

# Sins of the Colonial Fathers

## Why the Goal of ISIS is So Attractive

BY DR. HAYAT ALVI

The Islamic State of Iraq & Syria (ISIS) is very media savvy. Recently ISIS released an hour-long Hollywood-worthy film that explains the terrorist organization's goals, and the ways and means it intends to achieve them. The film, called *Flames of War: The Fighting has Just Begun*, specifically mentions the goal of erasing the borders that the British and French colonial powers carved on the map of the Middle East in what's called the Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916). It was a secret deal between the two Western powers to divvy up the region while the "sick man of Europe," the Ottoman Empire, was collapsing. The result has been the creation of the present day states we see on the regional map.

Gabriel Sheinmann's quote in his article, "The Map that Ruined the Middle East," (*The Tower*, July 2013) is telling: "A century ago, European powers redrew the lines of the Levant according to their own needs. They are gone, but the map remains, along with a shameful irony: While Europeans found a better way to set their own borders, the states they carved out of the Ottoman Empire continue to burn and self-destruct."

ISIS keenly exploits this reality, utilizing it as a rallying point for establishing its "Islamic State." In *Flames of War*, the narrator, speaking in perfect American-accented English exclaims, "The flames of war quickly and voraciously made their way to the colonialist political borders of Iraq and Syria; ... the Islamic State was granted a landmark victory in the war against *kufr* (disbelief), with the flames of war burning the borders of Sykes-Picot. The black pages of history that testified to the tyrannical and murderous rise of the secular state were now coming to a close."

ISIS has wreaked havoc in every territory it has taken, triggering catastrophic humanitarian crises with internally displaced people (IDPs) and refugees flooding neighboring countries. ISIS does not hesitate to express and promote their genocidal intentions.

While many global Muslims find ISIS's bloody tactics repulsive and even anti-Islamic, the ISIS end state serves as a potent reason for many to cheer. For a century, the masses in the Middle East have viewed foreign manipulation of their politics, economies, militaries, cultures and institutions, tribal and social structures, and most importantly their borders, as violations of their rights and intrusions into their sovereign territories. Today, many people throughout the developing world are ready to celebrate the turning of these pages of history and expose the crimes



Syrian refugees in Istanbul, Turkey.

(Photo courtesy of the author)

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that Western colonial powers have committed.

However, ISIS is far from a panacea for post-colonial grievances. It's a large group of militant, sadistic brutes. Most of *Flames of War* is hard to watch, due to its graphic scenes of close range killings of ISIS enemies in battle. The narration overflows with intolerant and hate-mongering language, particularly against Shias. The goals of ISIS unequivocally include committing genocides – yes, plural genocides. This is religious-militant fascism on

steroids. No one benefits from ISIS; one only suffers from its brutality and totalitarian bullying.

"The challenge for democracies is to provide an alternative means of satisfying the quest for glory that motivates those who join in ISIS' barbarism," says Scott Atran in a September 4 *Guardian* article. He reminds us that, "In 1776, the American colonists had the highest standard of living in the world. Frustrated not over economics but 'sacred rights', they were willing to sacrifice 'our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor' against the world's mightiest empire." The difficulties of many post-colonial Muslim communities and individuals in integrating into a Western-designed world, along with the indignities and humiliation imposed upon them, create the prime psychological recipe for wanting their own "Islamic state."

Fortunately, the majority of global Muslims outright reject ISIS and its geopolitical ambitions. They have accepted their post-colonial fates and environments, and do not wish to re-create past glories of Islamic empires, especially under ruthless ISIS rule. However, this ideological split among Muslims indicates a serious fault line within modern Islam. The danger lies in the ability of ISIS to successfully exploit the psyche of the aggrieved, while gaining vast territories and holding them militarily. This is as much a battle of hearts and minds as it is of geography.

Mahatma Gandhi once said, "No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive." In the case of ISIS, it's counting on exclusivity as its appeal, thanks to Sykes-Picot. ●

DR. HAYAT ALVI recently addressed Foundation members and guests to kick off the 2014-15 Winter Warmer Lecture Series. Visit the Naval War College Foundation's YouTube Channel to see video of her presentation entitled *Regression in the Middle East: ISIS and the Dark Age Caliphate*. Hayat Alvi, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at the US Naval War College. The views expressed are personal.