “terrorism” and this brings increasing hope for its eventual noticeable reduction. For example, twenty years ago there was no such phrase as “religious-based conflict”. The Center brought this phrase forward and today it is often more than casually mentioned or written by others. Likewise, today, in many circles the cause of such conflict is now often questioned. These are very important first steps. But, as we have been aware since our initial efforts, this process moves much too slowly and we still have a long way to go, though as they say, “we are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel”.

We must begin to even more intensely be aware of what are the causes of religious-based conflict, analyze them and find practical ways to deal with them. We must do away with the mantra that tolerance, even in a limited way, can help solve the problem. That is, we must go beyond tolerance in our search for a more substantive approach to this problem.

As we have written in past Updates, the leaders of countries must take the public initiative to change the vision from emphasizing religious differences to highlighting those common threads of similarities which religions have with one another. This is the first major step towards reducing religious-based conflict (i.e. terrorism). And, just in recent months we have seen three some important steps in that direction. In September plans were unveiled for a
new, massive interfaith complex in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) capital of Abu Dhabi, encompassing a Muslim mosque, a Christian church and a Jewish synagogue - a first for any Muslim country. The facility, to be known as the Abrahamic Family House, is to be located on Saadiyat Island in the UAE's capital city, right next to its new Louvre Museum. Abraham of the Old Testament, after whom the facility was named, is considered a holy prophet in all three religions. Also in September, in another first, a Jewish and a Muslim astronaut traveled together aboard a space rocket to the International Space Station and remained together there for one month. And the leader of a Muslim nation, Saudi Arabia, for the first time, publicly sent the leader of a Jewish nation, Israel, happy birthday wishes. Finally, Saudi Arabia’s embassy in Washington sent Rosh Hashanah greetings to US Jews wishing them a happy and sweet Jewish new year. It was the first time that embassy had sent such a message to the Jewish people in America.

These are all encouraging steps, and though small, are vastly important. Clearly there is much more to do, but they show by their example one of the important ways to reduce religious-based conflict which is through the emphasis of those common threads of similarity existing among all religions, rather than stressing only their differences as we now so often do. Good news!

Terry O. Trowbridge

HOTSPOTS

Somalia

In Somalia there is an organization called Al-Shabab which advocates the Saudi-inspired Wahhabi version of Islam. It has imposed a strict version of the Sharia laws in areas under its control, including stoning to death women accused of adultery and amputating the hands of thieves. Most analysts put the number of al-Shabab fighters somewhere just short of 10,000, although the true number is hard to discern, as many of the group’s members blend into civilian life. The group has carried out near-daily attacks across Somalia this year, killing more than 1,600 people. As an example, there were two attacks in Somalia in September, both targeting Western forces backing the government. One attack, apparently led by an explosives-laden vehicle and followed by foot soldiers, took place at the gates of Baledogle airfield, where the U.S. military stations drones and trains Somali soldiers. The second took place in the capital, Mogadishu, and involved the bombing of an Italian military convoy returning to base from a training exercise as part of a European Union training mission in Somalia. Al-Shabab has waged what amounts to a guerrilla war against the Somali government and its foreign backers since it was dislodged from many of southern Somalia’s cities in 2011. This group, however, regularly continues its attacks on those cities as well as on rural areas.

DR Congo

The caliphate may, at the moment, be gone in Iraq and Syria but ISIS is rebranding and finding new places to terrorize, an example is in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Just over a year ago, Congolese troops found a book written in Arabic on the body of an enemy combatant. The book was from the Islamic State’s Research and Studies Office, a department of the terrorist group’s now-defunct state in Syria and Iraq that issued doctrinal texts buttressing its brutal worldview. The discovery of the book in the spring of 2018 was among a number of clues indicating that ISIS, was trying to establish a toehold in the lawless jungles of eastern Congo. In April the Islamic State’s news agency claimed the group’s first attack in the Congo, stating that its soldiers had assaulted a military barracks in the area of Beni, killing eight people. The attack took place in a region beset by violence in a part of the world long outside government control, the kind of terrain that has proved to be fertile ground for ISIS. If the group succeeds in planting its flag here, it would not only expand its reach into a new part of the continent, but it would also do so far outside the grasp of international forces.

Ireland

The police in Northern Ireland said in April that the killing of a journalist who was covering a night of violent unrest in Londonderry was committed by a militant opponent of British rule there. “We are treating this as a
terrorist incident, and we have launched a murder inquiry,” Mark Hamilton, an assistant chief constable, said of the fatal shooting of the journalist, Lyra McKee, 29. “At this stage, we believe her murder was carried out by a violent dissident republican,” he said. “Our assessment at this time would be that the New I.R.A. are most likely to be the ones behind this,” he added, referring to a militant republican group formed several years ago from the merger of several splinter groups. Many people in Northern Ireland, primarily Roman Catholics, consider themselves republicans, meaning that they want the region to break away from the United Kingdom and join the Republic of Ireland. The violence took place in Creggan, a heavily Catholic area of Londonderry after the police started carrying out searches in the area because of concerns that militant republicans were storing firearms and explosives there. Religious-based conflict continues to exist in Ireland.

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 are estimated to be circa $50 per year. Then there is the Department of Defense increase of $243 billion to the base budget of the DD. Finally is the increase of $54.2 billion to the Department of Veteran Affairs budget. These figures, though not included, substantially increase the interest on the national debt.

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 $1.7 trillion with an additional cost of $490+ 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, are $31+ 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 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.

Yes, I want to support the Center!

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