
How to Manage Savagery

Bret Stephens

“ISLAM HAS bloody borders.” So wrote Samuel Huntington in “The Clash of Civilizations?,” his 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article later expanded (minus the question mark) into a best-selling book. Huntington argued that, eclipsing past eras of national and ideological conflict, “the battle lines of the future” would be drawn along the “fault lines between civilizations.” Here, according to Huntington, was where current and coming generations would define the all-important “us” versus “them.”

At the time of its writing, “The Clash of Civilizations?” had, beyond the virtues of pithiness and historical sweep, something to recommend it on purely empirical grounds. It seemed especially plausible as applied to the “crescent-shaped Islamic bloc” from the Maghreb to the East Indies.

In the Balkans, for example, Orthodox Serbs were at the throats of Bosnian and later Kosovar Muslims. In Africa, Muslims were either skirmishing or at war with Christians in Nigeria, Sudan, and Ethiopia. In the Caucasus, there was all-out war between Orthodox Russia and Muslim Chechnya, all-out war between Christian Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan, and violent skirmishes between Orthodox Ossetia and Muslim Ingushetia.

In the Middle East, some 500,000 U.S. troops

had intervened to expel Iraq from Kuwait. Israel had just endured several years of the first Palestinian *intifada*, soon to be followed by a fraudulent peace process leading, in turn, to a second and far bloodier *intifada*. Further to the east, Pakistan and India were at perpetual daggers drawn over Kashmir. There were tensions—sometimes violent—between the Hindu majority and the large Muslim minority in India, just as there were between the Christian minority and the Muslim majority in Indonesia.

For Huntington, all this was of a piece with a pattern dating at least as far back as the battle of Poitiers in 732, when Charles Martel turned back the advancing Umayyads and saved Europe for Christianity. Nor was the pattern likely to end any time soon. “The centuries-old military interaction between the West and Islam is unlikely to decline,” he wrote. To the contrary: “It could become more virulent.”

As predictions go, Huntington’s landmark thesis seemed in many ways to have been borne out by subsequent events. Long before 9/11, and long before George W. Bush came to office, anti-American hostility within the Muslim—and, particularly, the Arab—world was plainly on the rise. So was terrorist activity directed at U.S. targets. Meanwhile, the advent of satellite TV brought channels like al-Jazeera and Hizballah’s al-Manar to millions of Muslim homes and public places, offering their audience a robust diet of anti-American, anti-Is-

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rael, and often anti-Semitic “news,” propaganda, and Islamist indoctrination.

It should have come as no surprise, then, that Muslim reaction to the attacks of September 11, 2001 tended toward the euphoric—in striking confirmation, it would seem, of Huntington’s bold thesis. And that thesis would seem to be no less firmly established today, when opinion polls show America’s “favorability ratings” plummeting even in Muslim countries once relatively well-disposed toward us: in Turkey, for example, descending from 52 percent in 1999 to 12 percent in 2008, and in Indonesia from 75 percent to 37 percent in the same period (according to the Pew Global Survey). These findings are all the more depressing in light of the massive humanitarian assistance provided to Indonesia by the U.S. after the 2004 tsunami. The same might be said of Pakistan where, despite similarly critical U.S. assistance after the 2005 earthquake, already low opinions of the U.S. have sunk still further.

Nor is the phenomenon of “Muslim rage” directed against America alone. In Spain, the Netherlands, Great Britain, France and Germany—countries with widely varying foreign policies toward, and colonial histories in, the Muslim world—terrorist plots, terrorist attacks, spectacular murders, and mass rioting have made vivid the gulf that separates embittered and often radicalized Muslim minorities from the societies around them. Even in tiny, inoffensive Belgium, whose government was among the most vocal in opposing the war in Iraq and has bent over backward to respect the sensitivities of the Muslim community, the entire Brussels neighborhood of Molenbeek, according to the Flemish newspaper *Het Volk*, has been turned into a “breeding ground for thousands of jihad candidates.”

AND YET even as these trends unfolded, and continue to unfold, a second and almost opposite set of trends can be perceived today. Contrary to Huntington’s forecast, much of world conflict is now overwhelmingly characterized by fighting and competition not between or among civilizations but *within* them. And nowhere is this truer than in the Muslim world.

Look again at the peripheries of the Islamic crescent where Huntington perceived a collision course between Islam and the West. In the Balkans, NATO intervention in Bosnia and later in Kosovo secured Muslim populations and ultimately ended the Serbian regime of Slobodan Milosevic. In Africa, U.S. diplomatic mediation helped to bring an end to the 22-year second Sudanese civil war and to initiate de-

facto autonomy—with the ultimate goal of independence—for that country’s largely Christian south. In Israel, the second *intifada* with its wave of suicide bombings was all but stopped cold by a combination of aggressive counterinsurgency operations and the building of a separation fence.

In the Caucasus, the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan ended with a ceasefire that has held to this day, while Chechnya was brought to heel by a brutal military campaign directed by Russian President Vladimir Putin. In Kashmir, there has been no direct fighting between India and Pakistan; the head of the main jihadist group lamented this past July that Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf had “murdered the Kashmir cause.” Even as far afield as Mindanao in the Philippines, the radical Islamist Abu Sayyaf movement has been crippled by a combination of Filipino and American arms.

True, not all the wars of the Islamic periphery have ended: Hamas’s Kassam rockets continue to fly from Gaza into Israel, and Hizballah, itself an Iranian proxy, has fully re-armed following the summer 2006 Lebanese war. In January 2007, Ethiopia invaded neighboring Somalia to depose a Taliban-like regime. Bombay was hit with a Madrid-style bombing attack on its commuter rails in 2006. Thailand’s Muslim minority has been restive and violent.

Remarkably, however, the wars that chiefly coil the Islamic world today are no longer at its periphery. They are at the center, and they pit Muslims against other Muslims. The genocide in Darfur is being perpetrated by a regime that is every bit as Muslim—and black—as its victims. The Palestinians went from *intifada* to civil war: in 2006 and 2007, nearly as many Palestinians died violently at the hands of other Palestinians as at the hands of Israelis. In Lebanon, there have been bloody clashes this year among Shiites, Sunnis, and Druze. Last year, the Lebanese government had to send troops into Palestinian refugee camps to suppress an insurrectionary attempt by a Syrian-sponsored terrorist group.

It does not end there. Saudi Arabia has been under attack by al Qaeda since 2003. In November 2005, Jordan suffered devastating suicide bombings at three Amman hotels in which nearly all the victims were, like their murderers, Sunni Muslims. In Afghanistan, a Muslim government led by Hamid Karzai—a Pashtun—fights an Islamist rebellion by Taliban remnants and their allies, also mostly Pashtun. In Pakistan, the axis of conflict has shifted from the east to the west, where sizable areas are under the control of Islamist militants; in 2007 alone, some 1,500 Pakistanis were killed in terror-

ist attacks, former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto notably among them.

Then there is Iraq. Though Americans naturally focus on the more than 4,000 U.S. servicemen killed so far since the country was liberated in April 2003, that figure pales in comparison with the number of Iraqis killed in inter- and intra-sectarian violence: Sunnis against Shiites and Kurds, Sunnis against Sunnis, Shiites against Sunnis, Shiites against Shiites. Cumulatively, the number of civilian deaths since early 2006, when sectarian fighting got under way in earnest, now stands at just over 100,000 (according to the Brookings Institution).

All this serves as a useful reminder of another significant fact. In the years immediately prior to 9/11, non-Muslims tended to be the likeliest targets of terrorism. In recent years, Muslims themselves have overwhelmingly been their co-religionists' primary victims. In 2007, of the nearly 8,000 deaths due to terrorism in the Middle East, only a handful were Israeli. Similarly, of the roughly 270 suicide bombings in 2007, some 240 took place in predominantly Muslim countries. Nearly 100 mosques were also the targets of terrorist attack, many at the hands of Muslims.

TAKING THE long view, one might note that intra-Islamic feuding is as old as the religion itself. Of Muhammad's immediate successors—the "righteous caliphs," according to Sunni tradition—the first, Abu Bakr, may have been poisoned; the next three are all known to have been assassinated, with the murder of the third caliph (Othman) resulting in the schism from which the Shiite branch of Islam emerged. The Abassid revolt destroyed the Umayyad caliphate in the 8th century; the early 9th century was marked by civil war between the sons of the fifth Abassid caliph, Haroun al-Rashid. Al Qaeda itself has ancient Islamic antecedents: the 8th-century Kharajites, for instance, were notorious for their extreme puritanism, frequent recourse to violence, and the belief that they could declare their Muslim opponents to be infidels and treat them accordingly.

To be sure, endless feuding is hardly unique to Islamic civilization: the history of the West is also one of intense competition, bitter conflict, and outbursts of religious fanaticism. On the whole, though, these conflicts have dissipated and evanesced as the West has almost universally adopted democratic forms of governance. By contrast, Islam's foundational patterns not only persist into the present day but in many ways have intensified.

There have been devastating civil wars in Alge-

ria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, and an even more terrible war between Iran and Iraq. Even a partial list of prominent political assassinations in the Muslim world since World War II runs to over 100 names. It includes two prime ministers and a president of Egypt; two presidents and a prime minister of Bangladesh; three prime ministers and a president of Iran; a king and two prime ministers of Jordan; two presidents, a president-elect, a prime minister, and a former prime minister of Lebanon; a president of Syria; a king and two prime ministers of Jordan; a king and a former prime minister of Iraq; a president, a prime minister, and former prime minister of Pakistan; a king of Saudi Arabia. And these are just the successful attempts. The list of coups in the Muslim world is about as long. In Syria alone there have been no fewer than nine since 1949.

Several explanations have been offered for this history of violence. There is the absence of democracy, which forecloses opportunities for non-violent political change and pushes most forms of dissent into the mosque. There is the oil curse, which allows states like Saddam Hussein's Iraq to finance expensive wars, buy political support, sustain huge sclerotic bureaucracies, and prevent the diversification and modernization of their economies. There is the endemic tribalism of Muslim, and particularly Arab, societies, and the values that go with it: the claims of kinship, the premium on familial honor, the submission to established hierarchies, suspicion of those outside the clan. There is the moral abdication of the Muslim intellectual class, which, with some notable exceptions, fell prey to nearly every bad idea that came its way, from fascism to socialism to third-worldism. And there is the history of Islam itself, which has made a virtue of military conquest, dealt sharply with heretics, and, until the abolition of the caliphate in 1924 by Turkey's Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, typically combined political with religious authority.

There is also the fact that European colonial regimes overstayed their welcome in their Middle Eastern possessions, with the effect that more or less liberal movements like the Egyptian Wafd came to be seen as stooges of the West, incapable of achieving national goals through nonviolent means. Partly as a result of this failure, the Muslim world soured on liberalism before it ever really tasted it, and traditional liberal parties and policies were discredited in favor of more radical alternatives: the Muslim Brotherhood, the violent Arab nationalisms of the Baath parties in Syria and Iraq, Gamal Abdel Nasser and the "Free Officers" in Egypt, Algeria's

National Liberation Front, and so on. Despite the manifest failings of these movements, and the triumph of liberal politics from Mexico City to Warsaw to Seoul, liberalism has never really recaptured its good name in the Muslim world beyond a handful of courageous individuals.

Exactly how to weigh the relative importance of these factors is hard to say; plainly they are mutually reinforcing. And while Muslim and especially Arab societies are not alone in suffering from them, they have come together in a unique way in those societies to produce a culture of perpetual failure and worsening crisis.

SHOULD THIS have been more apparent to Huntington when he wrote “The Clash of Civilizations?” Perhaps. It may have been obscured, in part, by what later turned out to be the Muslim world’s own version of a holiday from history. The Iran-Iraq war ended in 1988, and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in the following year seemed to cool Iran’s revolutionary ardor. Civil wars in Lebanon and Yemen were brought to an end, leaving most existing Arab regimes as entrenched as ever. The collapse of the Soviet Union meant the Middle East was no longer a cold-war battleground. Socialism lost favor, and some Middle Eastern regimes began expressing an interest in reforming their economies. From the outside, at least, one could almost begin imagining a “New Middle East,” as Israel’s Shimon Peres did with consummate naiveté in a 1993 book.

But the Soviet (and Yugoslav) collapse had another important consequence: it reshaped the map of the Muslim world by bringing newly independent post-Soviet states into its fold. Some independence movements, notably in Chechnya and Bosnia, took on an Islamic coloration. Elsewhere, a pan-Islamic consciousness, which had already gained considerable momentum with the 1979 Iranian revolution and the *mujahideen* war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, was spreading rapidly. It was aided immeasurably by advances in mass communication and by the worldwide establishment of thousands of Saudi-funded *madrassas* preaching an inflexible version of desert Islam. If, previously, the very idea of an “Islamic civilization” would have seemed at most a remote abstraction to most Muslims living within it, in the 90’s it became at least possible to imagine this as an expression not only of common religious identity but also of shared political aspirations.

Most deeply invested in the concept were the Islamist radicals for whom the abolition of the caliphate represented not the passing of an outdat-

ed institution but a historical calamity. To them, the 90’s presented its own set of opportunities. Unable to dislodge the “apostate regimes” of the Middle East through terrorist campaigns, they decided to focus on dislodging their patron—the United States—from the region.

The idea of killing large numbers of Westerners, particularly Americans, had the additional advantage of being both plausible and popular. Plausible, because the Reagan administration’s precipitous withdrawal from Beirut after the 1983 bombings of our Marine barracks and embassy, followed a decade later by the Clinton administration’s equally precipitous withdrawal from Somalia, suggested a superpower easily frightened. And popular because the U.S. really was broadly detested throughout the Muslim world, not least on account of its support for the selfsame apostate regimes that were detested by the radicals.

The strategy of an “escalating sequence” of terrorist attacks on American targets was explicitly laid out by the jihadist theoretician Abu Bakr Naji (the name is almost certainly a pseudonym) in a document, *The Management of Savagery*, published on the Internet in 2004. Predicated on the idea that everyone loves a winner, it was not, in its own terms, a bad strategy.

In the immediate wake of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush administration and other governments had been quick to brand Osama bin Laden as an outcast among Muslims. But the overwhelming weight of evidence suggested differently. There were large public demonstrations of support for bin Laden in the Philippines and Indonesia. In the Muslim areas of Thailand, the name “Osama” became suddenly popular among newborn boys *and* girls, according to an October 2001 report in the *Hindustan Times*. Portraits of bin Laden were hot-selling items from Bangladesh to Nigeria. A poll found that fully 42 percent of Kuwaitis, whose country the U.S. had liberated only a decade earlier, considered bin Laden a “freedom fighter.” Among Palestinians, 9/11 made bin Laden “the most popular figure in the West Bank and Gaza, second only to Arafat,” according to a Fatah leader in Nablus.

Al Qaeda’s popularity would not soon fade. In 2004, the Pew Global Survey found 55 percent of Jordanians and 65 percent of Pakistanis holding a favorable view of bin Laden. Nor was al Qaeda slow to capitalize on its stardom. By 2002, European intelligence agencies were reporting a sharp uptick in the organization’s recruitment efforts. More worrisomely, al Qaeda was able to transform itself from a group into a movement. Some jihadist

outfits, like Abu Musab al Zarqawi's Tawhid wal-Jihad and the Algerian Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, swore loyalty oaths directly to bin Laden. Others, including Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiyah, began imitating al Qaeda's methods by attacking prominent Western targets. Cells sprang up in Gaza. Al-Qaeda "wannabes" murdered 52 people in the London bombings of July 2005 and plotted to murder the prime minister of Canada.

But it was the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq that, as Naji wrote in *The Management of Savagery*, had the most galvanizing effect on would-be jihadists. Even before the U.S. toppled the Taliban, the radical televangelist Sheik Yussuf al-Qaradawi had decreed: "Islamic law says that if a Muslim country is attacked, the other Muslim countries must help it, with their souls and their money, until it is liberated." His call was widely heeded. By late 2006, al Qaeda could count on as many as 5,000 to 10,000 active members in Iraq, many of whom (including nearly all the senior leadership) had come from abroad. And while they were never the major part of the Sunni insurgency that gripped the country until last year, they accounted for an estimated 90 percent of all suicide bombings.

Late 2006 was also the moment when it became at least conceivable that Naji's strategy, which foresaw the creation of "liberated zones" under the dominion of al-Qaeda-like groups, might actually succeed on the ground. Al Qaeda in Iraq had largely "liberated" Anbar province through an unbridled campaign of terror against other Sunnis. It had also pursued a policy of deliberate carnage against Iraq's Shiites, with the intent, and effect, of creating all-but ungovernable chaos in the country. In the United States, the report of the Iraq Study Group, headed by James Baker and Lee Hamilton, recommended that no more U.S. troops be committed to Iraq, while the Democratic party, which had largely supported the initial decision to invade Iraq, began issuing increasingly hectic calls for immediate withdrawal.

Had those calls become U.S. policy, Naji's strategy might have been vindicated. The "fall of prestige of America" that he prognosticated would have accelerated dramatically throughout the Muslim world. Precipitous U.S. withdrawal from Iraq would have been seen by jihadists and their fellow travelers in a similar light to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1988—as proof that it was possible to defeat a superpower, and as a harbinger of their enemies' complete rout. Al Qaeda would have had every incentive to apply the Iraq model—the "management of savagery"—to other Muslim

states, particularly weaker secular states like Jordan, deemed guilty of "apostasy." And al Qaeda's own prestige would have been hugely boosted, offering a large pool of new recruits to replenish those who had been lost.

THAT, HOWEVER, is not how matters have turned out, at least so far. President Bush pushed ahead with his "surge" strategy, under a new commanding officer using tried and true counterinsurgency tactics. Its effects were soon felt. Al Qaeda's ranks were decimated, and the flow of foreign fighters dried up.

In late 2007, the U.S. military captured letters from two of al Qaeda's "emirs" in Iraq. One of them appraised his situation thus:

There were almost 600 fighters in our sector before the [Sunni] tribes changed course 360 [sic] degrees. . . . Many of our fighters quit and some of them joined the deserters. . . . As a result of that the number of fighters dropped down to 20 or less. We were mistreated, cheated, and betrayed by some of our brothers who used to be part of the jihadi movement, therefore we must not have mercy on those traitors until they come back to the right side or get eliminated completely.

The second emir offered similar testimony:

The Islamic State of Iraq [al Qaeda] is faced with an extraordinary crisis, especially in al-Anbar province. Al Qaeda's expulsion from Anbar created weakness and psychological defeat. This also created panic, fear, and the unwillingness to fight.

Nor was it only in Iraq that al Qaeda found itself on the run. In summer 2007, a National Intelligence Estimate warned that the terrorist group was once again in a position to strike the U.S. Yet less than a year later, CIA Director Michael Hayden offered a strikingly different assessment to the *Washington Post*. "On balance, we're doing pretty well," he said. "Near-strategic defeat of al Qaeda in Iraq. Near-strategic defeat for al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia. Significant setbacks for al Qaeda globally . . . as a lot of the Islamic world pushes back on [its] form of Islam." Polls found declining levels of support for al Qaeda and other Islamist groups in several places in the Muslim world; in Pakistan, Islamist parties were trounced in February's parliamentary elections. Key al-Qaeda leaders were also killed in Predator strikes in the Pakistani hinterland bordering Afghanistan.

In short, al Qaeda's star has dimmed consider-

ably, and it is important to consider the reasons why. Though there can be little question that the surge accounts for a large part of the explanation, it is equally true that the surge would not have succeeded without the support of the very Sunnis who, until 2007, had provided sanctuary and support to men like Zarqawi and his minions. This switch is in turn explained by al Qaeda's barbaric treatment of ordinary Sunnis and their tribal leaders during the period of the "Anbar caliphate."

And that raises a question: why did al Qaeda put itself "in a state of war with the masses in the region" (in Naji's words) rather than using those masses as allies or pawns in their war against America and the so-called apostate governments? The answer, it turns out, is inscribed in the very nature of the jihadist movement.

"ALL EXISTING so-called Muslim societies are also Jahili societies," wrote Sayyid Qutb, al Qaeda's intellectual godfather, in his 1964 book *Milestones*. By "Jahili societies," Qutb was referring to the pre-Islamic, pagan world of Arabia that lived in "ignorance of divine guidance." Put simply, Qutb, his fellow travelers, and his spiritual heirs were, and are, not merely at war with the modern world, as defined by liberal democratic government and Western social mores. They are also murderously inclined toward "heretical Muslims," particularly Shiites. They object violently to Muslim attempts to fashion a kind of compromise modernity between Western and Islamic norms. They seek to overthrow secular Muslim regimes like Indonesia and Jordan, and religious Muslim regimes like Saudi Arabia that maintain relations with the West.

They are also—crucially—at war with the pre-modern world: traditional tribal societies in which authority is handed down from father to son and in which Islam is a religion and not a binding legal code or political ideology. Typically, Muslim regimes have been careful to accommodate their tribes, plying them with money, government jobs, small arms, and other tokens of honor, and above all by allowing them to govern their internal affairs. This was (generally) true even in Saddam's Iraq. To the jihadists, however, tribal structures represent a twofold political challenge: first, they instill a powerful sense of local identity as opposed to a strictly pan-Islamic one; second, their systems of patronage and charity get in the way of the jihadists' agenda of radical social change.

It was this anti-tribalist attitude, combined with the utter savagery with which the jihadists put it

into practice, that proved to be al Qaeda's undoing in Iraq. And that was not the only manner of its undoing. Precisely because of the post-9/11 transformation from a group to a movement, al Qaeda's leadership lost control of what in the West would be called message discipline.

"I repeat the warning against separating from the masses, whatever the danger," wrote Ayman al-Zawahiri to Zarqawi in an intercepted 2005 letter, stressing the need to avoid killing other Muslims, including Shiites. Zarqawi ignored the advice. The mass killings of fellow Muslims reversed the popular support previously garnered through attacks on Western targets. Worse, al Qaeda picked fights with countries that might have otherwise looked the other way at its activities. As late as early 2002, for example, Saudi Arabia's interior minister, Prince Nayef, was flatly denying that al Qaeda even existed in his country. Four years later, after spectacular al-Qaeda attacks on the kingdom, the same prince was threatening to "cut off the tongues" of bin Laden and Zawahiri.

Most significantly, al Qaeda's failures and reversals began to sow deeper doubts about its basic purposes. The breakthrough came with the publication of *The Document of Right Guidance for Jihad Activity in Egypt and the World*, a systematic refutation of al Qaeda's theology and methods by Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, a/k/a "Dr. Fadl." The importance of this work derived from the standing of its author. Dr. Fadl was the first "emir" of Egyptian Islamic Jihad and the author of the 1988 *Foundations for the Preparation of Holy War*, a bible among jihadists.

There are various theories as to why Dr. Fadl—now imprisoned in Egypt—wrote the book; these range from a long and bitter personal feud with Zawahiri to coercion by the Egyptian government to a genuine ideological *volte face*. Whatever the case, its chief significance lies in its insistence that jihadist activities must be subordinate to ordinary moral considerations. The jihadi, Dr. Fadl writes, cannot steal for the sake of jihad, or murder Muslim civilians, religious minorities, or foreign tourists, or seek the overthrow of existing Muslim governments, or cavalierly decree the apostasy of others, or disobey his parents. ("We find parents," Dr. Fadl states severely, "who only learn that their son has gone to fight jihad after his picture is published in the newspaper as a fatality or a prisoner.")

Even now, after his "conversion," Dr. Fadl is no one's idea of a modern secular thinker. Rather, his manifesto rejects the inherent radicalism of jihadism in favor of more orthodox conservative val-

ues, a return to a kind of Islamic mean. More than that, it is a frank recognition of reality—namely, that the jihadist fervor of men like Zawahiri can only lead Muslims down one dead-end street after another.

HOW WIDESPREAD is this recognition? That remains to be seen, as do its consequences. As Max Boot has noted in COMMENTARY,* it takes neither a large organization nor particularly deep pockets to perpetrate devastating terrorist attacks, and terrorist groups have shown considerable resilience even in the face of the most devastating setbacks. Furthermore, although al Qaeda may have been gravely wounded in the past year, Hizballah has grown considerably stronger and more confident. The Bush administration kept its nerve in Iraq, and may finally have won the war. But it seems to have lost its nerve vis-à-vis Iran's quest to become a nuclear power. Israel defeated Yasir Arafat's second *intifada*, but it may soon be beset by a third one, this time planned and instigated by Hamas.

Still, al Qaeda's decline offers a kind of portrait-in-miniature of a civilization that seems perpetually to be collapsing in on itself. Here is a movement in which suicide—that is, self-destruction—is treated as the ultimate act of self-assertion. A movement that sees itself as an Islamic vanguard, leading the way toward a genuine Muslim *umma*, but is permanently at war with the Muslim communities it inhabits. A movement whose attacks beyond the Islamic world have mainly had the effect of accelerating the very forces by which it is sealing its own fate. To use an inexact astronomical analogy, this is a movement with the quality of a supernova: even as an envelope of superheated gas rapidly expands outward, its core is compressing and ultimately implodes.

A similar pattern played out with the pan-Arabist regimes of the 1950's and 60's. And the same forces are at work today in Iran, where the regime's outward-directed, "revolutionary" activities—from supporting Hamas to engineering Hizballah's de-facto takeover of Lebanon to developing nuclear weapons—seem almost purposely designed to counterbalance the weight of the regime's manifold domestic discontents.

As for how the United States and its allies should attempt to deal with this new reality, one temptation is simply to stay away, on the theory that no good can come from putting our hands in such a mess. This is roughly the view of the libertarian and paleoconservative Right, and perhaps a major-

ity of the Left. But the view hardly bears discussion: all mention of Israel aside, access to Middle Eastern energy resources is a vital American interest and will almost certainly remain so for decades. The Muslim world is also inextricably a part of the Western one, particularly in Europe. Nor is the global terrorist threat likely to go away even if al Qaeda does. The possibility that a regime that sponsors or supports terrorists might be in a position to supply them with weapons of mass destruction is a direct threat to us.

A second option, associated with the so-called realist school, contends that with rare exceptions, the U.S. should deal with the Muslim world more or less as it is, without seeking to change it.† This is a view that has much to recommend it—at least in the hands of a master diplomatic practitioner. But Metternichs are hard to come by, and in the hands of lesser statesmen, realism easily slides into passive acquiescence in an intolerable status quo—or into intolerable changes to it. Witness the readiness of Colin Powell, as chairman of the joint chiefs of staff during the first Bush administration, to accept Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 as a *fait accompli*.

A third view, shared to varying degrees by neo-conservatives and liberal internationalists, is that the U.S. and the West have no choice but actively to seek domestic reforms in Muslim countries. Needless to say, such a course is fraught with risks and often prone to mishandling, overreaching, and failure. But some version of it is the only approach that can, if not heal the pathologies of the Muslim world, then at least ameliorate and contain them so that they do not end up arriving unbidden on our doorstep, as they did one morning in September 2001.

This is not the place to lay out precisely how the U.S. might go about pursuing such a course with greater success than it has achieved thus far. But a few points are worth noting in light of the experience detailed above:

- First, while we should pursue democratic (and economic) openings wherever we realistically can do so, our overarching and primary aim is to make the Muslim world unsafe for radicalism—whether that radicalism is of the Islamist, pan-Arabist, or Baathist variety. This means a policy of unyielding opposition to groups like Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood and to the Iranian and Syrian regimes, despite growing calls to come to terms with all of them. But we must also come to

* "Are We Winning the War on Terror?," July-August 2008.

† I dealt at length with this school of thought in "Realists to the Rescue?," COMMENTARY, February 2007.

terms with the *limits* of what intervention in Muslim politics can plausibly achieve. In particular, we need to be attentive to the fact that Western-style political or social prescriptions can often be counterproductive.*

- Second, the experience of the so-called Anbar Awakening of tribal leaders against al Qaeda is an instructive reminder that the Muslim world does not, as was widely asserted in the wake of September 11, divide merely between a handful of extremists and a “vast majority” of moderates who can easily be rallied to our side. Instead, Muslim societies typically divide into at least three significant blocs: a “pre-modern” element, consisting mainly of tribesmen, peasants, nomads, and the like; a “modern” element, typically urban, educated, and, by the standards of their societies, middle-class; and an “anti-modern” element, consisting mostly of Islamists but also of members of the Baath party and other fascistic groups.

So far, many of our democracy-promotion efforts have been aimed at the middle group, the one most familiar to us. But this is not, in all cases, politically the most consequential element. What we have learned in Iraq is that it is possible, indeed necessary, to isolate anti-moderns by creating political alliances between the urban middle class and the tribes.

- Third, we can seek ways to cultivate nationalist sentiment in the Muslim world, not least because jihadists detest, and fear, the notion of Arab and Muslim nationalism as yet another locus of loyalty that has nothing to do with Islam. In hindsight, Iraq’s near-miraculous soccer victory in last year’s Asian Cup was a significant moment in its evolution as a post-Baathist state, confirming that there really is such a thing as an Iraqi nationalism shared by Sunnis, Shiites, and Kurds alike.

- Finally, although the internal factors that ultimately did so much to cripple al Qaeda were, so to speak, written into its very DNA, they were not triggered until the United States proved itself capable

of defeating the bin Laden gang militarily—first incompletely in Afghanistan, later decisively in Iraq. The importance of these confrontations lay not only in the actual killing or capture of al Qaeda’s leadership and its foot soldiers but also in the demonstration to a watching Muslim world of the full extent of American power and the comparative weakness of al Qaeda. Its defeat finally pricked the Muslim myth that the jihadists were a military match for the U.S., just as Israel’s victory in the Six-Day war of 1967 made a mockery of the martial pretensions of pan-Arabism and dealt Nasser a near-fatal blow.

Now the government of neighboring Iran has invested some \$20 billion of scarce national treasure, and the weight of the regime’s prestige, in its nuclear programs. Aside from the inherent case for getting rid of these programs for the threat they pose to core U.S. interests, it ought at least to be considered that their swift destruction might, far from rallying Iranians to their leaders’ side, produce precisely the opposite effect.

These suggestions are only a sketch of a policy. But effective policy depends above all on a correct understanding of the people, places, and things toward which it is being applied. To speak of an Islamic civilization is to speak in error. Rather, there is a Muslim world. It is fractured, and fractious. At times, Muslim causes or conflicts spill over into the non-Islamic world, as they did in the 1990’s. Today, thanks in no small part to our actions, they remain internal—expression not, or not merely, of a clash of civilizations, but of the convulsion of one. In this internal disunity lie our strength and our opportunity—and ultimately, perhaps, the reform of the Muslim world itself.

* In Morocco, for example, the king, not parliament, appoints and oversees the minister of religious affairs. He, in turn, is solely responsible for approving religious rulings, weighing their compatibility with *sharia* in much the same way the Congressional Budget Office assesses the fiscal impact of a tax cut. The result is a religious environment that is at once more tightly controlled and more progressive in its attitudes toward family law, women’s rights, and so on.