

“*The difference between military revolutions and revolutions in military affairs is significant. It is profoundly necessary to understand both history and current events with respect to Western and Muslim civilizations. Military revolutions impact all of society. Revolutions in military affairs affect only the military.*” —an excerpt from this essay

*by Chaplain (Major) Bruce Sidebotham, U.S. Army Reserve, D.Min*

History doesn't just repeat itself. Once a cycle starts, it practically never ends. Today's struggle between Israelis and Palestinians for dominance of Jerusalem is not an isolated, merely local feud. It's a small aspen tree sprouting in a grove from a giant root ball that winds through half the globe and back over a period of 1,400 years. Leaders today in the military and political arena—as well as those in community and religious service—need the intellectual discernment to understand and analyze the nature and consequences of this historic struggle (and the “root ball” from which it has sprung) and the moral courage to base their decisions and actions on truth rather than on the latest political and social fads that are based upon false hopes and “sensitivities.”

Around 610 A.D., Muhammad began introducing more than a new religion. He revolutionized the Middle Eastern “way of war” and initiated an empire that would rival all the others. That rivalry continues today, along with differences in the Western and Middle Eastern “ways of war.”

1

Muhammad started a military revolution—not just a “revolution in military affairs.” According to Knox and Murray in *The Dynamics of Military Revolution*, military revolutions are like major earthquakes. They are unpredictable and uncontrollable. Their upheaval impacts the whole society. They may impact economics, politics, and culture even more than the armed forces.

2

The military movement that Muhammad started was unforeseen, and it drastically changed the world. Muhammad introduced religious fervor to the Arab “way of war.” The Old Testament records God telling the ancient Jews through Joshua to conquer Canaan.

3

Similarly, in the  
*Qur'an*

Allah tells Muhammad's followers to "Go forth, light-armed and heavy-armed, and strive with your wealth and your lives in the way of Allah!...Fight those of the disbelievers who are near you, and let them find harshness in you, and know that Allah is with those who keep their duty (unto Him)."

4

Whether or not Muhammad was a prophet of God, he was a great statesman and military

leader. In *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, Bernard Lewis notes, "Muhammad achieved victory and triumph in his own lifetime. He conquered his promised land, and created his own state, of which he himself was supreme sovereign."<sup>5</sup> Whether or not Islam is a religion of peace, it inspired military campaigns and united an empire that reached from Morocco to Afghanistan within fifty years of Muhammad's death.

6

*This new empire was a military success inspired by religion, rather than a religious success inspired by the military.* In *God's Battalions*

, Rodney Stark declares, "The conquering Arabs constituted a small elite who ruled over large populations of non-Muslims, most of whom remained unconverted for centuries."

7

Imperial success flowed from a military revolution in the Arab "way of war" and not from religious missionary activity. In

*The Lost History of Christianity*

, Philip Jenkins notes that, although "this was a movement of armed conquest and imperial expansion, which on occasion involved ferocious violence...conquest was not quickly followed by Islamization, or the destruction of church institutions."

8

Referencing calculations by historian Richard Bulliet, Jenkins reveals that Islam had little initial religious impact outside of Arabia, and it did not become the majority religion in its own empire until sometime after 850 A.D.

9

Antioch and Jerusalem actually had Christian majorities as late as the beginning of the Crusades (1096 A.D.).

10

Arab warfare before Muhammad was hit-and-run raiding between tribes. Islam united the tribes, and fervor to spread the new faith sustained Arab unity. In *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State*

, Hugh Kennedy underscores how the Arabs now "fought for their religion, the prospect of booty and because their friends and fellow tribesmen were doing it."

11

Arab conquest received no advantage from the five essentials that Geoffrey Parker associates with the Western paradigm for its "way of war": 1) technology; 2) discipline; 3) highly aggressive military action; 4) innovation; and 5) a unique system of finance.

12

According to Stark, regarding technology, the Arab advance neither possessed nor sought any systems or weapons more modern than their enemies. Concerning discipline, it featured fierce desert tribes, not professionally trained battalions. As to aggressiveness, it razed some major cities like Carthage, and it massacred some defenseless villages in order to provoke nearby fortified garrisons into an open fight. However, many people in diverse Christian traditions all across Orthodox Byzantium and Zoroastrian Persia welcomed the Arabs as liberators.

13

As for innovation and finance, according to Samuel Moffett in

### *A History of Christianity in Asia*

, "it was the conquered who represented civilization, and the conquerors were still nomad warriors from the desert."

14

Stark says that the sophisticated culture of Muslim empire "was actually the culture of conquered people."

15

Ultimately, when the Arabs finally met the Western “way of war,” their conquests stalled.

Against the Persians of Asia, the Byzantines of the Middle East, and the Visigoths of Spain, the Arabs seemed invincible. Beyond the Pyrenees, however, they met the elements of the Western “way of war” that were in the midst of their own “revolution in military affairs.” If MacGregor Knox can call “the French Revolution of the late eighteenth century, which merged mass politics and warfare,”<sup>16</sup> a military revolution, then he should call the rise of Islam a military revolution as well. What Napoleon did for *politics and war* in France, Muhammad did for *religion and war* in the Middle East. However, the military revolution that Muhammad started was not a revolution of what Geoffrey Parker calls “the Western way of war.”

17

It was a revolution of the Arab “way of war.” It overcame Persia and Byzantium, and it created one of the world's largest empires. It has not overcome the West, at least not yet. Weapons of mass destruction, globalization, and information technology are revitalizing the Arab “way of war” with a renewed military revolution. The Western world is answering, as it did at Tours, by revolutionizing the military affairs of its Western “way of war.”

Beyond the Pyrenees, the Arabs met Charles Martel, who was building what would become his own empire—the Carolingian Empire. His military success did not come through revolutionary factors affecting all of society. It did not come through a military revolution. Rather, it came through measured and strategic innovations in organization, doctrine, tactics, and weaponry that were limited primarily to the battlefield. According to Stark, Martel’s were not like the gutless garrison mercenaries of Byzantine cities or the hired hands filling the Persian cavalry. His were citizen professionals with better armor, better weapons, better horses, better food, better discipline, better leadership, better logistics, and better pay.<sup>18</sup>

The Muslim empire thrived in North Africa and Asia; it turned back Mongol invaders, spread into South Asia and Southeast Asia, eventually crushed Constantinople, and drove deep into Eastern Europe. However, whenever it encountered the armies of the West, it failed. Against the Western “way of war,” the “way” inspired by Muhammad's revolution eventually lost Al-Andalus—its conquests in the Iberian Peninsula—in 1492, suffered a major naval defeat by southern Catholic maritime states in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571, failed in a series of efforts to conquer central Europe when an Ottoman army of about 150,000 was turned back at “The Gates of Vienna” in 1683, surrendered Egypt to Napoleon in 1798, abandoned Barbary Piracy in 1815, and submitted to British occupation in the 1800s. The Caliphate maintained by the Ottoman Empire finally collapsed completely in 1923, and the non-Muslim state of Israel formed in the Muslim heartland in 1948. Even with great numerical and geographic advantage, the Muslim empire could not eliminate Crusader settlements in Palestine for nearly 200 years

(1098-1291). Those settlements eventually failed, but not for military reasons. According to Stark, they failed due to resentment in Europe over their cost in taxes and "a medieval version of an antiwar movement."<sup>19</sup> If modern Israel turns out to be functionally equivalent to medieval Crusader colonies, then it might endure a similar lifecycle.

The West, with its characteristic science, technology and “way of war,” remains dominant in the world today, but that might be changing. Globalization, weapons of mass destruction, and information technology are resurrecting a military revolution among Muslims that may favor non-Western “ways of war.” Since the 1979 regime change in Iran, Islam is surging militaristically. This time, it's not through a new religion uniting Arab tribes, but through fanaticism uniting millions of Muslims dispersed around the world among Muslim and non-Muslim majorities. A Pew opinion survey published in December 2010 found that 82 percent of Muslim Egyptians favor stoning for adultery, 77 percent favor severing limbs for theft, and 84 percent favor death for apostasy (leaving Islam).<sup>20</sup> With those kind of popular opinions characteristic in a relatively moderate Muslim country, more democratic Muslim governments might not prevent a clash of civilizations any better than democracy prevented civil war in America.

Like the original military revolution in the Arab “way of war” that resulted in a Muslim empire, today’s military revolution is also uncontrollable, unpredictable, and broadly transformational. The “End” for this revolution is restoring the Muslim Caliphate. Its “Ways” are fear, intimidation, and fanaticism. Some of its “Means” include: 1) starting non-state terrorist organizations like Hamas, Hezbollah, and Al-Qaeda; 2) assassinating moderate leaders like Benazir Bhutto and Salman Taseer in Pakistan; 3) employing weapons of mass destruction like flying jet airplanes into sky scrapers; and 4) orchestrating violent demonstrations like those against the Danish cartoons of Muhammad and the burning of a *Qur’an*.

Against these “Means,” the West is answering with updates to military organization, doctrine, operations, tactics and technology that resemble a revolution in military affairs. Organizationally, America created new departments and commands. For example, it created the Department of Homeland Security to coordinate federal agencies, and it started the U.S. Northern Command to lead Homeland Defense in the continental United States. America is also trying to rebalance its defense force structure and modernize its doctrine in order to address more non-traditional threats. For example, Stability and Civil Support Operations now require the same attention and proficiency as major combat operations.<sup>21</sup> Operationally, tactically, and technologically, over one million of over three million service men and women served in nearly 80 foreign countries in 2010. Most of those American military personnel were focused on Counter Insurgency (COIN) and Foreign Internal Defense (FID) missions.

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*The difference between military revolutions and revolutions in military affairs is significant.* It is profoundly necessary to understand both history and current events with respect to Western and Muslim civilizations. Military revolutions impact all of society. Revolutions in military affairs affect only the military. The military revolution surging outside of the West among Muslims is having a broader impact even on Western society itself than the revolution in military affairs that's happening within Western militaries.

As when religious zeal inspired Arab tribes to burst forth from the desert and conquer most of the non-Western world, modern circumstances are kindling widespread fervor to reestablish a Muslim Caliphate. It is another military revolution. New methods involving non-state enemies and weapons of mass destruction are reshaping economics, politics, and sociology in every nation. The West, with its "way of war" and its revolutions in military affairs, withstood and overcame non-Western military revolution once before. Only time will tell if it can do so again.

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Bruce and his wife, Lynn, have raised four boys. Their youngest son was born in Indonesia. As a chaplain (major) in the U.S. Army Reserves, Bruce spent a year in Iraq (2008-09), where he provided pastoral care to 39 different teams of embedded advisors throughout the province of Nineveh. Bruce directs Operation Reveille, a ministry that helps service personnel with cross-cultural relations. Contact information: [bside@oprev.org](mailto:bside@oprev.org)

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### ENDNOTES

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## **Quotations**

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