

Not Learning Lessons Past: the West's Response to IS

Keith Rankin, 26 September 2014

In an earlier posting [Ukraine, United Kingdom, Ireland, Scotland](#), I noted that the first lesson of conflict learned by Robert McNamara was "understand your adversary". If we have honourable objectives, our first and most important weapon is empathy.

In the Vietnam War, McNamara came to realise – when the others around him would not – that the Americans' Vietnamese opponents were fighting for independence from colonial rule (seeing the US as a substitute colonial power). The Americans on the other had assumed that their Vietnamese opponents were Soviet puppets, fighting for the ideology of communism; fighting as the advance foot soldiers of an evil Soviet (or Sino-Soviet) empire. The Americans failed because they did not understand what their opponents were fighting for. Let's apply our 'learnings' to the Islamic State (IS).

Caliphate

The Islamic State is seen by the west as no more than an evil terrorist organisation. Certainly they are terrorists, and they are evil in that they are willing to use the most ruthless of means to achieve their ends. But they are more than an evil terrorist organisation. And indeed their ends may be very worthy, unlike their means. The least we in the west can do is to appreciate what they are fighting for.

The lack of empathy works both ways of course. To the IS, their western opponents are just another group of anti-Islamic 'Crusaders'. The IS has time on its side; in their worldview the Crusades have been going on – hot or cold – for 900 years or so. Eventually each group of Crusaders has been seen off. The West, which does not reflect too much on its complex history, simply doesn't get this perspective. Crusaders were in the Middle Ages, weren't they?

It's also a clash of the Wilsonian worldview; a view of the world made up of a lattice of sovereign nation states, with some nations more equal than others and one more equal than all others. Historian Nicholas Boyle calls this idealised worldview the "Religion of America" (see my post [2014 and 1914](#) for some discussion of Boyle's views). Islam on the other hand is more than a religion. It is a [supra-national](#) brotherhood; albeit a fraternity with sectarian divisions and without as much ability as Christendom to evolve over time.

The key to this issue is the direct clash between the system of territorial nation states, and the pan-nationalism exhibited by all religions, and by Islam more than most.

Two easily accessible points of contact with this concept of Islamic supra-nationalism are: the BBC radio documentary [Caliphate – Searching for the Islamic State](#)", broadcast on Radio New Zealand [Nights](#) on 21 August 2014; and the television documentary series [The Ottomans: Europe's Muslim Emperors](#). In the time of Islam there have been three substantial caliphates, The Abbasid Caliphate of Baghdad, the Moorish Caliphate of Cordoba, and the Ottoman 'Empire' based on Istanbul. People of different ethnicities, and indeed of different faiths, all had their opportunities to survive and prosper within these broad-based political structures. Although these were all polities of relative tolerance and modernity, they did suffer from their inability to evolve.

Strategy

We in the west should learn more about Islamic history, and about the political structures associated with Islam. Thus western leaders can learn to foster Muslim aspirations while completely rejecting the violent aspirators (such as IS). The IS recruits by demonstrating to ordinary Muslims the violent crusading activities of the west. We oblige them. What we can do instead is to encourage peaceful means to the achievement of a 21st century caliphate, centred most likely in the Gulf States. We like Emirates (Team NZ's sponsor) and Al Jazeera. They can be central to our vision of an alternative, progressive Caliphate. When the Crusader argument becomes untenable, the IS starves of support.