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Hell Comes to Paris

By John Wight
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Years spent depicting head chopping fanatics as rebels, moderates, and revolutionaries in an effort to effect the toppling of another secular government in the Middle East. Years spent cultivating Saudi Arabia as an ally against extremism and fanaticism rather than treating it as a country where extremism and fanaticism resides. Years spent treating the Assad government, Iran, and Russia as enemies rather than allies in the struggle against this fanaticism. And years spent denying any connection between a foreign policy underpinned by hubris and its inevitable blowback. All this together has succeeded in opening the gates of hell.

The aforementioned hubris was on display just hours prior to the horrific events in Paris, when British Prime Minister David Cameron elevated the killing of Mohammed Emwazi by US drone strike in Raqqa, Syria, to the status of a major military victory in the war against ISIS. Out came the podium from Number 10, and out he came to proclaim that the killing of Emwazi (aka Jihadi John) had “struck at the heart of the terrorist organization [ISIS].”

That Cameron could venture such a fatuous boast the very day after an ISIS suicide bomb attack in southern Beirut killed 43 and wounded over 200 people was yet more evidence of the extent to which Western governments are detached from the reality of the Frankenstein’s monster their foreign policy has helped create and let loose upon the world.

There is also the truth that in the minds of people whose worldview is grievously impaired by a Western prism, the deaths of Lebanese, Syrians, Iranians, and Kurds – in other words those engaged in the struggle against ISIS on the ground – constitute a statistic, while the deaths of Europeans and Americans to the same barbarism are an unspeakable tragedy.

In years to come historians will prepare such a scathing indictment against this generation’s leaders of the so-called free world, it will make the indictment prior generations of historians have leveled against the authors of the Sykes Picot Agreement, the Balfour Declaration, the Treaty of Versailles, the Munich Agreement, and the Suez Crisis seem like a playful tap on the wrist in comparison. In fact, the only issue of debate in the course of preparing it will be where it should begin and where it should end. As things stand, it is on track to be open-ended.

In response to 9/11 the decision by the Bush administration, ably assisted by the Blair government, to crash first into Afghanistan without an exit strategy, followed by Iraq in the mistaken belief coalition troops would be greeted as liberators rather than occupiers, marked the day not when a new dawn of democracy and freedom was about to break across the Arab and Muslim world, but the day the hand of the West first reached for that rusty bolt securing in place the gates of hell, and slowly started to pull it back. Over the succeeding decade back ever-further the bolt came, inch by inch, until in 2011 the gates finally, and inevitably, flew open with the West’s ill-fated intervention in an Arab Spring in Libya that by then had arrived at the end of its reach.

NATO airstrikes succeeded in dragging the Libyan ‘revolution’ from Benghazi all the way to Tripoli and victorious completion, whereupon the aforementioned David Cameron and his French counterpart at the time, Nikolas Sarkozy, descended to hail the Libyan people for “choosing democracy.” The hubris of those words, the military intervention which preceded them, have sent thousands of men, women, and children to the bottom of the Mediterranean in the years following, marking a tragic end to a desperate attempt to escape the democratic paradise the British Prime Minister described.

Regardless, on we continued, driven by a myopic and fatal rendering of the brutal conflict in Syria as a revolution, even as legions of religious fanatics poured into the country, most of them across the border of our Turkish ally while Erdogan looked the other way. In the course of the long years of total war that has engulfed the country since, the world has witnessed every conceivable variety of bestiality, carried out under the black flag of ISIS. But wait a minute, the

barrel bombs, you say. Assad is killing his own people. He is the cause of all of this mayhem and carnage.

Allowing for a moment the idea that the Assad government was the main cause of the Syrian conflict when it began in 2011, in 2015 the same government is without any shadow a necessary part of it ending with Syria's survival. Barrel bombs are an atrociously indiscriminate weapon, for sure, and their use rightly comes under the category of war crime. However just as the war crime of the allied firebombing of Dresden in 1945 did not invalidate the war against European fascism then, neither does the atrocity of Syrian barrel bombs invalidate the war against its Middle East equivalent today. When the survival of a country and its culture and history is at stake, war can never be anything else but ugly, which is why the sooner it is brought to a conclusion in Syria the better.

This is where we come to Russia's intervention, which came at the point where the Syrian government was slipping towards the abyss. President Putin's forensic accounting of the perfidious calamity of events leading up to Russia's arrival, in his address to the UN General Assembly, should have heralded the glaringly and obviously necessary *volte face* required to turn a Western policy responsible for disaster into one approximating to coherence.

But, no, instead a moral equivalence has continued to be drawn between a secular and sovereign government under which the rights of minorities were and are protected, and a medieval death cult intent on turning the country into a mass grave of said minorities, along with others deemed superfluous to the requirements of the Caliphate.

This shorthand history of the elemental conflict currently raging across Syria, and also northern Iraq, and which has now come knocking on our door, places the crassness of David Cameron's boast of 'striking at the heart' in its rightful context. We – i.e. the West – are in truth striking at the heart of nothing when it comes to the struggle against ISIS. Russia on the other hand is striking them, along with the Syrian Arab Army, the Kurds, and Iran. The extent to which their efforts are succeeding can be measured in this shocking series of attacks that have been carried out beyond Syria's borders – starting with the downing of the Russian passenger aircraft over the Sinai, followed by the recent suicide bombing in southern Beirut, and now with this latest grisly episode in the heart of Europe. They reflect the desperation of a group that has suffered significant reverses in Syria and Iraq in recent days and weeks.

No matter, if terror was the aim of the Paris attack, it has undeniably succeeded, leaving the French, British, and US government with a dilemma over how to respond, both in terms of security measures at home and their ongoing role in the conflict in Syria.

Responding to this latest atrocity in the French capital, Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev expressed Russia's condolences and said: "The tragedy in Paris demands that we all unite in our fight against extremism."

These are no mere empty words. The longer Russia's call for unity in this struggle goes unheeded and ignored, the longer it will take for the gates of hell to be bolted shut again – assuming, of course, they ever can be.