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A Strategy of Exhaustion

Vegetius

Most Jihads do not die with a bang; they have historically gone out with a whimper. The first great wave of Islamic holy war effectively petered out within a century of the death of the Prophet Mohammed and Arabs were no longer active leaders in the expansion of the Muslim faith after the tenth century A.D. when the peoples of the Turk branch of the Eurasian peoples picked up the banner of Islam. The last of a succession of waves of pre-industrial Jihad petered out at the walls of Vienna in 1683. As we deal with post-industrial Jihad, we may be able to learn something about Islamic holy wars of expansion that have been dealt with in the past.

Jihad was a powerful enough force that it was impossible to permanently defeat by purely military means. Unlike their Christian foes, the Muslim holy warriors were generally content to stop killing when their enemies surrendered and decided to convert to Islam. Jihads died because they reached a point of exhaustion. The most fervent warriors who sought martyrdom in battle could get it easily. This eventually left the Jihad bereft of its most enthusiastic fighters. Those less fanatic or more skillful collected enough slaves and riches in the holy wars to feel that God had rewarded them on earth for their fervor, and settled down to enjoy the good life that successful Jihad made possible. A final element in the death of successive waves of Jihad was internal dissention and struggles for power among the Jihadist leadership. The contest for control for leadership of the first Caliphate began almost immediately with the death of the Prophet Mohammed and culminated in the great Sunni-Shiite schism.

As Edward Luttwak points out in his new book, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, the Byzantines studied this new enemy closely and came to realize that their only hope of survival against the lethal threat of expansionist Jihadism was a strategy of exhaustion. Luttwak's work is the first really comprehensive modern study of how the Eastern Roman empire survived and largely thrived in the face of expansionist Islam for eight centuries.

The Byzantines learned to cope by using a variety of military, political, economic, and diplomatic means to contain and exhaust the expansionist tendencies of various waves of Muslim expansionism. This application of all forms of national power was deliberate and calculating. To be sure the Byzantines lost battles as often as they won, but they survived for a remarkably long time.

It took several centuries for Arab Jihad to peter out in the pre-industrial era and be replaced by Turkic Jihad. In our post-industrial world, that has happened in less than a decade. The Arab Jihadists have been largely replaced by Muslim fervor from central Asia in the last few years. Much of the first wave of post-industrial Jihad exhausted itself in a foolish headlong rush in Iraq.

Ironically, George W. Bush has been largely vindicated in his exhortation to the jihadists to “bring it on” in Iraq.

One is led to wonder how the Byzantines would view Afghanistan. Like us, they were casualty adverse and they were reluctant to waste their professional soldiers in fruitless endeavors; and like our military and civilian leadership today, they would probably view Afghanistan as a war of necessity. The Eastern Romans fought when they found it necessary, and would likely have fought in Afghanistan given the circumstances that we find ourselves in today; but while they were doing so, they would have been thinking of creative ways to get better results with a minimum of fighting in the future. They would likely approve of schemes to attempt to buy off those in the Taliban movement not motivated by religious furor or to create reformist political parties to lure over those who side with the Taliban hoping for some better form of government than they suffer under now.

The Byzantines would likely be looking beyond Afghanistan as well. If those elements of the Taliban who view their Jihad as primarily defensive in nature can be separated from expansionist Al Qaeda and its allies, the most fervent of the expansionist Jihadists will likely seek sanctuary elsewhere as they already have in Somalia and other area where governance is weak or non-existent. The Eastern Romans would therefore likely approve of our efforts in the Africa and Pacific Commands to foster governance and security infrastructures.

However, the Byzantines would have disagreed with us in one important respect. They viewed the war with the expansionist elements of Islam as a never ending struggle. That is because, as we have previously mentioned, they studied their adversaries carefully. They understood, as Luttwak points out, that, there can be truces with the infidel in the literal interpretation of the Koran, but there can be no lasting peace. Even when they won a battle or campaign, the Byzantines prepared for the next round of conflict; they did so with all elements of national power including military preparedness, diplomacy, and a well placed series of bribes when needed. The Eastern Romans never entertained any fantasies of destroying Jihad completely.

In this, we are more like the Byzantines’ western Roman cousins. We harbor notions of wars of bloody minded annihilation rather than struggles of exhaustion. The Eastern Romans knew that even when the wildfire of jihad was contained, that the sparks would spread to other areas and smolder; eventually the fire would rage again. They might have succeeded in the long run in continuous containment of expansionist Muslim holy war if their “friends” in the Christian west had not decided to attack them from that direction. Eventually, the two front struggle became too much, but as a bulwark against the rise of violently expansionist Islam they bought the rest of the west valuable time to recover from the decline of Rome and to rise a new and vibrant western culture on the ruins of the old.

Expansionist radical Islam views the west as the enemy, and Muslim victory inevitable; even if it takes centuries to accomplish. We’ve been at it only a decade and many Americans think that is too long. In the clash of civilizations against radical Islam, Afghanistan is a mere skirmish, but it is one that we must win in this war of exhaustion.

The author is a government employee and a former infantryman.

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