

What if the 30-Year Religious Wars Prediction Is Wrong?
Posted On:December 31, 1969

Yemen, once a backwater that nobody much cared about, is now a failed state that has inflamed an entire region. The Saudis, who have spent obscene fortunes on defense toys that they have never used are now tentatively using them and are rallying other Sunni Arabs to join them. For all their decades of bluster about Israel, they were never this serious before. This time, they are really frightened and their fear is directed at a rag-tag terrorist group that has taken over the government of Yemen. This group is Shiite, and supposedly backed by Iran. So, in effect, this is a proxy war between Sunni and Shiites, something that seems to be sweeping the Middle East. But is it really?

The wise "talking heads" are predicting a 30-year religious war between the Shiites and Sunnis, a prediction that seems to mirror the Protestant-Catholic 30-year wars, a 17th century struggle between Catholic and Protestant powers that killed of maybe 20 percent of Germany's total population and 50 percent along its main trade corridor (more deaths than the Bubonic Plague), ultimately discrediting religion as a cohesive political principle, replacing it with nationalism.

The trouble with this prediction is that these are different times, different religions, and very different players, and events are moving with much more speed. How can anybody make thirty-year predictions with a straight face today?

I, for one, cannot imagine that Iran, today the chief champion of the Shiite sect, will still be a revolutionary Shiite state in thirty years! Iran is timelessly Persian, its history and its geography much more intrinsically at home with its place and nature in the uplands as the crossroads between Asia and Europe. It has had more in common with being at the western end of the Persian-Chinese Silk Road than with Islam, which it tried to tame and make imperial during Islam's Golden Age. The taming did not last long enough. Its young people today chafe at their elderly clerics, longing to join the modern youth culture, which eventually they will.

So who will the Shiites, fueling the 30-years Shiite-Sunni war, be? They are not, even today, Persian-speaking Shiites. They are Yemeni, Iraqi, Hamas, and Alawite, and do not even share a common language (or values) with their Iranian brethren. How long can that relationship last?

As for the Sunnis, who will lead them? The Saudis are walking a tightrope, and tightropes are not very secure when leadership is in their 80s. What is going to happen to a country with money but no work ethic, too many princes, and no vision of a future? The only thing one can say about Sunnis is that they easily fall out, fracture, retreat to clan, and have little inclination to maintain national identity.

I really do not see the same fervent religious passion that fueled the Catholic-Protestant wars of the 17th century. I do not see the intellectual theology. I do not see the industriousness of the population. I see none of this fueling a genuine religious war. What I do see is the reemergence of Persian identity shedding its Islamic straitjacket. I see the same thing eventually happening to the Turks, who also have a real identity and temperament (and a geographic reality) underneath a thin stratum of an unsuitable Islamic veneer.

I see the Arab world, however, fragmenting into the two geographies and histories from which they come: the urban traders (Lebanese, Syrian, Alexandrian, perhaps Baghdad and Cairo) and the desert Bedouin. They are not alike.

We are inclined to call all people who speak Arabic "Arabs." This is not so. There are whole swaths of people in North Africa who had other languages, other much older cultures, who may well revert to their origins as the Arab world melts in the next half century. Egypt, for one, is much, much older than its Muslim history. We may be in for some surprises there. It is hard to tell.

But for certain, we need to rethink the glib 30-year Sunni-Shiite war.

670 words

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