

# Middle East Politics: Trade Makes the World Go Around in a Religious Context

by Tim Lynch

At the November RCMI Security Studies Roundtable, Reza Akhlaghi, Managing Director, Foreign Policy Concepts, gave a presentation on Iran's Geopolitical Trajectory following the US/Iran Nuclear Deal. Reza delivered an informative account of how the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiated between Iran and the United States, United Kingdom, France, Germany, China, Russia, and the European Union will provide many opportunities for trade and he stressed Canada should be at the forefront in exploiting them.

In the course of his presentation Reza highlighted how the countries neighboring Iran would be affected by such arrangements. Following his presentation, he agreed to explain to me these complex, historical, socio-geopolitical, religious and cultural nuances in the region. My objective was to develop an understanding of how these realities may affect global security going forward.

## The Relevance of Religion

Much of what Reza described related to the prevailing geopolitical and religious history of Iran and its neighbouring states. Following a University of Toronto conference on Canadian Foreign Affairs in May 2015 Janice Stein, Founding Director, Munk School of Global Affairs noted that, *"Seventy years ago we made a deep mistake in thinking about the world; we didn't foresee the importance of religion in politics. The post-war consensus was rather that secularization would continue to grow as societies developed and became more educated. As religious beliefs became a respected private matter, the secular liberal order would deepen and strengthen around the world. We now need to understand the important role that religion plays in large parts of the world and build that into our foreign policy."* (1) At Reza's session it became clear that appropriate interpretation of religious nuances is critical to understanding how alliances and rivalries will evolve in the region.

I began my discussion with Reza by inquiring about the relationship between historic Persia and the country today known as Iran. Reza went back in history to 600 BC describing how the Persian Achaemenid Empire was founded by Cyrus the Great. He described how the Persians controlled the land from the eastern borders of China to the Roman Empire. It covered all of today's Middle East, central Asia, and Northern Africa. The Empire came to an end with the invasion of Alexander the Great in the early 330s BC.

The Arabs were keen traders and sought to establish trade routes to Asia; the Persians were not cooperative in such matters. The Persians were defeated by the Arabs in sixth century AD, around the same time Islam was founded by Prophet Muhammad. The Arabs were keen on spreading trade as well as Islam all over Asia. A religion that called on its followers to be honest in the dealings with fellow believers facilitated trade. Conversions to Islam grew along with trade. Conflict resolution procedures needed to conduct trade were developed as Islamic Jurisprudence evolved.

## The Fragmentation of Islam

Reza explained that the differentiation between Sunni and Shia Islam occurred with succession of the faith following the death of Prophet Muhammad. There were four key candidates for the caliph role following Muhammad's death: Abu Baker, Omar, Uthman (Osman) and Ali. Many threw their support behind Abu Bakr who assumed the role of first caliph. This choice was disputed by followers of Ali (Ali ibn Abi Talib) who was the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law. Ali's followers had designated Ali as the Prophet's immediate and first successor.

The faith divided into the traditional believers: Sunnis, who did not believe that Ali deserved to be the first Caliph and Shiites who chose Ali as the first Caliph. There was a marked difference in culture and civilization between Persians and Arabs. The Persians gradually identified with Ali and his followers. The Arabs, along with most other cultures that converted to Islam, form the dominant Sunni sect of Islam which comprises the largest religious body in the world, followed by Roman Catholicism.

Shiites are in majority in Iran and the Iranian state is governed by the Shiite interpretation of Islam. Tracing their Persian history to 600 BC the Iranians claim a defining status in the region. Shiites represent a slight majority in neighboring Iraq. In all Middle Eastern countries there are minority Shiite communities, as within most modern economies. Ismailis, a branch of Shiite Islam, have emerged as a significant contributor to Canadian society with the building of the Aga Khan Centre in the Toronto suburb of Don Mills.

The prevailing turmoil in Iraq arose from the lack of understanding, as Stein cites, of the role of religion at the time of the invasion by the 2003 US/UK led coalition

of the willing. Iraq was then governed by the Sunni Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party under the leadership of Saddam Hussein. His hold on power required suppression of the majority Shiite Iraqi population as well as all intellectuals. Attempts at ameliorating these relationships by the US climaxed with President George W. Bush supporting Shiite Nouri al-Maliki, as Prime Minister of Iraq. Mr. al-Maliki served as such from 2006 to 2014. This appointment does not seem to have included an explanation of the democratic principle of minority rights. Under the al-Maliki regime the Sunni Iraqis were not equally included in government and Iran exerted significant influence over state matters in Iraq and its Shite-rule neighbor, Syria. Meanwhile, military leaders in the Ba'ath Party became the acorns from which ISIS grew, creating the horrific, global, political imbroglio we witness today.

Bashar al-Assad, President of Syria, belongs to the Alawite minority religious sect which has historical alliances with Shiite Islam which results in Assad being an ally of Iran. The Assad family has been a dictatorial regime that has successfully manipulated religious and ethnic tensions in Syria, with force when necessary, to retain power.

Syria borders Lebanon. The Assad Regime has contaminated the political maturations of Lebanon. The Regime helped establish Hezbollah, a Lebanese based religious army founded by Shiite clerics and funded by Iran, to fight against Israel. Discussing these relationships, Reza noted that there is some truth in the Israeli comment "today Iran is a neighbor of Israel."

Iran also has an historic and linguistic relationship with the Kurds. The Kurds are a distinct ethnic group inhabiting lands in Turkey (Northern Kurdistan), western Iran (Eastern or Iranian Kurdistan), northern Iraq (Southern or Iraqi Kurdistan), and northern Syria (Western Kurdistan or Rojava). (2) While they practice a brand of Sunni Islam, they are culturally and linguistically related to the Iranians and are inclined to accommodate their Sunni brand of Islam in urban western modernity.

At the other end of the Sunni religious spectrum are the Wahhabis which are described as ultraconservative or orthodox Muslims. From a strategic perspective, it is necessary to recognize that Wahhabism is the official form of Sunni Islam practiced in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a longtime ally of the US. Using its petro-dollar the Kingdom has been funding the globalization of Wahhabism since the 1970s.

A Sunni sect, regarded as a form of Wahhabis, follow the Salafi movement. This sect within Sunni Islam has allied itself with Jihadi movements and promotes offensive Salafi jihad as a legitimate expression of Islam against those they deem to be enemies of Islam.(3) Their most famous Jihad was the 2001 9/11 attack on the US by

al-Qaeda. Evidently, Saudi Arabia has been involved in creating the "Great Divide" that has emerged between Islam and the rest of the world following the 9/11 attack and yet it remains a close ally of the US.(4)

## **Socio-geopolitical Realities**

While Shiites may be a minority group in a Sunni Muslim country, Reza stressed that they provide a valuable strategic network for the Iranian government. He illustrated such influence by referring to Sunni Pakistan's refusal to assist its Sunni brethren in Saudi Arabia in the fight against the Houthi militias in Yemen. Reza maintained that this was due to direct actions taken by the government of Iran.

Comparing the way Iran influenced Pakistan with the overt attempt by Israel to influence the US JCPOA Treaty negotiations illustrates how Middle East religions influence world politics. A majority of US Legislators voted for the JCPOA Treaty against the wishes of Israel. That done, President Obama compensated Israel by increasing its US military funding; illustrating the sensitivities of Middle East politics – you shake the hand that does you harm!

My discussion with Reza was facilitated by reference to maps of the Levant countries, Caucuses and North African countries. Reza claimed the Arabs of North African countries have a more secular approach to religion and government than those in the Arabian Peninsula.

Throughout my talk with Reza he referred to the high level of education and urbanization of Iranian society; stressing that women make up 67% of the student population at Iranian universities. He maintained that this young political force is the biggest threat to the ruling conservatives. It is recognition of this reality that allowed the JCPOA Treaty to reach fruition. By contrast, the Bedouin Arab culture is being preserved in the Arabian Peninsula as is evident by the novel involvement of women for the first time in recently held elections in Saudi Arabia. Essentially, Iranian society provides a benchmark for gender equality in Islam.

## **The Strategic Location of Turkey**

I met with Reza before the downing of a Russian tourist plane in Egypt by ISIS, a Russian military plane by Turkey and soon after the exodus of Syrian refugees to Europe through Turkey had started. We both agreed that Turkey holds a strategic location not only between Europe and the Middle East but also between Russia and the Middle East.

The re-alignment of relationships between Russia's President Vladimir Putin (the Czar) and Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (the Sultan) could

provide some insight on how east / west as well as Muslim / West relationships evolved.(5) Both leaders represent regions that were empires accustomed to authoritarian rule; Putin the USSR, Erdoğan, the Ottoman Empire. Both interpret democracy as having control over the majority of their citizenry; Erdoğan by practicing theocracy, Putin through media control and propaganda. Both leaders have problems accepting social media or allowing their people to guide themselves without a ruler. (6) Looking at the map of the Caucus countries Reza described them as Putin's "strategic backyard" where the majority of the inhabitants, along with the neighboring Russian Federation provinces like Chechnya, are Sunni Muslims. He suggested the geopolitical quagmire that is the Caucuses is worthy of a separate session for RCMI Security Studies.

## From Iron Curtain to Mesh Curtain

Anyone who witnessed the 2010 G20 Conference in Toronto knows how mesh fencing divides communities; particularly when complemented by a line of military attired police. Following the turmoil in Syria, 2015 will go down in history as the year Europe was divided, and subdivided, by mesh fencing to stop refugees escaping war. The ideological cold war era that was defined by an imaginary Iron Curtain separating the USSR in the east from the "free world" in the west is being replaced by a real "Mesh Curtain" attempting to stop terrorists in the war ravaged south coming to the peace secured north.

Unfortunately, the nuclear standoff that precariously preserved peace during the Iron Curtain era has no substitute for the prevailing "Mesh Curtain" era of terror as is evident from the following litany of supplications in the form of global Islamic terrorist attacks: San Bernardino California, USA Dec. 2015; Paris, France, Nov. 2015; Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, Nov. 2015; Paris, France Jan. 2015; Sydney, Australia Dec. 2014; St-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Canada, Oct. 2014; Ottawa Canada, Oct. 2014; Volgograd, Russia, Dec. 2013; Nairobi, Kenya Aug. 2013; Woolwich UK, Apr. 2013; Boston, USA Apr. 2013; Oslo, Norway 2011; Mumbai, India 2008; Glasgow, UK 2007; London, UK 2005; Madrid, Spain 2004; Bali, Indonesia 2002; New York City / Washington DC, USA 2001; Nairobi, Kenya / Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 1989; Lockerbie, Scotland UK, 1988.

## Religious comparisons

When it was founded, Islam provided a valuable means of conducting business as part of the Arab's need to trade. Regardless of their ethnic origin all Muslims had a

common understanding of the Quran; which came first: trade or Islam? Disputes that arose in business were resolved through Islamic jurisprudence, as were all areas of societal morality: albeit with males dominating females.

The founding of Christianity had nothing to do with trade. Christianity professed salvation into heaven after death, provided believers led a moral life while on earth. Christianity teaches that it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to assume entry into heaven. Such proclamations did not stop Christian merchant and artisan classes from evolving and thriving. The jurisprudence necessary for dispute resolution was conducted in a more secular setting; separating civil law and criminal law from Canon law.

The existence of Popes over the millennia who claimed to descend from the apostle, St. Peter, Christ's chosen leader, and who are believed to be endowed with Ex Cathedra powers, limited prima donna Christian clerics in assuming self-perceived authority. Acknowledging episodes like the Inquisition and Crusades, medieval Christianity has its black holes. The impression is that in modern day Islam any cleric is the equivalent of a Pope and can interpret the Quran in any form of religiosity that attracts a following.

There is no denying Islam in its totality offers a wealth of knowledge about human survival on earth over the millennia. Rather than commercialize and trade its history to the world, Islam seems more intent on living its history, with extreme viewpoints grabbing the agenda and inciting medieval behaviors among believers, which makes Islam a security risk. This is unfair to Muslims who practice their Islamic faith and portray a code of ethics in a globalized world.

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1 Tim Lynch, Foreign Policy or Emotional Impulse? Frontline Defence, Issue 4, 2015. Summer 2015

<http://infolyнк.ca/bcfishing/CIC-BGC-Conf-Article.pdf>

2 Ofra Bengio, Kurdish Awakening: Nation Building in a Fragmented Homeland, (2014), University of Texas Press

3 Dr Abdul-Haqq Baker, Extremists in Our Midst: Confronting Terror, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

4 "THE GLOBAL SALAFI JIHAD". *the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*. July 9, 2003.

5 BBC 5th Floor, Putin and Erdogan: Head to Head, Fri 4 Dec 2015 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03998pv>

6 Jon Meacham, Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power, Random House Inc. New York, 2012

The Author acknowledges that searching key words and phrases on Wikipedia contributed to the writing of this article.

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