

Charlottesville: Is America Becoming the Middle East?

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Americans have been so entangled in the Middle East for the past few decades that they have begun interpreting their own politics in the terms of that region. Is driving a car into protesters an ISIL tactic? Is pulling down statues of Confederate generals like destroying ancient Assyrian antiquities? Is Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad a mass murderer or a bulwark against fundamentalist hordes? How helpful is this importation of symbols from a region the United States has done so much to roil?

Joyce Karam points out that the white nationalist marchers in Charlottesville had a love affair with Assad. KKK figure David Duke has been flying off to give speeches in Damascus for years, attracted by the anti-Semitic rhetoric of Syria's ruling Baath Party and its enmity for Israel (about which it mainly talks a good game). The white nationalists also admire the Russian Federation as a bastion of whiteness. Russian president Vladimir Putin has put his country's air force at the service of Assad. Both Putin's and America's far right (and some elements of the American far left) see Assad as a bulwark against Muslim terrorists.

President Donald Trump struck Syria with cruise missiles last spring after allegations that the regime had used sarin gas on villagers. Breitbart, the webzine built up by current White House chief strategist Steve Bannon as a voice for the "alt-right" (white nationalists in business suits or khakis and polo shirts), suggested that the strike was the work of Ivanka Trump. Duke and a neo-Nazi site also attributed the strike to "Jewish extremism" and "manipulation" by Jews, respectively.

The far-right gangs who invaded Charlottesville last weekend chanted, "you will not replace us," but at some point changed the slogan to "Jews will not replace us." This sentiment reflects conspiracy theories about globalization being the work of Jewish business interests, leading to the offshoring of American jobs or the importation of cheap labor from abroad. These slurs have a long history in America, going back at least to Father Charles Coughlin's Christian Front in the

1930s, but connecting them to Israel and Middle East policy is a recent wrinkle.

The Daily Beast and many other commenters referred to the homicide by automobile, allegedly committed by James Fields Jr., which robbed 32-year-old Heather Heyer of her life and injured 19 others, as an “ISIS-style terrorist attack.”

The reference was to the use of vehicles by lone-wolf sympathizers of the declining Muslim extremist group ISIL (IS, ISIS, Daesh) to ram civilians. Although they did not pioneer the technique, which has been used dozens of times by terrorists of various stripes for years, it has been wielded by the terrorist group’s acolytes with special lethality. In July 2016, a man of Tunisian background drove a heavy truck into crowds in Nice, France, killing more than 80. On June 3 of this year, two men of Moroccan heritage and one born in Pakistan launched a vehicular terrorism attack on London Bridge, killing eight, mostly tourists from abroad.

The far right quickly took up the vehicle attack as a tactic. In an apparent revenge incident, a British man drove a van into congregants issuing from London’s Finsbury Park mosque on June 19, killing one and wounding 11.

[NOTE: And on Aug. 17, it happened again. A van plowed into a crowd in the tourist district Las Ramblas in Barcelona, killing 13 and injuring more than 100. Later that day, a car containing five suspected terrorists drove into a car in the coastal Spanish town of Cambrils, killing one and injuring seven. And an explosion in Alcanar Platja, another coastal town, killed one and wounded several others. ISIS has claimed responsibility for all of the attacks.]

The alleged perpetrator in Charlottesville, James Fields, ironically enough, resembles some of the young ISIL terrorists in Europe. He idolized Nazi Germany and immersed himself in the minutiae of its military history. He tried to join the Army but was discharged after basic training for not meeting requirements. His wheelchair-bound mother’s 911 calls allege that he abused and terrorized her, at one point pulling a knife on her. He is said to have been prescribed medication for anger issues. The Nice attacker, Mohamed Bouhlel, was also accused of having anger issues and of abusing his family.

A predictable controversy also broke out about whether the alleged Charlottesville attacker could be termed a terrorist, as opposed to being a

hothead who flew into a murderous rage. Some feared that tossing around the charge “terrorism” could encourage the government to attempt to widen its domestic terrorism statutes at a time when the Justice Department is increasingly hostile to any dissent. Others, myself included, pointed out that if Fields had been a Muslim, there would have been no controversy about using the label.

This debate is paralleled in the Middle East. Many who support the remaining rebels in Syria are justifiably angry that all are being tagged as al-Qaida or ISIL, pointing out that many just wanted to escape the tyranny of the Baath one-party state. The Lebanese political elite does not agree with the United States and Israel that Hezbollah is a terrorist organization (it functions as a national guard for the Lebanese south, given the long history of Israeli attempts to annex that region). The unsettled character of the definition of terrorist groups in the Middle East led neophyte Donald Trump simply to assume that the Lebanese government is an ally of the United States against Hezbollah — which is actually a part of the Lebanese government and has been for many years.

In the wake of the Charlottesville atrocity, left-leaning crowds gathered to protest the agenda of the white nationalists. In Durham, North Carolina, a crowd pulled down a Confederate statue. The American right wing has for some time peddled a meme that removing or vandalizing Confederate monuments resembles ISIL’s attacks on historic sites. The latter, a puritan Muslim iconoclastic movement, sees ancient Assyrian and other pagan statues and monuments as works of Satan (rather as in 391 AD, when Roman patriarch Theophilus and his followers tore down a pagan temple, the Serapeum, in Alexandria, as a den of demons).

The statues of Confederate figures, however, are hardly works of longstanding. Most were erected in the early or mid-20th century as a movement of official white nationalism in the South, celebrating Jim Crow or implicitly rejecting the civil rights movement. Many see them as celebrations of the region’s slave culture. As for history, the American right wing was positively ecstatic when Russians and other ex-Soviets tore down statues of Stalin, and in 2003, the Bush administration orchestrated the pulling down of the statue of Saddam Hussein in American-occupied Iraq. The issue does not appear to be the preservation of history (which could be addressed by putting Confederate statues in a museum, where they could be contextualized). It appears to be the preservation of the history of white nationalism.

That Americans are measuring themselves against the Middle East is no accident. The era of US neo-imperialism in that region, which changed in a big way with Ronald Reagan's encouragement of the Muslim far right in its guerrilla insurgency against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and went on steroids with George W. Bush after 9/11, has helped affect how Americans see themselves at home. In a ratcheting movement, Reagan enabled the rise of al-Qaida, and Bush the rise of ISIL, providing further justifications for the new militarism. Hundreds of thousands of Americans have cycled through the military in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Headlines continually blare about the foreign terrorist threat, taking the spotlight off the dangerous white nationalists at home. While most veterans are highly admirable people, the Bush administration, desperate for canon fodder, lowered military standards and it is well known that some white nationalists sought to serve in his wars as part of their ideology. One such appears to be the leader of one of the hate groups that marched in Charlottesville. American wars abroad have fed into the new white supremacism, and our longest wars are warping domestic politics. The answer to the question in my title may be "yes."

Source: <http://billmoyers.com/story/right-wing-extremism-america-middle-east/>

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