

American ignorance of Islam results in confused Syria policy

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Washington, DC, December 13, 2012 — Lack of understanding of Islam and of the critical importance between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims is fueling a disastrous American policy in Syria, as it has elsewhere in the region.

The civil and proxy war that currently rages in Syria, with 42,000 dead as of November, 2012, pits rebel forces nominally represented by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces against the sitting administration of Syrian president Bashar Hafez al-Assad.

This rebel coalition has received recognition from 114 countries, and now from US President Obama. It is led by its elected president Ahmad Mouaz Al-Khatib Al-Hasani, former imam of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. The rebel movement itself has strong roots in the Muslim Brotherhood, which now also leads Arab Sprung Egypt. The motto of the Muslim Brotherhood is, "Allah is our objective; the Prophet is our leader; the Quran is our law; Jihad is our way; dying in the way of Allah is our highest hope."

It is important to know that the term "Jihad" has an elegant meaning, which in its elevated sense applies to all true religions and to Christian life. But as used the term is often meant and interpreted in ways that legitimize violence.

Most know by now that the war in Syria has split interested nations along Cold War lines. But such simplistic analysis and development of policy is at the checkers level. To raise our analysis to the level of chess requires that analysts admit and take into account the historical intra-Islam realities at play, and recognize the important split between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims.

The profound and pervasive ignorance in the West of how important this split really is, and the magnitude of its implications for sound foreign relations has caused Western powers blunder after tragic blunder in policy and behavior in the Middle East. Americans do not understand that America's Iraq is run by Nouri Al-Maliki with natural ties based on religious affinity to Iran, and by implication to Syria's Bashar al-Assad, and not to the Sunni dominated rebel movement. Some even ascribe the resurgence of Sunni attacks and groups in Iraq to the deepening sectarian conflict and the rise of Sunni power in Syria.

On the Sunni side, conversely, Gulf countries, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey itself have been supporting the rebels indirectly, including from Turkish territory.

President Obama said Tuesday that the United States would formally recognize a coalition of Syrian opposition groups as that country's legitimate representative. There are many reasons for this, including power plays involving Russia and China, and the liberal capacity to see full-scale war in the dreamy universe of Arab Springs.

But everyone knows that much of the rebellion is infused with Jihadists, especially the Nusra Front, an offshoot of Al Qaeda in Iraq, that has become one of the most effective forces fighting against President Bashar al-Assad.

The Israeli Ambassador to the US explains, "We are watching the situation very carefully." While Syrian President Bashar Assad was "reckless, irresponsible and ruthless," a bigger threat to regional stability

would be allowing al-Qaeda and its ilk to get their hands on Assad's chemical weapons arsenal. "Syria has a very varied, deep chemical weapons program. It is geographically dispersed as well. Were those weapons to pass into the wrong hands, Hezbollah's hands, for example, that would be a game changer for us."

These are horrifying contemporary geo-political realities that properly cause alarm day to day, but they are rooted in the deepest lines of demarcation in this complex landscape, namely the dangerous 2,000-kilometer fault line running through the Middle East between Beirut and Bahrain via Damascus and Baghdad, the present line of demarcation between the two main branches of Islam, Sunni and Shi'ite.

The 1,300-year-old schism between Sunnis and Shi'ites was caused not by a theological dispute (those came later), but by rival clans in Muhammad's tribe, the Quraysh, squabbling over the succession after his death in 632 AD. Mostly the "Sunni-Shi'a Line" lies dormant, and ordinary Sunnis and Shi'ites live out their separate lives, side-by-side in relative harmony. In Lebanon and Iraq it has not been uncommon for Sunnis and Shi'ites to intermarry.

But the Line is still always there, just below the surface, and it has recently re-emerged as the most significant factor reshaping geopolitical relationships in the Middle East, a region where religion and politics are always inextricably intertwined.

It is clear and reliable knowledge of these internecine, inter-tribal, inter-ethnic, and cryptic, near unfathomable inter-religious realities that are absolutely requisite for the development of sound policy in the region. But this type of knowledge can never be intuited at the opportunistic levels at which governments operate. Knowledge of what is truly needed to guide sound policy requires life-long investment in true human relationships, a constant labor to transcend one's own cultural entrapments and rigid mental frames in a spirit of good will and humility.

Does anyone believe a victory by rebel forces will result in greater peace and stability in the region? That Russia and China will calmly toss in their cards, abandoning far-reaching military, geopolitical, and economic interests in Syria? That the 1300 year old Shi'ite Sunni divide will calmly revert to calm and peace? That Jihadist and Islamist revolutionaries who are losing their lives today will become latte-sipping friends of the United States tomorrow?

So long as international policy is racked by the cancer of unmitigated self-interest, we will walk from war to war, from dysfunction to dysfunction.