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THE NEW PROPAGANDISTS: THE BATTLE FOR THE NARRATIVE

— Josef Joffe

Ideas are the best force-multipliers. They incite and intoxicate, making men fight to the death and fueling boundless cruelty. Muslim armies pushed all the way to Spain and Persia under the green flag of the Prophet.

The Crusaders fought for 200 years to expel the infidels from the Holy Land. Though great power conflicts, Europe's religious wars in the 16th and 17th centuries drew their murderous energy from the *idée fixe* of serving the true God.

In the democratic age, secular ideologies took over. Napoleon's armies were propelled to Moscow by the new democratic faith. Millions went to the trenches in World War I to defend the sacred nation-state.

Drugged by the idea of racial supremacy, Hitler's armies conquered a continent. Stalin could sacrifice 25 million in World War II on the altar of nationalism-cum-communism.

This very short history shows what separates the West from the Rest today. Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, al-Qaeda, Taliban, and IS have enlisted the "force-multiplier" of a consuming ideology.

Yet the West has lost the fervor that drove both internecine warfare and global conquest.

As the reigning creed, postmodernism (or multiculturalism) has edged out the "isms" of yore. It is the opposite of the "integralist" faith that once galvanized the West.

Postmodernism abjures the idea of the nation-state and nationalism, celebrating sub-national loyalties. Invoking the horrifying history of imperialism, it denies the worth of Western civilization as such. It is "multiculturalism minus one." Moral respect is due to any culture but one's own.

These ideas resonate because there is a lot to atone for. The mighty battle cry is "Never Again!" to racism, conquest, oppression, and discrimination.

This ideology is a "force diminisher" in the confrontation with a reinvigorated Islam, which fields everything the West has been losing: a transcendent faith, boundless self-righteousness, the belief in cultural superiority, and the infinite willingness to shed blood, especially one's own, given that intra-Islamic mayhem dwarfs anything seen in the "clash of civilizations."

Once the spearhead of nationalism, the West's intelligentsia is now its fiercest critic. The West's warrior culture is disappearing outside the US, Israel, Britain, and France.

This is the enduring asymmetry of the 21st century: conviction vs. conciliation. It hampers the West in the contest against a fiercely nationalist Russia set on revising the territorial verdict of the Cold War.

Though now inspiring second thoughts, multiculturalism has inhibited Europe from assimilating large Muslim minorities. For "nationalizing" newcomers requires a sense of nationhood and cultural self-worth.

Mobilizing a country in the fight against IS et al requires the idea that something is worth fighting for, even if the enemy is far from the gates.

Realism bids us to be sober. This side of the fringe, it is hard to imagine politicians and pundits celebrating the Best of the West. They would unleash a storm of epithets like "racist," "imperialist", or even "neo-Nazi."

Given the lack of conviction, it is hard to imagine PR or propaganda reversing postmodernity's progress. This said, let us stress the upside. If the terror armies can ride the force-multiplier of faith, the West enjoys two different asymmetries.

One is technological superiority such as mobility across vast distances, space-based surveillance, precision-munitions, drones, and stand-off weapons.

Substituting high-tech for mass, these weaken the West's worst force-inhibitor: the fear of body bags. The successful air campaigns against Serbia and Libya prove the point.

The second asymmetry is being handed to the West on a silver platter. Like 9/11, which inducted 57 countries into the US-led posse, every decapitation by IS brings new recruits to the alliance. IS is the best coalition-builder the West has had since Hitler and Stalin.

The democracies are slow, but not impossible to anger – provided three criteria are met. The response has to look “cheap” in terms of lives lost. It has to look right and just. The prospect of success must trump the fear of an endless war.

Hence even the most reluctant warriors – President Obama, Riyadh, Amman, Berlin – have turned against IS. Nor has the EU succumbed to appeasing neo-imperialist Russia.

So the narrative of postmodernity triumphant should be amended. A slow (and hedged) reaction is not proof of terminal lassitude. In the case of IS, moral indignation fused nicely with realpolitik, which, by itself, is never enough to concentrate the postmodern mind.

The West will only be roused if moral revulsion is in synergy with strategic interest. It would have been wiser if the US had not abandoned Iraq in 2011 and the West had bombed IS when it was still called ISIL, “Islamic State in the Levant.”

In withdrawal mode, America issued two invitations. One: to IS, which knew a power vacuum when it saw one. Two: without US supervision, the Shia regime in Baghdad was free to launch a “Saddam in reverse” by oppressing the Sunnis.

“Late” does not mean “never.” And yet, the Europeans must learn that they lack the wherewithal for sustained warfare (as demonstrated by Libya). They will have to go beyond the paltry defense spending of about 1.3 percent of GDP. And the US must accept that a world without Mr. Big invites trouble because there is nobody else to shoulder the burden.

The postmodern narrative will not evaporate, but IS et al inspire fear and loathing.

Alas, a timely response would have been more prudent, and less costly. And the rethinking was not homemade, but a gift from the West's emboldened enemies.

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