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ISIS: What Hath God Wrought

Surely there is no enchantment against Jacob, neither is there any divination against Israel: according to this time it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, What hath God wrought! — The Bible: Numbers 23:23 (KJV)

THIS IS NOT A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE WORLD. This is an essay for those who have expressed a great deal of confusion about current events; it is a very rough analysis of what's happening in the world today. I pretend no scholarship and attempt to draw as few conclusions, as anyone may, when observing and recording history. It's hard not to have opinions and more often than not, these are expressed subtly when the writer pretends not to express them. Of course I have a bias, I was born and brought up in the United States of America to a family that was nominally Protestant Christian, but who had many Jewish friends.

The phrase "never again" has real meaning for me. I grew up surrounded by survivors of the German concentration camps. My first babysitter had a number tattooed on her arm. Like many Americans, I feel certain guilt for having let so many bad things happen to so many innocent people. That does not necessarily make me a Zionist, although I have to ask, "Where else could they go?" Despite that some of the most obnoxious people I have ever met were Israeli Zionists, I still have to ask, "If we cannot be counted upon to protect the Jews, then who will?"

To my most vociferous anti-Israeli friends, mostly Jews themselves, I ask them to put themselves in the shoes of the Dalai Lama 2,000 years in the future. Having been forced to flee their home in Tibet by the Han Chinese the Dalai Lama and his followers wander the Asian continent with the pledge, "Next year in Lhasa." I don't see the difference.

Please note, none of this means that I am unsympathetic to the plight of the Palestinian people (or the great, great grandchildren of the Han Chinese settled in Lhasa). People, who should know, petroleum engineers, have told me that the Palestinians are one of the best-educated and most industrious people in the region. I've heard it expressed, more than once, that a combination of Israeli and Palestinian engineering and entrepreneurship could create an economic powerhouse in the region, which could very well eclipse the existing Islamic power structure. There is also a suspicion, among Ex-pats working in the region, that the existing Islamic power structure does not want a resolution of the Palestinian "problem" for those very reasons.

I don't know the truth or the answer. I do know that when enough people have been killed, when exhaustion sets in, that there will eventually be peace in the Middle East and not before. I would like to see it in my lifetime, but I don't expect it.

History is confusing. It takes a millennium or two for historians to settle on an accepted story even if the accepted facts haven't changed. In that light, please bear with me and forgive my attempt to create a (temporary) settled history. I am attempting to look at current events as a historian *might* a thousand years from now, hence my use of *might*. I didn't say *will*, I said *might*.

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I shall start with the biggest possible picture and express it, in terms a typical American should understand. No metaphor is perfect. So, please don't nitpick the larger picture. Save that for the minutia, which I will (no doubt) get wrong.

There are *currents* in history, which if left in isolation would never cause a conflict, except in so far as any ideology, religion, or philosophical system is coherent internally. Yet, when these isolated currents are combined, as the "real world" tends to do, these differing currents collide and the inevitable results are conflicts. In a perfect "Hegelian" world these theses and antitheses would eventually morph into a new stable synthesis. However, in the "real world" that synthesis is often the result of one side winning or losing, with winner taking all. It takes a single side maintaining this "winner take all" view, which ensures that any given conflict will continue. This, preceding concept, is the central theme in my larger history of the world.

As I see things some of the longer lasting "currents" at play are:

JUDAISM – It's remarkable that the Bible is one of the oldest history books in existence, predating Herodotus (the father of History) by a thousand years. Still, even more remarkable is the idea that a people, who call themselves Jews, have been able to maintain their cultural and religious identity for at least three millennia, in spite of having been forcibly dispersed and intentionally gassed all over the world. I use this as a metaphor for every deadly pogrom. After the destruction of the second temple by the Romans, the Jewish Diaspora had one perpetual prayer, "Next year in Jerusalem." That is the driving force behind the Zionist "current."

PALESTINIAN Problem – This is a new "current" born from the birth of the modern state of Israel.

When the British mandate ended and the Jewish state was declared the governments of Syria, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia declared war on the new state. The Arab coalition lost that war and as a result many Palestinians either abandoned their homes and fled or were pushed out by Israelis in the name of "security."

Just to mess up the equation, a lot of Palestinians stayed within the bounds of Israel and are citizens, second-class citizens perhaps but citizens nonetheless.

The Arab powers that be at the time did not desire to come to terms with the Jews and let the *problem* fester until it became institutionalized. It is now in its second or third generation.

The *problem* might have been avoided if the Palestinians that fled were allowed to return home. The *problem* might have been avoided if the state of Israel had made a good faith attempt to purchase any property willingly or forcibly abandoned. It was and is a failure of international leadership that this *problem* has been allowed to become an open, cancerous, sore.

The irony in all this is that Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, as the founding document of their respective religions, revere the Old Testament of the Bible. Although, I get the impression that very few Muslims have ever read the Old Testament.

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The *problem*, it appears, dates back to the birth of the twin brothers Jacob and Esau. The Jews are the children of Jacob, renamed Israel, while the Palestinians are the children of Esau. That, at least, is the popular mythology, which counts for far more than any "facts" in the case.

The conflict between these two factions dates back to the book of Genesis 25:29-34 (around 2000 BC) when Esau sold his birthright to Jacob/Israel, who was a jerk about it. It seems that Esau came home starving. Jacob/Israel had food and extorted Esau's birthright for a bowl of stew. No wonder there is perpetual enmity between the two sides of this family. It makes the Hatfield and the McCoy feud (a famous 100 year-old family dispute in America) look tame by comparison. Between you and me, I think the children of Israel owe an apology, at least, to the children of Esau for this uncharitable transaction.

ISLAM: Most Palestinians are Sunni Moslems. Hamas, which currently controls the Gaza Strip, is Sunni while Hezbollah (in Lebanon) and Syria is Shia. They don't like each other. Confusing, I know. It gets worse.

Completely unrelated, of course, but involved nonetheless, is the giant schism between the two main branches of Islam: Shia and Sunni. This schism is almost identical (metaphorically so don't nit-pick) to the schism between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, or, more recently, between the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches.

The **SUNNI'S** are the largest denomination (metaphorically the Roman church – sort of) and are the predominant sect in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and points west as well, as in Kurdistan and Afghanistan. The relevant belief is that Mohamed did not specify a successor, but that mosque elders could choose a successor or caliph. The position started out as a democratically elected one but quickly degenerated into other forms of election (like a different family birthright). Sunni's have splintered (like the Protestant Reformation) into a number of sub-sects mostly unforgiving and ultra conservative like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the Wahhabi movement in Saudi Arabia. Osama Bin Laden was an adherent of the Wahhabi movement as are the ISIS fighters currently plaguing Syria and Iraq.

The **SHIA** are the second largest Muslim group in the world (making up about 25%) and constitutes the majority of the populations in Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Iran, and Iraq, as well as a plurality in Lebanon and Yemen. The relevant belief is that Islam was a family business and that Mohamed's son-in-law was his rightful successor as are succeeding members of his family. The Shia denomination is just as splintered as the Sunni (or, say, Christian Protestants) with dozens of offshoots, including the Alawites, to which Syria's President Bashar Hafez al-Assad and Iraq's deposed president Saddam Hussein both belong. That said, there was no love lost between the Iranian branch of Shia Islam and the Alawites branch in Iraq, with both fighting a bloody war to a standstill in the 1980's.

OIL – It's impossible to discuss the Middle East without including oil in the equation. Without oil I suspect the greater conflict in the Middle East would have remained a small regional one without serious arms and far fewer casualties.

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Oil is a very new “current.” It was first discovered in the region around 1908, in what is now Iran but the regions geo-political importance came into view with the birth of Winston Churchill’s oil powered modern British Navy.

Between 1900 and 1910 the British navy was converted from coal to oil, under the guidance of Churchill, who was then the First Lord of the Admiralty. It was Churchill who first recognized the importance of taking the Ottoman Empire (who controlled Iran and the Arabian peninsula and hence the sources of oil) out of the First World War. That was the reason for the Gallipoli misadventure, as well as Lawrence of Arabia’s quest.

As a result of choosing the wrong side in WWI, the Ottoman Empire was dismantled and the modern states (and their boundaries) were created by fiat in the treaties ending the War to end all Wars. This includes modern Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Transjordan (Palestine), and Saudi Arabia among others. Various, victorious allies became the caretakers of these newly created countries until they could manage things themselves. The British received this “mandate” for Palestine, Egypt, Iraq and Iran while the French gained Lebanon and Syria. A local warlord conquered the Arabian Peninsula and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was born. Yes, it’s that new.

The first oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia in 1938 but it wasn’t until the golden age of the 1950’s that oil flowed freely and the Saudi princes got very, very rich.

The conservative “Wahhabi movement,” which helped to bring the Saudi family to power became the dominant creed and, to quote Wikipedia: *The radical beliefs of Wahhabism enables its followers to label non-Wahhabi and mainstream Muslims as apostates along with non-Muslims, thus paving the way for their bloodshed.*

MONEY, lots of it, when combined with a radical and violent religious fervor is the poison that drove Osama bin Laden’s Al-Qaeda and, now, the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) plague, which threatens regional and global stability.

The modern incarnation of the *Palestine problem* began with the Balfour Declaration in 1917, which was nothing more than a letter from Britain’s Foreign Secretary to Walter Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community. It said simply:

His Majesty’s government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

The Balfour declaration came about largely as a result of pressure on the British Cabinet to yield something to the Zionist movement in exchange for their continued support in WWI. Again from Wikipedia:

James Gelvin, a Middle East history professor, cites at least three rea-

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sons for why the British government chose to support Zionist aspirations. Issuing the Balfour Declaration would appeal to Woodrow Wilson's two closest advisors, who were avid Zionists.

"The British did not know quite what to make of President Woodrow Wilson and his conviction (before America's entrance into the war) that the way to end hostilities was for both sides to accept "peace without victory." Two of Wilson's closest advisors, Louis Brandeis and Felix Frankfurter, were avid Zionists. How better to shore up an uncertain ally than by endorsing Zionist aims? The British adopted similar thinking when it came to the Russians, who were in the midst of their revolution. Several of the most prominent revolutionaries, including Leon Trotsky, were of Jewish descent. Why not see if they could be persuaded to keep Russia in the war by appealing to their latent Jewishness and giving them another reason to continue the fight?" ... These include not only those already mentioned but also Britain's desire to attract Jewish financial resources.

The words "national home" in the Balfour Declaration was interpreted as "national state" by the Arabs and resistance by the various petty-rulers began with the formation of political clubs, called Muslim-Christian Associations, who's primary political stance was resistance to Jewish immigration into Palestine. By 1936 armed resistance to the British Mandate and Jewish immigration broke into open revolt and attacks on Jewish pioneers became more common. Again, to quote from Wikipedia:

The attacks on the Jewish population by Arabs had three lasting effects: First, they led to the formation and development of Jewish underground militias, primarily the Haganah, which were to prove decisive in 1948. Secondly, it became clear that the two communities could not be reconciled, and the idea of partition was born. Thirdly, the British responded to Arab opposition with the White Paper of 1939, which severely restricted Jewish land purchase and immigration. ... The White Paper policy also radicalized segments of the Jewish population, who after the war would no longer cooperate with the British.

There is a pretty clear historical trail following Israeli independence. However, until the flush of oil money in the 1950's and 60's came into force, the larger currents were held at bay.

We have to step out of the minutia of recent historical events to understand the larger forces at play. Arnold Toynbee in his massive "A Study of History," in which he studies the rise and fall of 26 civilizations, describes the Islamic world as being divided between the Iranic and the Arabic, (he was writing in the 1930's) but united by Islam. We would describe them as the regions dominated by the Shia and Sunni sects. As Toynbee said, the region had a rich heritage: In the East, Persia, with its three millennia of civilization, history and conflict. In the center, the Fertile Crescent, home to Ur, Syria, and, the legendary Babylon, and to the West with it's 4000 years of Egyptian Civilization.

To Toynbee, a "civilization" was far more than it's political boundaries. A civilization was bound by its language, it's common beliefs (both religious and cultural) and it's common heritage. Thus, a "civilization" may

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be crushed militarily and politically, but as long as there is a cultural and linguistic memory, the civilization persists and may reassemble, perhaps even by giving birth to a new incarnation of its former self.

All three civilizations, surrounding Mohamed around 600 AD, lay prostrate, devastated by the circumstances of "late antiquity." The Greek empire of Alexander the Great had disintegrated into many small petty kingdoms or swallowed whole by the Roman Empire, which itself was in its death throws, at least in the west. To the man (or woman) on the ground it must have looked like the end of the world. In a situation like this it's understandable why someone with a firm set of more or less common beliefs and a strong sense of "law and order" could acquire so many adherents so quickly. It is easy to understand why such a combination of a strong sense of morals (as defined by anything calling itself a "religion"), political acumen and good military leadership could sweep across the region so quickly. Within 20 years of Mohamed's death his disciples had conquered all of the Persian-Sassanid Empire, Egypt, most of Syria, and were confronting both the Eastern and Western Roman Empires.

Over the next 500 or so years the Islamic Civilization flourished culturally. The Caliphate of Baghdad, which quickly became the dominant power in the region, owed its riches to the constant looting of Persia, Central Asia, North Africa, and Spain which the Muslim armies had been looting from the beginning of Islam until they were brutally checked by Charles Martel in France in 732 A.D. at the battle of Tours, and reversed with equal brutality by the Mongols in the thirteenth century of the common era.

The earlier date marked the beginning of a contraction for Islam in the west and the beginning of the consolidation of power and culture in Europe while the latter date began the forcible contraction of the Islamic state overall. Between 1200 and 1258 Genghis Khan and his grandson led the Mongol attack on the Caliphate of Baghdad. These two liberated all of Persia and most of Mesopotamia from the yoke of the Caliphate, almost destroying Islam in the process. The subterfuge and savage cruelty with which the Muslims Jihad used to convert both Turks and Mongols to Islam gave Mongol horsemen a reason to make their way from Mongolia through the Muslim controlled areas (today known as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan) finally reaching Iran, Iraq, and Syria. The onslaught of Islam had led to a gradual accumulation of bitterness and a desire for revenge against the Muslims amongst the Turks and Mongols.

It was this accumulation of grievances that led to the Mongol assault on Islam which ended in the sack of Baghdad in 1258 under Hulagu Khan, egged on by his Nestorian Persian Christian wife. The attack by the Mongols on the Caliphate was the Mongol counterattack on Islam as were the Crusades, which were the Christian counterattack against Islam in the 11th century.

The truth is that by the middle of the 12th century the Caliphate was in disarray. The crusaders had conquered most of the ancient lands of Israel and the lands of Islam were ruled by dozens of Caliphs with wars breaking out between competing petty states. Islam was in retreat.

Toynbee describes the growth of civilizations as a result of external

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pressure that is not so great that society collapses or is unable to grow and not so little that there is no urgency to act. He sites the culture and environment of Polynesia as a society with too little pressure to trigger growth and arctic aboriginal culture as being one with too much pressure to create anything beyond subsistence living. One can spend eons debating the merits of his examples but the point is that the pressures on Islam in the latter half of the twelfth century made society ripe for a political leader and one such leader was found in Saladin who effectively put an end to the Christian counterattack and largely restored the Caliphate to its former glory. Unfortunate for Islam, Saladin died in 1193 just before the Mongol invasion.

The point of this diversion into ancient history is that from the perspective of someone living in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, or even Egypt, as well as the Muslim parts of the ex-Soviet empire and parts of Pakistan, life is not good. He (or she) might well conclude that the end of the world was near. Does this sound familiar? The conditions are ripe for another charismatic leader to emerge. One who promises to unite the Islamic world and push out the infidel (this being us)? Osama bin Laden fancied himself to be this kind of transformational leader. Was he simply ahead of his time?

Stepping back, just a bit, to review the last 35 years of history in the region. In 1980, the region was relatively united with most countries run by stable dictatorships, some friendly to the west, some not. It didn't matter. Those with oil, had to sell it to someone. So, while the headlines were full of noise, the world was stable. Iran had a revolution where the west was made to look like bogymen but they still sold us their oil and they disliked and mistrusted the Soviet Union as much or more than they disliked us. The first policy mistake for the West (Toynbee counted Russia as a part of our "Western Civilization" and our last two world wars as nothing more than internecine squabbles) was the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union and our response to it for the sole purpose of discomforting the Soviets.

The West has meddled in Afghanistan for as long as the European powers have competed with Russia and its successor the Soviet Union over their influence in Southwest Asia. Afghanistan was in play as early as the middle of the 19th century as part of "The Great Game" between Great Britain and Russia over control of the Indian Sub-continent. Winston Churchill's first non-fiction book published in 1898 was titled "The Malakand Field Force." It describes a British army tasked with keeping the road through the Swat Valley (now in Pakistan) open so that supplies could flow to Britain's clients in Afghanistan. This same Swat Valley became a thoroughfare through which the Afghani Mujahideen, encouraged and supplied by the American CIA, and lead, to some extent, by our old friend Osama Bin Laden, funneled supplies to fight the Russian takeover of Afghanistan. When these Mujahideen won and the Soviet army withdrew, the Mujahideen morphed into the Taliban and the Jihad fighters into Al Qaeda. This oversimplified things a bit but the details are inconsequential. Essentially, before the Taliban arrived, Afghanistan was slowly becoming a western patterned Middle Class society much like Turkey. The Taliban reversed whatever "progress" had been made and installed an archaic religious feudalism in its place. The Taliban, as well as Al Qaeda

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were and are largely funded (after the US stopped funding them) by the adherents of the *Wahhabi* movement in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. They are well funded.

The West's second error was invading Iraq in 2002 with the express purpose of toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein. There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein was not a very nice person. But to the West, Saddam Hussein formed a check on the ambitions of Iran and their ayatollahs as well as a check on Syria. To some extent Saudi Arabia supported Saddam Hussein as an inexpensive bulwark against Iranian ambitions but that ended with his invasion of Kuwait which the Saudi's rightly interpreted as a threat to themselves. U.S. President George H. W. Bush (#41) attempted to restore the balance by NOT toppling Saddam, just chastising him. Of course all that ended with the invasion of Iraq by U.S. President George W. Bush (#43) in 2002.

Now that we've made a mess of things by disturbing the delicate balances of power in the region we must look at the religious minutia as the conflict in Iraq and Syria has, in essence, become a religious war between Sunni and Shia the outcome of which may have lasting consequences because it's also a war against Judaism, Christianity and Western Civilization.

The Islamic Middle East is a boiling pot of local and regional conflicts, some religious, some not. What has become clear in the last few years is that the major conflict is now between Jihadists (mostly Sunni) and more conventional nationalists. Each side has attempted to enlist local tribes or political organizations to their side and the resulting polarization is the source of most of the conflict.

The nationalists in the region generally accept the borders as defined in the post WWI era agreements with some slight adjustments. The Kurds would love to have their own nation, which would include small parts of Turkey, Syria and Iran but, for the moment, have contented themselves with a national identity and a semi-autonomous region within the bounds of Iraq. Political stability and economic growth is the main driving force behind most nationalist movements and the governments they support.

The Jihadists, almost exclusively Sunni, have a far different vision, where the perfect world would consist of a universal (Sunni) Islamic state with Islamic law governing everything. That's the vision, in practice ISIS is behaving not much differently from the Inquisition, an institution of the Roman Catholic Church, which began executing heretics in the 12th century and continued, in a much modified form until recently. However the last execution of the Inquisition was finally carried out in Spain in 1826. Historians believe that over the past millennium as many as 150,000 souls lost their lives to the Inquisition. The institution itself still exists but with the newer title "Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith." Pope Benedict XVI as Bishop Ratzinger was the Prefect of this ancient institution.

The current crop of Sunni Jihadists, ISIS, began with the creation of Al Qaeda by Osama Bin Laden who had a more pan-nationalist and pan-Islamic viewpoint than ISIS (which is why ISIS has been disowned by Al Qaeda). Bin Laden grew up in the opulence of Saudi Arabia. His vision was larger than the squabbles between Sunni and Shia and his stated

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goal was to kick all non-believers out of the Islamic regions and rekindle an Islamic Civilization – exactly what Toynbee predicted. However Bin Laden let his vision get in the way of practical politics. Having kicked the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan (with considerable help from the CIA) he believed that the West would abandon the Islamic world through threats and intimidation. He seriously thought the US would quit the region after September 11th.

ISIS has a different agenda. The vision of ISIS is somewhat less grand than that of Al Qaeda but with an added twist that anyone who is not a Sunni Muslim is an infidel who should be forcibly converted at the least or, better still, simply killed with as much brutality as possible lest anyone else think of escaping their grasp. Their focus is narrow, military victory here and now, with the stated goal of uniting Syria and Iraq under a new Caliphate. This sounds a lot more like one side in a civil or religious war than a threat to global domination. The problem as everyone perceives it is, first the challenge to established regimes, specifically the artificially created Iraq, Syria and Iran as well as the autonomous Kurdish region. The secondary threat is purely humanitarian. It scares us to see Americans beheaded in foreign regions or whole colonies of our co-religionists murdered, forcibly converted and otherwise discriminated against. Things like that shouldn't happen.

The truth is that what we fear most is a militant version of a renewed Islamic Civilization, which could very well compete on an equal footing with our own should they ever stop squabbling. Osama Bin Laden made it very clear that he considered his Jihad to be nothing less than a war against Christianity. ISIS fighters likely feel the same although their immediate hatred is aimed at their Sunni counterparts several hundred feet away, with a mortar and machine gun aimed at their heads. However should ISIS consolidate their power and execute their larger vision then our worst nightmares could be realized, a generalized religious war between Islam and Christianity. What is most frightening to those who are tasked with caring, our politicians, is the almost complete silence from the Imams of the Mosques in the west. Compare the silence of western Muslims to the sound of black American Baptist preachers. This could be just a problem with our media who have no interest (at the moment) but the questions need to be asked.

Here's where the players are right now:

Iraq is mostly Shia in the south and Sunni in the north (as is Afghanistan) much like the Catholic/Protestant split in Ireland. The Baath party which ruled Iraq under Saddam Hussein began as a nationalist, pan-Arab, socialist alternative to Communist, Capitalist, or religious rule but came to be dominated by the Sunni of the north much to the discomfort of the dominant Shia population in the south. The Shia complaints were largely economic rather than religious. With the fall of Saddam, control passed to a democratically elected but Shia dominated administration, which as one might expect, encouraged the ascendancy of the Shia population over the Sunni with the tacit approval, and in some cases help, from a Shia dominated Iran. Meanwhile, the West (specifically the US) encouraged the development of a more Nationalist and inclusive approach to government. However, the Iraqi government resisted these suggestions. Resent-

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ment and a religious fervor in the northern region first encouraged, a low level civil war, followed by the emergence of ISIS in the Sunni dominated regions of Iraq and Syria.

Oddly enough, the government of Iran, dominated as it is by a committee of Ayatollahs, takes a more nationalist approach to policy rather than expressing religious fervor beyond its borders. The controversy over Iran's attempt to build the precursors to an atomic bomb is driven by nationalist goals not religious. The sole exception to this nationalist drive is the Israeli/Palestinian issue which the Iranians view as a religious obligation not unlike Christendom's Crusades to liberate the Holy Lands from the infidel. Indeed the language used in this context is almost identical but reversed. Iran financially and materially backs the Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria to the discomfort of the Sunni rebels including ISIS.

The Baath political party and the al-Assad family have dominated Syria since 1970. It too has been a Nationalist, indeed Pan-Nationalist, in its orientation. It was the Arab Spring, which we'll get to in a moment that upset this balance and triggered the uprising that has cost in excess of 100,000 lives and gave birth to the ISIS movement.

At the moment Egypt, Libya, Turkey and Pakistan are not players in this dangerous game but circumstances may draw them in. The countries of the Arabian Peninsula (though presenting a Modern, Western Face) are deeply religious (Sunni) at the core and have been the primary financial benefactors of Hamas, Al Qaeda, and ISIS.

The Arab Spring generally refers to a series of (more or less) democratic uprisings in 2010 and 2011 that sought to overthrow the established, mostly nationalistic regimes. Most scholars on the subject point to a repressed but growing Middle Class in the region. In some places they were successful but in others they were brutally repressed. The results of the Arab Spring in Libya and Syria was brutal repression and, in the case of Libya, the destruction of the existing government with a resulting local civil war. In the case of Syria a different outcome emerged.

The Syrian Civil War began as a protest against the arrest and beating of a shopkeeper. A month later fifteen teenagers were arrested and beaten for writing something like "the people want the regime to fall." The exact chronology is unimportant, what is important is that while the US and Western Europe dithered in their support for a militant but liberal opposition, the Russians sent massive military aid to their former client state, Syria.

Syria, a predominantly Sunni country was ruled by a Shia led government, much like Iraq had been with Saddam Hussein. It quickly divided along sectarian lines. When it appeared that the Assad might fall, Hezbollah, supported by Iran, decamped Lebanon to back Assad and stabilize the war. It has remained in approximate stasis ever since with minor back and forth between sides. Meanwhile in far eastern Syria, along the Iraq border, ISIS carved out a niche where it grew largely unaffected by either the Assad forces in Damascus or the Iraqi forces centered in Baghdad. When it reached sufficient strength it began to unleash its devastation upon Iraq.

In a case of "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," we have found ourselves amongst some very strange, and I suspect, transient bedfel-

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lows. In Iraq we are on the side of Iran, in stopping the onward rush of ISIS, while at the same time, encouraging ISIS followers in their assault on Syria. Iran is pouring arms into Kurdistan, a traditional enemy, in the hopes of stemming the growth of ISIS. Meanwhile, Israel is in the unenviable position of fighting a war against Hamas, while scratching their heads about what to do with Hezbollah. Under normal circumstances, Israel would back any enemy of Hezbollah. Yet, given the alternatives, Hezbollah looks like a civilizing force, albeit one that might turn against them on a dime. So long as there is a war in Syria, Hezbollah will remain out of Israel's hair. For this reason, backing any Sunni opposition, including ISIS, looks, potentially, like a good move. I'm sure there is a lively debate developing behind closed doors in Israel.

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin, President of Russia, is enjoying making the US and Western Europe uncomfortable, through his desire for *Lebensraum* in the Ukraine and by his undying support for the dictatorship of Bashar al-Assad. This support is designed, we suppose, to ingratiate himself with Iran in exchange for peace and quiet in the Islamic Republics and Provinces, which line his southern border. ISIS is a much bigger threat to Russia than to Western Europe. Despite the fact that (of late) most of the ISIS rhetoric has been directed towards the US and Western Europe, even Putin must recognize that it's only a matter of time before the wrath of ISIS is directed his way. The West, Russia aside, has largely coalesced into a federated, but unified whole, Toynbee's "Western Civilization." The European Union is not likely to go to war with any of its constituents and the same is true of North America. Only Russia, who resists joining "Western Civilization," is still insisting on internecine competition. The "Great Game" is over. However, I suspect that (should our worst nightmares come true) the western part of Western Civilization may let Russia twist in the wind, for a while, before coming to its aid, if it ever does.

This, then, is the picture of current events. While our presidents, prime ministers and other potentates smile for the camera, there must be a gnawing feeling in the pit of their stomachs that all is not going well. In America the laboring classes (those below blue collar "professionals") are becoming more and more Spanish speaking, while in Europe these same laborers are largely Muslim. If ISIS succeeds, if ISIS morphs into a Pan-Islamic yet still militant movement, if the Imams of Europe and America say nothing, if the squabbles in the Middle East become an all out Religious war against Judaism and Christianity then what do we do? What does Israel do? What do those voices of reason and compassion throughout the region and the world do? The media loves to use the phrase, "a disaster of Biblical proportions," to describe any devastating local disaster. Granted, it's been a while since the phrase could be used without hyperbole. It's hard, sometimes, to remember that Armageddon is an actual place in Israel.