The conflation of religion in geopolitical conflict

The causes of violence and the ideologies behind it are not always the same

When attempting to make sense of geopolitical conflict, it is often too tempting to apply simplistic ideological labels, such as Sunni versus Shia, Islam versus the West, or democracy versus communism, as if it was predetermined that certain races, civilizations and ideologies were naturally irreconcilable.

Framing conflict in such one-dimensional terms is problematic, because labels merely represent points of view.

For example, while some see the Vietnam War as a classic Cold War clash between democracy and communism, others would prefer to call it resistance against perceived Western imperialism. Similarly, the 1979 Iranian Revolution has been called an ideological conflict by some and a cultural one by others.

Therefore, in order to better shape our response towards any particular geopolitical conflict, it is critical for us to first develop a more nuanced understanding of it.

In other words, it is not enough for us to know who the adversarial parties are and what they claim their objectives to be, but effort should also be made to appreciate the underlying historical and political dynamics involved.

The conflation of ideology in geopolitical conflict is perhaps most evident in the case of the Middle East, a region that has, since the fall of the Ottoman Empire close to a century ago, been beset by violent and continuous conflicts ranging from deadly genocide to popular revolutions.

That the region is constantly at war should come as no surprise, given the post-colonial and socio-economic context in which it has evolved. For one thing, the Arab world remains underdeveloped and poorly educated, with more than one third of its population illiterate. It does not help that there is also little effort on the part of the often Western-backed ruling regimes to cultivate knowledge among their people.

Politically, the region's modern genesis bears emphasis, as most of the nation-states that we recognize today were actually carved out and created by the Western powers in the aftermath of World War I. These artificial borders not only disrupted longstanding historical ties and cultural heritage, they also ended up creating many new problems.

A prime example of this is Kurdistan, a culturally contiguous community that has been divided and subsumed by Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Being minorities in these four countries, the Kurds continue to be oppressed till this day.

An even more familiar case is that of Palestine and the British-engineered creation of the state of Israel. While one people gained a state, another lost theirs. And as the late night news reminds us week in and week out, this territorial dispute remains painfully and bitterly unresolved.

In short, there are numerous historical, political and socio-economic factors at play when one considers the many conflicts taking place. Yet most of these dynamics are ignored when the orientalist lens is put on and the ideological label of Islam is attached.

Hence, when the West is made the bogeyman and target of conflict, it is understood to be a clash of civilizations, as is the case with al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) Caliphate.

However, when they fight amongst themselves, it is deemed as sectarian conflict between the Sunnis and the Shias. Either way, it fits the narrative of Islam as a belligerent religion and its followers as warmongers.

This orientalist understanding of Middle Eastern conflict is not only simplistic, it is also dangerously misleading. Take, for example, the much-touted sectarian conflict taking place between the Sunnis and the Shias.

While the two main actors in this conflict, that is to say Saudi Arabia representing the Sunni-Wahhabi movement and Iran representing the Shias, may espouse sectarian rhetoric, it's obvious from their actions that their motivations are less to do with theology than they are to do with regional power politics.

Take their approach to alliance building. Tehran has over the years funded and supported two Palestinian Islamist movements, namely the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas, two principally Sunni groups, although it must be added that relations with the latter have soured of late over the Syrian issue.

On the other hand, while the Saudis have publicly backed the Sunnis against the Shia regime in Syria, the truth is that they have also committed strong support for Iraqi Vice-President and former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi despite the fact that he is a Shia leader of a majority-Shia government.

For that matter, if Riyadh's foreign policy was truly sectarian-driven, then the Ikhwan al-Muslimun or the Muslim Brotherhood movement should be a natural Sunni ally. Yet both in Egypt and in Syria, this is far from the case.

Therefore, it is safe to say that religious ideology, as much as it colors the discourse and rhetoric of a conflict, is secondary to more important geopolitical considerations.

The fact is that conflict in most of the post-colonial world today can be traced to historical and political legacies. This applies even to conflicts closer to home, such as the Southern Thailand insurgency, which has also assumed an Islamic identity complete with jihadi rhetoric.

However, remove the ideological veneer and we find yet again another region in limbo, where modern political boundaries do not match pre-existing cultural boundaries, having been artificially divided by the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909. Add the forced cultural assimilation policy of the Thai government to the mix and we have an understandable resistance.

Therefore, it is instructive that when discussing any kind of geopolitical conflict that we take great care to ensure we do not conflate its underlying causes with its apparent ideology. While there is no denying that ideological motivations play an important role in the dynamics of conflict, excessive focus on it will lead us to miss the forest for the trees.

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