

A photograph of a room with a red cross on a white door, a handgun on the wall, and military gear on a chair.

Gérard Chaliand

# WHY WE'VE STOPPED WINNING WARS

Translated by Marina Urquidi  
*Available at [losing-wars.net](http://losing-wars.net)*

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of Bernard Fall (1928-1967), an exceptional participant observer of the Vietnam War, which cost him his life. Over the years, all of his analyses were relevant. He was never heeded.*



*“The fact that yesterday’s victims can become torturers makes one optimistic about the adaptability of the human species.” G. C.*

# TWENTY YEARS AGO

In the nineteenth century, colonial wars were not much more than a degraded form of war compared to conflicts among industrial nations. There are few theoretical writings on colonial wars other than those of French Army officers Joseph S. Gallieni (1849–1916) and Louis H.G. Lyautey (1854–1934) and the work of British Army Major-General Sir Charles E. Callwell, *Small Wars* (1896).

How, between 1830 and 1940, were some scant European troops able to defeat Asian or African armies in much higher numbers, with virtually no exception, whereas since World War II, Western armies have seldom managed to overcome Asian or African troops, often fewer in numbers?

The weaponry available to insurrectionists in the colonies or semi-colonies in the wake of World War II is not enough to explain the post-1945 reversals.

The success of national liberation wars can be credited to the ideas introduced by the colonizers, which the colonized, once these ideas were assimilated, then turned against their rulers. It took, among other factors, at least three generations for the Asian world to discover and integrate Europe's major nineteenth-century ideology, that is, modern nationalism, and it is no coincidence that liberation movements called themselves "national."

Right after World War I, the insurrection led by Abd el-Krim in the Rif region (1922-1925), after having been a disaster for the Spanish in Annual, would require no less than a hundred thousand men for France to crush though Abd el-Krim's army comprised a scarce thirty thousand well organized soldiers equipped, inter alia, with 75 mm field guns. At the time, however, European troops

engaged in this type of operation were fully supported by the colonial powers. The last colonial war, that of Abyssinia (1935-1936), was waged with enthusiasm on the Italian side and the blessings of Pope Pius XII.

On another front, the principles of revolutionary warfare designed by Mao Zedong were being developed, while the series of Western defeats in East Asia—the United States in the Philippines, the Netherlands in Indonesia, Great Britain in Malaysia, and France in Indochina—put an end to “white” domination, which up to that point had been complete except in Japan. Meanwhile, ideas were evolving, and under the umbrella of nationalist or Leninist parties, local patriotisms morphed to radical nationalisms. Was the fight for freedom against the Axis powers expected to be only for the freedom of the Western nations? The old imperial conceptions based on the white man’s racial superiority were demolished. The days of industrial nations subjugating people in a state of inferiority in the name of social Darwinism and civilization were over. Violent decolonization followed, punctuated by retarding battles in Indonesia, Indochina, and Algeria. Sometimes retreat was conducted in an orderly fashion, as in India or in Africa, but not in the case of Portugal. Since the end of the Cold War, it has become easier to measure just how much the consequences of decolonization are far from being exhausted.

*Gerard Chaliand, excerpt from the foreword to La Décolonisation armée contemporaine (et ses conséquences), by Guy Mandron, 1995.*







# FOREWORD

The “Islamic State” has been losing ground since October 2016, despite its heroic stand in Mosul, where the besieged, although bound to lose their battle against the disproportionately stronger Shia special forces, managed to change their inexorable defeat into a moral victory. The movement’s aura has remained unaltered, if not grown stronger.

The situation in Syria, which in the summer of 2015 seemed to have put the regime at a major disadvantage, has been reversed. There too, the Islamic State has suffered considerable losses as along the Euphrates, the battle of Al-Raqqah began and was obviously going to be long.

For all that, the fate of about twenty percent of the Iraqi Sunnis has not been settled. What will the government of Baghdad choose to do? What measures will Iran suggest? Moreover, the Shia regime will have to find a way to deal with Iraq’s Kurds stationed not far from Mosul and now controlling a larger area than at the beginning of the conflict.

A refresher on what has happened: Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of the Islamic State in Iraq since 2010, took advantage of the civil war in Syria to change his organization’s name to “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham” (meaning Syria, for ISIS, or in the Levant, for ISIL). After its break with al-Qaeda’s Syrian branch in 2013, the movement became simply “Islamic State.” In quick succession, exploiting the disarray of the Iraqi forces, al-Baghdadi captured Mosul with practically no resistance, decreed the abolition of the Syrian-Iraqi border, in an unprecedented move declared the territorialization of the area controlled by his movement straddling

two countries, and proclaimed himself caliph. The lightning offensive, waged from Sinjar to Iraqi Kurdistan in the early summer of 2014, galvanized Jihad sympathizers and some 20,000 volunteers from various countries, a good part of whom crossed the Turkish border freely to join an organization that seemed on its way to victory. The Islamic State's repressive methods were intentionally staged in a spectacular dramatization of their horror in order to spread terror (to offset the organization's small numbers). They were largely, and somewhat complacently, relayed by the Western media, where a number of television channels distinguished themselves with uninterrupted broadcasting of the anguish, seeming to forget that terrorism is precisely primarily a psychological weapon.

Privileging the fight against the Islamic State should not obscure that this latter is not the West's only adversary. The major military force among those who are euphemistically called the "opposition forces," especially in the Anglo-Saxon press (*The New York Times*, *The Economist*), is Jabhat al-Nusra, a branch of al-Qaeda, which in September 2016 changed its name and declared its disaffiliation from al-Qaeda. The movement is now called Fateh al-Sham, but a name change is easier to make than a change in nature.

In the Syrian imbroglio, the United States and Europe's alliances with the countries in the region clearly appeared as ambiguous while Turkey effectively collaborated with the Islamic State to weaken Syria's Kurds. The head of the Turkish state, a skillful tactician, got President Putin to occupy Jarabulus militarily, probably depriving Syria's Kurds once and for all of control over the frontier segment separating the district of Afrin from that of Kobani. Syria's Kurds thus reached the limits of their possibilities and potential support. As for Vladimir Putin, he was given a free hand during the battle of East Aleppo, which was fought by various Islamist movements (and very few so-called democratic elements) under the iron rule of the best organized anti-regime movement,

namely Fateh al-Sham. The fall of Aleppo, which actually involved only twenty percent of the city, was presented by the majority of the Western media as a bloodbath. Was this deliberate disinformation?

As things stand today, the true winner in the region is Iran. As a consequence of the US intervention in 2003, Iraq is under Shia control, and Iran has a strong indirect presence in the country in that it trains the militia there. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad's regime, thanks to the support of Iran and its allies (Hezbollah), and, particularly, of Russia, was in a better position than it had been in the five previous years. Iranian militia (the Quds Force) took part in the fighting while Iran trained thousands of combatants on the ground. In addition, militia from Iraq and from Afghanistan (Afghani Fateniyoun recruited among the Hazaras), and Shia Pakistani militia (Pakistani Zainebiyoun) will obviously remain in Syria for a long time. In other words, a denominational recomposition of an essential part of Syria is quietly occurring as we watch.

The regime is relentlessly running the Sunni population out of the western areas of the country and replacing it with Shiites. It is difficult to evaluate the ongoing changes (in 2011, there were some 16 million Sunni Syrians and approximately eight million people of other denominations, but the regime is working on reducing the share of Sunnis).

Iranian successes are due in particular to the cohesion of the Shia clergy. The period of illusions personified by Ayatollah Khomeini is over. Iran now knows that it cannot aspire to be the political leader of the Muslim world. Ahmadinejad's excesses are things of the past. Iran's current pragmatic approach seems to be to return to a national-interest policy, which it is implementing with the determination of what could practically be assimilated to a Marxist-Leninist party apparatus.

The Sunnis, for their part, are lacking in coordination—this is one of their clergy’s characteristics—and are divided. The Muslim Brotherhood is supported by Turkey and Qatar, while Saudi Arabia has been exporting its Wahhabism for more than 40 years. Locally, in Syria, the Islamist movements are rivals and the Islamic State’s decreasing influence has bolstered Fateh al-Sham. Since the summer of 2014, the Islamic State, despite its self-promotion capacities (substantially helped by Western television), has been playing a poker hand that at the end of the day has put it on everyone’s wrong side. The noose is tightening around Al-Raqqah. The Islamic State’s above-mentioned territorialization, a large part of which consists of desert areas, has been blown apart; the Syrian-Iraqi border is still there, Mosul has gone under, and Al-Raqqah is about to follow. Meanwhile, the Islamic State has lost its al-Bab stronghold, which was reconquered with some difficulty by the Turkish army after three months of combat. A major part of the other Islamist movements of Syria recently (in 2017) formed a coalition called Tahrir al-Sham including Fateh al-Sham, a wing of Ahrar al-Cham (Salafist), and the Free Syrian Army.

Turkey has begun a major sweep operation within its borders against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party); according to the United Nations, at least 350,000 persons have been forcibly displaced and about 30 south-eastern cities partially destroyed. On the heels of a failed coup attributed to the Gülen movement, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan embarked on a political cleansing of all the sectors hostile or opposed to him—the army, including a large number of generals, the police, judges, politicians, professors, and journalists—in a Stalin-type purge where denunciation played a leading role. At the outcome of a referendum in which a little more than 51% of the votes favored a constitutional amendment, power was concentrated in Erdoğan’s hands. One of the president’s goals is to de-secularize the army, a long-standing bastion of Kemalism. Repression is

ongoing against the PKK, which made the mistake of wanting to fight losing battles in urban areas. The Turkish president intends to intervene further in Syria and in Iraq in order to strike elements of the PKK who have retreated there and those of the PYD (Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party), perceived as a danger to Turkey's security. By occupying Kobani, the USA has signified that an intervention by Ankara in Syria is out of the question. Similarly, Russia sent troops to the district of Afrin to protect it from Turkish threat. Erdoğan then tried to impose his will by air and was blocked by the refusal of the USA, attached to protecting the forces leading the battle of Al-Raqqa, in which Syria's Kurds are of prime importance. Suddenly, Turkey, otherwise facing serious economic problems—a nearly twenty percent fall in its currency, declining tourism, few investments, and modest economic growth—was left isolated.

The Turkish leader, after having copiously insulted the Europeans (whom he can blackmail over the refugee issue), turned again to Russia to get sophisticated weapons so he could show that he wanted to preserve his freedom of action. His intention is to buy an S-400 anti-aircraft missile system, which is incompatible with the NATO systems. He is ultimately aiming for an arsenal guaranteeing him as much independence as possible. How far Erdoğan can go down this path remains to be seen.

In April 2017, the Syrian regime used sarin gas in Khan Sheikhan, killing 87 according to French sources and triggering panic among the populations, forced to take refuge to the north in the direction of Idlib. The USA responded to the gas attack by firing 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles. Thus, Donald Trump showed that, contrary to his predecessor, he would not let Syria “cross the red line” without reacting. That's as far as it went; it was a public warning intended to show US determination (the message was also for North Korea).

Turkey's alliance with Russia is circumstantial and mostly reflects interests of a tactical order. For Russia, moving Turkey away from NATO can seem tempting. Ankara's alliances in the past decade have been erratic, and after having entertained a plan to take the lead of Sunnism in the Middle East, Turkey is left with no allies in the Arab world. Its relationships with Europe are contentious, and those it has with the United States have lost their former cordiality. Russia is attached to its alliance with the Syrian regime. It is firmly established in Syria with a naval base in Tartus, an airbase in Khmeimim, and a spy base in Tel Al-Hara (province of Daraa).

Moscow, while helping an Alawite state preserve power, does not wish to be seen as pro-Shia, particularly in the eyes of its neighboring Muslim countries. In 2016, a conference of Sunni scholars was held in Grozny (Chechnya) in the presence of the Grand Mufti of Egypt and the Grand Imam of al-Ahzar, which condemned Jihadism, Salafism and Wahhabism.

Saudi Arabia is currently Iran's main adversary while Turkey remains its major historical rival. Iran and Saudi Arabia are both seeking regional preeminence, a rivalry kindled by religious opposition.

Serious incidents had taken place in Mecca in September 2015 and relations with Iran further deteriorated in January 2016 when Saudi Arabia executed nearly fifty Shia clerics including Imam Baqir al-Nimr.

Under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia decided in 2016 to intervene in Yemen to try to crush Iran's allies there, namely the Zaidi Houthi sect that dominates a large portion of the western part of the country (Sanaa, Taiz, and Al Hudaydah). Despite bombings causing a situation qualified by the United Nations as the largest humanitarian crisis in 70 years, Saudi Arabia and its allies have not succeeded in crushing the Houthis,



who are particularly helped by the Alpine geography of their area. Only the cities of Sanaa and Ma'rib came under their control. In the 1960s, in the same theater, Gamal Abdel Nasser's troops, forty-thousand strong, had already been severely defeated by the mountain tribes. The Saudi intervention appears to be doomed to fail even though Saudi Arabia has had the Gulf Cooperation Council lined up behind it since 2016. The United Arab Emirates have however remained cautious in their support, starting with Dubai, where Iranian influence is significant. The Sultanate of Oman is playing more of a mediation role.

The United States obviously intends to play an important part in the region. Its public warning shortly after Damas's use of toxic gases is only one illustration of this. In Iraq, the United States has nearly six thousand soldiers set to stay in order to weigh in on the country's destiny. In Syria, Washington is keeping Erdoğan's infelicitous initiatives in check. US special forces are training Syrians and are keen on their playing a part against the Islamic State.

The core of US military under the current presidency, including James Mattis, General McMaster, and John Kelly, is solid and determined. In any event, with the price of oil at around USD 55 a barrel, the United States remains the economic kingpin.

During his visit to Riyadh in June 2017, Donald Trump, after having saluted his excellent Saudi ally and negotiated a very important arms sale, pointed with his usual blustery insight to Iran as the state at the origin of international terrorism of Islamist inspiration. At a time when Saudi Arabia is claiming to represent human rights in the United Nations, nothing less could be expected. The Iranian election is suggesting more subtle developments.

*July 1, 2017*



PART I

**VICTORY: A WESTERN  
ART**



# WARS OF CONQUEST

Why did Europe—particularly since 1757, when the British began their conquest of India at the Battle of Plassey—and also the United States in their brief 1898-1901 foray into the Philippines, ultimately win all colonial wars for nearly two centuries, despite a few lost battles?

We could simply say that they had better weapons. This would be a suitable answer if the West had lost its material superiority since then, which is far from being the case.

In the colonial or postcolonial context, wars are asymmetric, a conflict between the strong and the weak. They are irregular wars, involving guerrilla warfare and/or terrorism, in contrast with conventional wars, which are waged between two opponents who have agreed to fight a frontal battle, agreed to clash, theoretically with substantially equal forces.

For Europeans, the first colonial-type war—even if it was not in its time perceived as such—was Spain's conquest of Mexico, which preceded all the others, from the conquest of Peru to those in Asia and in Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and through to the mid-twentieth century.

## *Asymmetric-warfare models*

### **The conquest of Mexico**

The conquest of Mexico (February 1519 – August 1521) is a model of asymmetric warfare. The correlation of forces seemed overwhelmingly in favor of the Aztecs. At no point in the eighteen months of conquest were there ever more than two thousand Spaniards in Mexico, whereas their adversaries were likely in the hundreds of thousands.

Hernán Cortés landed with eleven ships, about a hundred sailors, five hundred and eight soldiers, sixteen horses, and fourteen artillery pieces. He had left Cuba in a hurry despite the opposition of the island's governor, and some of his troops were partisans of the latter. From the start, he avoided rousing antagonism among the coastal populations. After a few contacts, some of which were lethal, he was fortunate to find a Spaniard who had survived a shipwreck several years earlier and spoke the language of the Indians of the coast. This man became all the more invaluable that the young Indian who had served as a sort of interpreter had deserted the Spaniards and advised the Indians to attack them.

Like all conquerors, the Spaniards came as predators, but also as subjects of their sovereign king and as proselytes of the Christian faith symbolized by the pope. They were sure they were in the right, and their incentive was to find gold, glory, and honors.

Thanks to Cortés's diplomatic skills, relations with some of the indigenous communities were cordial and, as a token of peace, the Spaniards were given a score of Indian slaves. One of these, Malintzin (later christened Marina), would play a key role in the conquest.

The singular arrival of these intruders from the sea intrigued and worried the Aztec sovereign Moctezuma II, who dispatched emissaries to learn more about them.

Four worlds had preceded that in which the Aztecs lived, and each had been destroyed by a cataclysm. The fifth, like the preceding ones, was condemned to disappear at a date that had already been set. According to the Aztec calendar, the Spaniards had arrived in the year *ce Acatl*, or “1 Reed,” the same year in which the god Quetzalcoatl had been born and the year when he had later disappeared. A disconcerting coincidence, which had in fact been heralded by disastrous omens. Were these men come-from-the-sea actually gods?

Moctezuma’s emissaries—who communicated thanks to the shipwrecked Spaniard and Malintzin, who, an Aztec herself, spoke Nahuatl—were vividly impressed by the strangers’ appearance, their weapons and their horses—animals unknown to them—and the sound and the effect of the cannon, a demonstration of which they were given. They were both confused and dismayed.

The foreigners expressed their desire to meet with the Aztec sovereign; the request would be repeated several times, and each time, Moctezuma would evade it and try to dissuade those come-from-the-sea from meeting with him in Tenochtitlan, present-day Mexico City.

Malintzin, Cortés’s interpreter and lover (she would bear him a son, whom he would recognize as his), quickly learned Spanish, and gradually, thanks to her, Cortés and his companions would discover the Aztecs’ thinking, and conception of the world, whereas the Aztecs would learn virtually nothing about the Spaniards except that they were mortal and liked gold.

In the first days of August 1519, the ships were dismasted to prevent the governor’s partisans from going back to Cuba and to

make it clear that there was no other option than to forge ahead. The Spaniards began marching toward Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital. In six months, they lost forty-five men, mostly to disease or gangrene.

As they went forward, after winning a few armed clashes, the Spaniards realized that the Indian peoples under the Aztec yoke were suffering badly from Aztec tyranny. The Tlaxcaltecs, for instance, were forced to deliver hostages for a sacrificial holocaust in which their blood would nourish the sun. In the mid-twentieth century, Jacques Soustelle would write that out of death, the Aztecs generated life.<sup>1</sup> And this came with a toll.

In his march toward the empire's capital, Cortés had three hundred and sixty men and sixteen horses (he had left a garrison in Villa Rica de la Santa Cruz, a coastal city built by the conquistadors). The Spaniards emerged unscathed from an ambush in Cholula, within sight of the capital. Moctezuma received them with honors and in fear. Built on a marsh in the middle of a lake, the imposing city could only be entered by three roads that could be easily blocked. To make sure they would be safe, Cortés made the bold move of going first to Moctezuma with a small party, which through Malintzin, made the sovereign understand that he was to follow them to reside in their quarters. Moctezuma protested, but in vain. He was forced to yield to their demand, and the Spaniards were able to secure their way, albeit precariously.

The news then came that nearly a thousand men had landed on the coast, sent by the governor of Cuba to capture Cortés and his soldiers. (This was the expedition that brought smallpox onto the continent, and the epidemic would decimate the Indian populations.) Cortés rode out to meet them and managed, with a combination of diplomacy and coercion, to neutralize them and

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1 Soustelle, Jacques (1961), *Daily Life of the Aztecs on the Eve of the Spanish Conquest*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.



bring them around by luring them with the promise of the spoils of the conquest. The last week of August 1520, Cortés returned to Tenochtitlan with thirteen hundred soldiers and ninety-six horses. He found the city plunged into a bloodbath. The Spaniards who had remained there were facing a general uprising. Soon Moctezuma, who was seeking to parley with his people, was killed by a stone projectile. The Spaniards who were besieged in the city had no other choice but to escape, which they attempted to do on the night of June 30. This was the “*noche triste*” (sad night), when the Spanish lost half of their troops, three-fourths of their horses and all of their cannons. Cortés, his lieutenants, and Malintzin were safe.

The Spaniards had one last, very unfavorable battle to wage, but they managed to kill the chief of the Indian forces, which then had to give up fighting. Those who escaped took refuge among the Tlaxcaltecs.

The Aztecs were in the habit of fighting violent but short battles with few casualties, as their goal was not to kill but to take prisoners who would be used for human sacrifice. Their weapons were made of obsidian, so were very sharp but fragile. For the Spaniards, wars were quite a different story. No one was spared on the battlefield; the point was to destroy and crush the enemy, no compromise possible. War to the death it was; you either conquered or you died. On the Indian side, only the first rank fought and there was little discipline. The Spanish, on their side, led surprise attacks, fought by night, and used terror. Above all, their horses gave them impact power previously unknown to the Indians. Once they are struck at the top, highly vertical societies such as the Aztecs’—or the Incas’ in Peru—go to shambles.

Beaten but not defeated, Cortés prepared a second campaign. He had thirteen brigantines built, about fifteen meters long, with sails and oars and a twenty-five-to-thirty-man capacity. The vessels

were carried in parts by their Tlaxcaltec allies then assembled and shipped along a canal a little more than a mile long and thirteen feet wide. This was aimed to establish a naval blockade, and on the ground, the Spaniards advanced on foot or on horse along the three entry roads.

The Spanish forces were made up of some nine hundred men, including ninety horsemen and one hundred and twenty harquebusiers and crossbowmen, plus thirty large artillery pieces and fifteen small ones. Sixty-two Spanish soldiers were sacrificed on the pyramids. In all, of the Spanish forces disembarked in Mexico between 1519 and 1521, sixty percent died either from disease or in combat. Indian losses were considerable but difficult to quantify. Probably more than a hundred thousand. After a three-month siege, thousands of Tlaxcaltec warriors joined in the combat. The city's freshwater aqueduct was destroyed. The blockade was meant to starve the city, which was also being devastated by smallpox. After the new monarch was captured, the Aztecs surrendered.

The asymmetry inherent to the conquest of Mexico was also found in that, more complex, of Peru.

### **The conquest of Peru**

When Francisco Pizarro landed on the coast of Peru in 1532, it was his third expedition and he hoped that this would be the one to succeed. He was about fifty years old, the age of a veteran. With him, he had less than a hundred and sixty men, including sixty-two horsemen. The Spaniards climbing the Andes were unaware that they were lucky to intervene when a civil war was raging. The two sons of the Inca had been disputing the empire. One of them, Atahualpa, had just won; he knew about the Spaniards and of their small numbers.

The Spaniards' arrival in Peru, like in Mexico, is said to have been preceded by omens of disaster. Most of all, the god Viracocha was supposed to have announced the end of the Inca world and the destruction of the empire under the rule of the twelfth Inca, and the eleventh sovereign was the father of Atahualpa and his brother.

These omens and predictions may have also been invented *ex post facto* to explain the cataclysm ...

On November 16, 1532, the Spaniards, after having climbed the Andes, found themselves in the town of Cajamarca, where they designed one of the most daring ambushes in history. They would soon capture the Inca alive when he was standing in the middle of the town plaza surrounded by his warriors. Indeed, the day before, a small party of Spanish horsemen with an interpreter had invited the Inca to meet in peace, to exchange words and presents. The Spaniards had been waiting all night in a state of extreme tension.

The Cajamarca plaza lent itself to the plan. Three of its sides were flanked with low buildings that had many exits onto the plaza. The first two sheltered horses and riders. The third was occupied by Pizarro and some of his infantrymen.

On the fourth side of the plaza stood a tower where four small pieces of artillery were dissimulated, along with ten harquebuses and the rest of the infantrymen. All firing and attacks were to wait for Pizarro's orders.

The Inca, carried in a palanquin and surrounded by dignitaries and warriors, entered the plaza where Pizarro, the priest of the expedition, and a young Indian interpreter stood. The priest spoke and was probably trying to communicate the message of the Bible that he held in his hand. The Inca asked for the book, opened it, put it up to his ear in vain, shook it, and disdainfully threw it on the ground.

At that moment, Pizarro gave the agreed-upon signal, and the Spaniards charged on horseback after two cannons had ravaged the tight formations. The Indians' surprise turned to panic. While they were trying to flee, Pizarro and two dozen battle-hardened infantrymen attempted to seize the Inca. They turned over his litter and killed his escort. Pizarro commanded that the Inca not be struck, while the horsemen chased those who were fleeing and massacred them.

The plaza was now strewn with nothing but dead bodies. The Indians' rout was complete. Those fleeing did not stop to try to gather and fight back.

In just one blow and without knowing it yet, this handful of Spaniards had just overthrown an empire divided by a civil war, the victor of which they held at their mercy.

The Spaniards counted themselves and not one had been killed. How could they not believe that the grace of God had helped them to triumph? Later, when the Incas reorganized, they would seek to be done with the Spaniards. It would be too late. None of the uprisings would succeed.

The wars of conquest of the American continent in the first part of the sixteenth century were, without the slightest of doubts, models of asymmetrical wars. They show a clash of civilizations where the major weakness of the defeated lies in their worldviews, which are about the spirit. While the Aztecs were fearing the end of the world, they were facing conquerors sure of their faith and of their sovereign's grandeur. The God of the Christians, contrary to the gods of the Aztecs, could not be defeated, even if Spanish troops might be. The Spaniards' world did not carry concern for the future, contrary to that of the Aztecs, who saw an omen of disaster in the arrival "come from afar."

Added to this are the two previously mentioned major facts: the Spaniards, thanks to their interpreters (particularly Malintzin), knew what their adversaries were thinking while the latter would learn practically nothing about the Spaniards if not that they were mortal and that they liked gold. Moreover, the very concept of warfare was completely different on either side: mostly ritualized warfare for the Aztecs (the point was to take prisoners), and warfare that spared no one for the Spaniards. In Peru, Pizarro had learned the lessons of the conquest of Mexico: you need to seize the emperor, whose fall will precipitate that of a highly centralized pyramidal society. Later, when Westerners would attack other, less elaborate indigenous societies that did not have at their head a quasi-deified sovereign, resistance would be longer.

### *European colonial expansion*

When they first entered Asia in the sixteenth century, Europeans encountered civilizations with powerful empires. The small number of Portuguese, for instance, was just enough for them to secure fortified coastal towns like Goa or Malacca, but they would never control the hinterlands. Later, the Dutch would settle in Batavia (Jakarta) but would invade Java only gradually.

This became a completely different story in the nineteenth century, which was the great colonial century. The progress brought about by the industrial revolution, particularly to the military field, would allow Europeans, with very few troops, to win decisive victories over societies that were overwhelmed, unable to understand the source of their adversaries' superiority. From about 1765 to 1940, colonial wars were asymmetrical in that one of the sides had nearly absolute superiority over militarily and/or intellectually deprived societies. It would take time for the defeated

to assimilate the conceptual tools and the means of responding victoriously to the European challenge.

## Skirting Africa to invade Asia

Forty years before Christopher Columbus reached the threshold of the New World in 1453, the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire disappeared, a thousand years after the fall of Rome. Europe, taken over as far as the Danube by the Ottomans (in the fourteenth century), was seeing the scope of its trade relations shrink. The future Pope Pius II wrote at the time, deploring the fall of Constantinople: “What have we just lost, exactly? Undoubtedly, the sovereign city, the capital of the Eastern Empire... Alas, Christian religion, you who have formerly experienced such extension, how can you restrict yourself thus and weaken? You have lost one of your eyes.”<sup>2</sup>

With the entire southern coast of the Mediterranean, Anatolia, and the Balkans in Muslim hands, the Indian Ocean had been the great trade route for centuries. Now, in the mid-fifteenth century, it was out of the reach of the Catholic world. It was the Muslims’ prerogative from the coasts of Eastern Africa to the Maluku Islands. Beyond, the Indian Chola Dynasty thalassocracy ruled it for a while, and the Chinese fleet sailed on it for their long journeys to the coasts of Africa.

The westernmost part of Europe and what remained of central Europe, under Habsburg rule, seemed quite isolated. How could Europeans gain access to the spices they so coveted when the essence of trade was in Muslim hands? This was when the Portuguese, spearheaded by Henry the Navigator, sailed beyond the Cape Verde islands and ended up crossing the Cape of Good Hope (1478).

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2 “Lettre à Nicolas de Cues,” in Gérard Chaliand and Sylvie Mousset (2002), *L’Héritage occidental*, foreword by Le Goff, Jacques, Odile Jacob, Paris.

Soon, thanks to the services of a Muslim pilot, Vasco da Gama landed in India (1498). Christopher Columbus, a Genoan sponsored by the Spanish Catholic Monarchs, reached the West Indies and the American continent in 1492. In 1519, the same year in which Cortés invaded Mexico, the Portuguese navigator Pedro Álvares Cabral arrived in Brazil. In 1522, Ferdinand Magellan's expedition succeeded in its circumnavigation of the Earth, an unprecedented achievement.

It was high time for Europeans to break their land-side isolation. In 1529, the Ottomans besieged Vienna.<sup>3</sup> Not only did this break their isolation, but the papacy divided the world, a world unknown to it, between the Spaniards and the Portuguese!<sup>4</sup> The latter occupied a series of fortified towns in Asia, from Goa to Macau, but their low numbers and lack of cavalry prevented them from occupying the hinterlands.

Europe's colonial—and exploratory—expansion proceeded in several stages. That of the Portuguese, who set up trading posts around Africa: Guinea, Cape Verde, Angola, Mozambique, Goa and Diu, and, beyond, Malacca (1511). On the American continent, the huge area of Brazil (1519) would be preserved in one piece once it was taken over. On the Spanish side, expansion was reduced in Asia to the Philippines (1564) but was considerable on the American continent: from California to the south of Chile and Argentina, and two viceroyalties, in Mexico and in Peru. This would be a lasting conquest on the American continent for the Spaniards and the Portuguese. Most of the New World speaks Spanish or Portuguese and practices Catholicism. At the very end of the fifteenth century,

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3 <sup>v</sup>The medieval concept of Christendom faded into the background to make room for the interests of dynastic states. To counter the Habsburgs, King Francis I of France formed an alliance with the Ottoman Empire.

4 Through the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) and especially, the Treaty of Zaragoza (1529).

the naval forces were boosted by a series of innovations. The last of the galleys would be seen in the Battle of Lepanto in 1571.

It was in the early seventeenth century that the Portuguese would be supplanted in Southeast Asia by the Dutch (Batavia, 1619), in turn later unseated by the English. The latter landed in Calcutta in 1690 with their East India Company and soon went on to conquer the hinterlands. Contrary to all the land-borne invaders who in the course of history had swarmed in from the northwest, they unexpectedly arrived by sea from the northeast. They would benefit from the decline of the Mughal Empire, the country's divisions, and their weapons superiority. In India, they clashed with the French, but Great Britain provided better support, and they would take over Bengal and the eastern coast despite General Joseph-François Dupleix's efforts. In 1763, France signed the Treaty of Paris, recognizing its defeat in India and in Canada.

In Europe, Great Britain started the industrial revolution alone. This enabled it to take precedence over its competitors and establish its maritime and commercial hegemony at the expense of Holland and France. In 1788, it opened the first penitentiary on Australian territory, starting a process of occupation of the island continent. Shortly after the Napoleonian wars, it dominated a large part of India up to Delhi by playing on local divisions, using force against the Maratha Empire, and leaving potentates in power when they were cooperative. With Singapore (1819) and Malacca (1824) it established its control over the Indian Ocean. On route to India, it pushed the Dutch colonists, who had settled in the Cape since 1640, to the north (the Great Trek, 1836-1840), and to the Orange Free State and the Transvaal.

After its repression of the "Indian Rebellion," a mutiny led by the mostly Muslim Sepoys (1857), Great Britain took direct charge of the administration of the Indies, thus contributing to the country's unity. As of the second half of the nineteenth century, the Indies,



which at the time comprised India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Sri Lanka and a few small Himalayan states, were held by some seventy thousand Britons. A dense railway network connected the country and English became the language of the elites.

While a few Western European nations were taking over the world by the seas, including France in India and in North America, starting in 1556 Russia, under Ivan the Terrible, pushed back the Mongolian Khanates with its guns and began its advance to the Pacific in territorial continuity: Tomsk (1604), Irkutsk (1652), and Nerchinsk (1656).

After having secured its domination over the Kazakh steppes (eighteenth century), Russia pressed on toward the provinces of the Rivers Amur (1858) and Ussuri (1860). The conquest of Turkestan was achieved without difficulty: Samarkand (1868) then Khiva (1875). This was not the case in northern Caucasus, where Imam Shamil's resistance in the mountains of Dagestan and of neighboring Chechnya lasted more than twenty years (1834-1859).

Great Britain, once it had secured its domination in India, forced the government of Beijing to accept importing opium. As the Chinese expressed reservations about this, Great Britain declared war on China (1840-1842). Hong Kong was occupied, and other ports, including Shanghai, would be opened. Unequitable treaties were signed shortly after a new Chinese defeat following the capture of Beijing by the British and the French (1860). The Taiping revolt was crushed (1864). The Russians occupied one million square miles of the Manchu Empire and founded Vladivostok (1875). France, after its difficult conquest of Algeria (1830-1847), undertook that of Vietnam and Cambodia, and came to dominate the Indochinese peninsula (1862-1885).

Except for a few buffer states, like Siam, Afghanistan, and Tibet, Asia was colonized or semi-colonized, like China and even Persia,

while after 1878, the Ottoman Empire, insolvent, only survived because Great Britain did not want to have Russia occupying the straits.

Only Japan escaped the “white peril” at a time when the “yellow peril” was being raised as a threat. When in 1853, Americans and Europeans were demanding that Japan open its ports, Emperor Meiji (1866-1912), supported by two samurai clans, overturned the Tokugawa shogunate (1868) and decided to Europeanize Japan to help it resist against foreign dominion. This included modernizing the army, which allowed Japan to defeat China in 1895.

To Asians’ amazement, the war between Russia and Japan over Manchuria was won by Japan (1904-1905), and on top of that Japan won a battle against the Russian fleet in the Tsushima Strait (1905). Korea soon became a Japanese colony (1910).

This victory of an Asian country that had forced itself to learn from the European school had important repercussions in Asia, although no other nation seemed able at the time to follow the Japanese example.

## **The conquest of Africa and the role of Islam**

The fate of Africa was sealed in 1884 at the Berlin Conference.

Sub-Saharan Africa, the hinterlands of which had been recently explored by Barth, Livingstone, Stanley, Burton, Speke, Faidherbe, and others, was divided up among the European powers.

Except for Morocco and Libya, North Africa had already been overrun.<sup>5</sup> Algeria and Tunisia by France, Egypt by Great Britain (1882).<sup>6</sup> Muhammad Ali, the viceroy of Egypt and an exceptional

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5 The Senussi brotherhood of Libya (Cyrenaica) spread its rigorous piety to Lake Chad.

6 The fact that the mosque of Algiers was turned into a cathedral was experienced as a sacrilege (1832).

modernizer, had gained control of Syria and the holy places of Islam. While he was hoping to take power in Constantinople, he was summoned by the Europeans, with England at their head, to give up his ambitions or be evicted from Egypt. The Suez Canal became the shortest road to the Indies.

What is important to point out is that by that time Islam had been present for a long time in sub-Saharan Africa through conquests (Morocco) and trade (Tombouctou, Agadez, Ghadamis), not only in a very large part of the west, but also in the east of Africa, from the coasts of the Horn of Africa to Zanzibar and beyond, as far as Kilwa (present-day Tanzania). Swahili (close to Arabic) was, and still is the vernacular language of eastern Africa.

Besides, at the end of the eighteenth century, that is, a century before the European colonial period in Africa, Islam was on the move. There was the dynamic influence of Qadiriyya Sufism (born in Baghdad in the twelfth century) brought over from Egypt, predominant among the Fula of Sokoto (present-day Nigeria), and of the more populist Sufi order Tijaniyyah (founded in the nineteenth century), not to mention Wahhabi rigorism, also among the Fula and disseminated all over the African west: in Futa Djallon, Massina, Futa Tooro and in Hausa country, as well as among the Toucouleur people, and others.

At the margins of trade, which played a very important part in the Indian Ocean with Zanzibar as its epicenter (role of the Oman Sultanate and the Muslim Indian tradesmen), it should also be recalled that resistance to European penetration was very often led by Muslim movements.<sup>7</sup> It was Samori Ture who for a large part of the African west took on the title of Almami, commander of the believers, and attacked African “infidels” such as the Mandinka.<sup>8</sup> It

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7 El Hadj Umar Tall, Seku Amadu of Massina, Usman dan Fodio (Sokoto), Rabah in Bornu in Ubangi-Shari.

8 Person, Yves (1968), *Samori. Une révolution dyula*, IFAN, Dakar.

was Usman dan Fodio, a Fula, who established the Sokoto Sultanate, in the west of present-day Nigeria, not far from the border of Niger, and proclaimed a Jihad in 1804, before proclaiming himself Caliph (1810). The area that he dominated was larger than seven hundred fifty miles from east to west and included part of German Cameroon. Today, Boko Haram claims it as a model.

There was also, of course, resistance from the animists, who were millenarian movements in southern Africa (the Ndebele against the Shona, 1896-1897), and there were revolts, like that of the Herero people in the southwest of Africa, which were very fiercely repressed by the Germans (1904-1907). Overall, however, most resistance movements were Islamic, like that of the Maji Maji (1905-1906) in German Tanganyika and more particularly the Mahdist movements in Sudan, initially directed against the Egyptian Khedive and the Ulama before rising against the English in Darfur. The Mahdists were decimated at the Battle of Omdurman (in 1898, by General Sir Herbert Kitchener). The “Mad Mullah,” as the British called him, then took up the torch in Somalia, where the revolt lasted a quarter of a century.

### **The last major armed migration**

Between the sixteenth century and the first part of the twentieth, colonial wars were the vector of the last major armed migration known to the world since the Mongolians’ blitz expansions of the thirteenth century and that of Arab Islam from the Atlantic Ocean to the stairways to India and Turkestan. This European expansion, achieved with relatively few forces, would endure on the American continent and take Europe all the way to Vladivostok, while the British were also taking over Australia and New Zealand. Between the end of the eighteenth century and World War I, the whole of

Asia was colonized or semi-colonized, and Africa, with a few rare exceptions, was entirely occupied.

The colonizing troops' weapons superiority was an important factor of success, but as previously mentioned, this is not enough to explain the Europeans' (or US) victories. There was also troop discipline and cohesion, and their officers' knowledge. Above all, there was the fact that *the adversaries, after the industrial revolution and its consequences, had very poor knowledge of their attackers* (only the Boers in South Africa knew their British adversary well).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Great Britain ruled over five hundred million subjects, or thirty percent of the planet's population, and about one-fourth of the globe's surface area. Russia controlled about ten million square miles. The whole of Africa and Asia, except for Japan, was under direct or indirect European domination.

During the nineteenth century, the share of Europeans in the world population doubled with nearly sixty million Europeans having emigrated, mostly to the American continent. In 1900, Europe, with its population of four hundred thirty million, was responsible for sixty percent of world production (the United States for thirty percent). With the increase in industrial production and the development of communications, the tonnage of merchant marines, with steam having replaced sails, had doubled just before 1914 while worldwide, the railway network had quintupled. The Trans-Siberian Railway reached Vladivostok in 1902.

A new form of globalization was in action. Europe (Germany, Great Britain, France, and Italy) was the matrix of scientific innovation. Ideas born in Europe were disseminated, including that of modern nationalism (the nation state was born in France in 1792), carrying with them the seeds of the death of territorial empires. Fire power became greater during the American Civil War

(1861-1865) and in Europe with the Battles of Sadowa (1866) and Sedan (1870), making mass warfare particularly deadly, as would be brutally discovered in 1914. Meanwhile, the machine gun, invented in the second half of the nineteenth century, became the major instrument of colonial conquests.

Great Britain had imposed itself as the colonial power par excellence, followed by France and Russia. The Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and somewhat later Italy also become colonial powers, albeit more modest ones. This avalanche of success in the second part of the nineteenth century brought about the coining of the term “social Darwinism,” or survival of the fittest, apparently the “whites,” whose civilization was considered superior. Actually, the modernity expressed through the consequences of the industrial revolution was not the exclusive prerogative of the “white race,” as shown at the time by the example of Japan.

For a long time voluntarily isolated, the United States, once their hinterland was conquered, wished to push Europe out of the Western hemisphere (opposition to the French in Mexico under Napoleon III). In 1898, the United States evicted Spain from the Caribbean and even from the Philippines, which would be their only colony until 1945. The Panama Canal (1903) belonged only to the United States, while Alaska had been purchased from Russia (1867). In fact, the Western hemisphere was under US hegemony. Whatever their economic and financial power, the United States, whose population bordered on eighty million, had taken only a marginal part in Europe’s encroachments all over the world (China, intervention in Beijing in 1900).

The whole of Africa was occupied except for Liberia, where former African American slaves had set themselves up as masters. Colonialism and semi-colonialism reigned both in Asia and in Africa. It was a golden age for the rich, while the many revolts were being crushed.



# THE WEST'S ADVANTAGE

Despite a few battles lost in Afghanistan, in South Africa, and in Tonkin, Europeans triumphed in all the wars and conflicts they waged in Asia, Africa, and Oceania. What was the basis of the West's advantage? The importance of weapons superiority cannot, of course, be underestimated. The percussion-cap rifle, which was loaded from the front, was replaced by rifles loading from the breech (1860) and soon by the repeating rifle. In particular, the Gatling gun (1862) was followed by the powerful Maxim machine gun, which demonstrated its dreadful effectiveness against waves of determined attackers, like in Omdurman (Sudan, 1898). Fire was killing massively. In the second part of the nineteenth century if not earlier, European troops, except in the event of a surprise, were out of the reach of missile weapons and even of the type of fire arms being used in most societies. But the colonial wars, considered at the time as minor, were successful far beyond the limited means committed to them. Outside of the weaponry, what were the factors explaining these achievements?

## *Factors of success*

### **Qualitative superiority**

The conquered peoples, wherever they were, knew little or nothing at all about their invaders. Whence did they draw their superiority? Even societies that had known Europeans before the industrial revolution were surprised by the continent's leap. In 1683,



the Ottomans had besieged Vienna and superiority was theirs. But at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Europeans, whether the Habsburg or the Russian troops, had become qualitatively superior to them. The German army, even before the Battle of Sedan, became the model for the Ottoman army, which included an instructor called Helmut von Moltke. The Europeans' lead was not just explained by technique or fire power. The Ottoman officers sent to the German war schools were getting only and strictly military training, but nothing of the ideas that prepared Europe's rise in the nineteenth century.

### **A divided adversary**

The societies confronting the European forces were divided. India was a major example. England, who had overpowered it through Bengal, was progressing in leaps and bounds, taking advantage of the existing divisions. These societies were either declining, as were those in China in the mid-nineteenth century, or had been reined in, as in Muhammad Ali's Egypt, or were simply backward from the material point of view. The conquering momentum, on the contrary, was encouraging the European nations, who were sure of themselves, competitive, and predatory.

Opposite them, their adversaries, save for a very few exceptions, had neither external support, nor sanctuary.<sup>9</sup> And these were two major conditions for guerrilla warfare to endure.

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<sup>9</sup> For a while, Morocco supported Abdelkader El Djezairi, who was leading a struggle against the French in Algeria.

## *First-hand knowledge of the field and the adversary*

The British “Indian Army” was made up of volunteers, who when they joined it between 1815 and 1847, were committed to twenty-one years of service. After 1847, commitment to military service was reduced to twelve years. Thereafter, it was further reduced to six years of active duty and six years on reserve.

*Indian Army officers were the only ones authorized to go to Great Britain during their active life, and only after having served ten years.*

All of this explains that the body of officers were well rooted in an environment that became part of their existence, for which they came to acquire first-hand knowledge of the field and possibly the language, and in any case, of how local society worked, its codes, and how to handle them.

When Lord Kitchener, the first Governor General of Sudan, was replaced in 1899 by General Sir Francis Reginald Wingate (one of Thomas Edward Lawrence’s mentors) who remained in office until 1916, the latter instituted the Sudan Political Service. The administrators of this body were recruited in Great Britain and spent their whole career in Sudan.<sup>10</sup>

A system such as this, strengthened by the Victorian mindset, explains and provides keys to an era very distant from ours. As indicated by William Carson, a colonel in the US Marines: “We did not wage war in Vietnam for eight years, we waged a one-year war eight times.”<sup>11</sup> This era ended with the Indochina War (1954),

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10 Holt, P.M., Ann K. Lambton, and Bernard Lewis (eds.) (1970), *The Cambridge History of Islam*, Volume II A, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 361.

11 Carson, William M. (1968), *The Betrayal*, Norton, New York.

which had been waged by long-term volunteers who were relatively rooted in the environment in which they fought.

### **Time and wars of attrition**

Time, as a factor, plays today against Westerners, who are in a hurry to end any sort of fighting because of public attention. During the colonial wars, time weighed, on the contrary, in favor of the conquerors. For isolated traditional societies having no external support, a war of attrition was costly. If necessary, their harvests were destroyed and their cattle were decimated. This scorched-earth policy was applied in India by Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, in Algeria by Thomas Bugeaud, and in the Caucasus (Dagestan) by Aleksey Yermolov.

### **Faraway public opinion**

Public opinion before World War I was not very well informed on these faraway conflicts.<sup>12</sup> They were either indifferent, or sometimes proud of the victories when these flattered national pride. As for the Second Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902) in South Africa, it was followed with passion (British testimonies by Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, and Winston Churchill). It is true that it was a war between “whites.” At the time, hardly any testimonies regarding the adversaries were brought to the attention of the public.

These irregular wars, usually waged by very limited forces, were somewhat scorned by the military or by politicians who were concerned with national competitions in Europe. *It would be some time before the considerable sociological changes produced indirectly by*

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12 In Marseilles, a seaside memorial stone reads: “In tribute to our heroes who died in the East and in faraway lands.”

*these apparently minor conflicts were noticed.* Only very recently has some attention been directed to battles formerly considered as “decisive” (John F.C. Fuller). This is why nothing could be found on the Spanish conquest of Mexico, which could be rightly said to have been decisive. Nothing, either, on the very important Arab victories at the Battles of Yarmuk (636) and Qadisiyah (637), which would lastingly impose Islam in Syria at the expense of the Roman Byzantine Empire, and in Iran by causing the fall of the Sasanian Empire.<sup>13</sup>

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13 Blin, Arnaud (2014), *Les Batailles qui ont changé l'histoire*, Perrin, Paris.

## *Importance of the demographic factor*

In the range of reasons explaining the changes that we have experienced, how could we not emphasize the demographic dimension? At the end of the nineteenth century, China and the British Indian Empire were, as they had always been, the world's two most populated areas. The Indian Empire, which included as previously mentioned Pakistan, Bangladesh, Burma, Sri Lanka, and a few small Himalayan states, was under Great Britain's dominion. China, which had suffered a military defeat by Japan (1895), had been humiliated for several decades by "unequal treaties" giving free access to its main ports, which were under the jurisdiction of foreign powers. Russia had expanded its borders through territorial continuity by appropriating one million square miles formerly under the Manchu Empire's rule. Outside of the two demographic giants, one subjected to Europe and the other humiliated by unequal treaties, the demography of Asia and Africa's countries was very low. The most populated Asian country after China and British India was Japan, with a population of forty-five million at the beginning of the twentieth century, which by beating Russia on sea and on land rose to the rank of industrial power soon-to-be colonial power.

Most populated states in 1900  
except China and British India (in millions)

Russia	135
United States	76
Germany	64
Austria - Hungary	46
Japan	45
Great Britain	41
France	39
Indonesia	38

In 1900, six Western countries were among the ten most populated countries (see table). At the time, Brazil had a population of eighteen million and Nigeria seventeen million, that is, together, the population of Italy at that time. The population of the entire continent of Africa was just one hundred ten million. Latin America, seventy-five million. Asia, minus China and India, some two hundred fifty million. Europe, Russia included, and North America bordered on five hundred million. This gives a better measure of the difference between this period and the world we know now. In fact, in their crushing majority, the colonial conquests were of countries with populations of no more than three to five million, often less. The population of the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, and Transjordan) in 1920, when it was divided between French and British Mandate less than a century ago, stood under ten million (against seventy-five million today). Just before its fall (1920), the Ottoman Empire, which included the

whole of the Arab Levant and the coast of Arabia down to Yemen, ruled over twenty million subjects. Today, Turkey alone has seventy-eight million inhabitants.

Twenty most populated countries in 1950 and their numbers in 2014 (millions) [Source: 2014 Yearbook of the United Nations]

	<b>1950</b>	<b>2014</b>
China	557	1373
India	368	1250
Soviet Union	180	Russia 144
United States	152	323
Japan	84	127
Indonesia	80	255
Brazil	53	204
Great Britain	51	63
West Germany	50	Germany 82
Italy	47	61
France	42	67
Bangladesh	42	158
Pakistan	40	191
Spain	28	46
Vietnam	28	94
Mexico	27	120
Poland	25	38
Nigeria	23	177

Philippines	21	101
Turkey	21	78

In 2025, or in less than ten years, the world population will have topped eight billion:

- Africa, credited in 1950 with approximately 230 million, or 9% of the world population, will border on 1.5 billion, or 18% of the world population. A very high share of the population growth will take place in sub-Saharan Africa.

- Asia will go from 1.4 billion (1950), or 55%, to 4.75 billion, or 59%.

- Latin America will go from 170 million (1950), or 7%, to 690 million, or 8%.

- The United States and Canada will go from 172 million (1950), or 7%, to 690 million, or 5%.

- Europe will go from 550 million (1950), or 22%, to 740 million, or 9%. The share of European population will collapse.

Since about fifteen years ago and for about the next fifteen years, the population share of sub-Saharan Africa has been increasing and is set to double. This demographic pressure on a labor market with no prospects is destructive. Despite some encouraging figures, a number of countries, if not the majority of them, will have neither the means, in terms of economic growth, to provide employment, nor the necessary infrastructure to school new generations. Wealth there is highly concentrated at the top, and the middle class, in the majority of these countries, is very narrow. Massive emigration will not be possible. Everything seems to indicate today that sub-Saharan Africa will be in the coming period one of the world's areas both most unstable and most favorable to the propagation of Islamist ideology, both in West Africa and in East Africa.



Islamism, in the area where Islam was established long ago and has been instrumentalized for decades by Wahhabi preachers or the Muslim Brotherhood, will be the way out for the marginalized. Eastern Africa and the African west will be affected, and what has recently occurred in the Central African Republic (a minority Muslim government oppressing a majority of Christians, leading France to intervene militarily), is just a harbinger. Already, as a consequence of the intervention in Libya, the Sahel is being affected by this drive. This is also the case in the northern periphery of Nigeria, in particular in the Hausa region (Niger and Cameroon). In eastern Africa, Sudan, Kenya, and northern Tanzania, are candidates for increasing Islamic agitation.

As a protest ideology, Islamism has taken over from the Marxist Leninism of former times.

Although in 1900 thirty-three percent of the globe's population lived in Europe, the United States and Canada, by 2025, at best, this will be a fourteen percent share. The persistent importance of the European-US model is due to the illusion of the United States' "soft power" and the continued influence of its movie and television industries, and so on, but the blonde, blue-eyed Hollywood star is a rapidly disappearing species.

There is nothing ultimately surprising in the fact that public opinion in western and central Europe, and in the United States and Canada, does not want its soldiers, be they volunteers, to die or to risk dying in theaters that do not seem of vital importance and where victory is anything but certain.

In Europe, a long period of peace, safety, and relative prosperity, and the fact that the continent has essentially depended on US military protection have contributed to a sharp reduction in military budgets when others are building up their fire power, and

eagerness to fight has lost its edge.<sup>14</sup> This process, particularly in certain countries including France, has been aggravated by excessive assistance of states anxious to prolong social peace as long as possible.

As for the West in general, whatever the dynamism of the United States, it is paradoxically characterized by its recent denial of death and singular reluctance, partly due to the aging of its populations.

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14 Desportes, Vincent (2015), *La Dernière Bataille de France*, Gallimard, Paris.



## COLONIZATION AND “SMALL WARS”

Conventional wars—those seeking battle and ultimately, whatever the tactical approaches, frontal clash until one of the protagonists is defeated—have been rare since the end of World War I.

After the Chinese civil war (1945-1949), the few conventional wars have been: the Korean War (1950-1953), the Arab-Israeli wars (1948, 1956, 1967, 1973), the Indo-Pakistani wars (1948, 1965, 1971), the Falkland War (1982), even the short Russian-Georgian confrontation (2008), as well as a few battles, the most famous of which is that of Diên Biên Phu (1954). Others were waged, briefly, on the Himalayan heights between Chinese and Indian troops (1962), the Soviets and the Chinese at the Ussuri River (1969), and at the Chinese-Vietnamese border (1979).

Guerrilla warfare, or “small wars,” which in ancient times was never, with one exception, the subject of a treatise, has however not once in world history ceased to be a widely used form of combat: during peasant uprisings; by movements of resistance to foreign invaders, in particular during the constitution of empires (Roman, Ottoman, Napoleonian, and so on); and in civil wars, most often religion-based.<sup>15</sup>

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15 The one treatise devoted to “small wars” is *De Velatione*, attributed to Nikephoros Phokas, a general who became Byzantine Emperor Nikephoros II (963-969).

## *The reappearance of guerrilla warfare*

The reappearance of guerrilla warfare in modern times stems from the vast armies stirred up by revolutions and empires, which, contrary to mercenary armies, live and are supplied on the field. Napoleon, for instance, to gain in mobility and speed, eliminated the food train, which was slow. Supplies were no longer at the rear but at the front, where the troops' needs were being provided from the country. But what worked in countries like Austria or northern Italy became problematic in poor countries like Spain or Russia.

Added to the poverty and the absence of surplus was the religious dimension. In Spain, priests played a significant role through their opposition to a revolution considered contrary to Catholic faith, while in Russia the French were regarded as representing the "Antichrist," to use Tsar Alexander's expression. The losses caused among the French by the Spanish guerrilla supported from Portugal by the English (Wellington), would be substantial.

In the County of Tyrol, there was the traditional rejection of mountain dwellers protective of their independence.

In Russia, the losses caused by the cold during the final weeks of Napoleon's retreat were considerable. Added to this were the deaths and casualties of the Battle of Borodino (Moscow, 1812) as well as the many victims of Cossack harassment.<sup>16</sup>

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16 Davidov, Denis (2012), *Essai sur la guerre de partisans*, introduction by Gérard Chaliand, Astrée, Paris.

## Theorizing guerrilla warfare

The literature devoted to guerrilla warfare itself—and not to light infantry forces used to badger the enemy—was born in the early nineteenth century. The Frenchman Jean-Frédéric-Auguste Le Mière de Corvey and the German Carl von Clausewitz are among the most remarkable theorists of irregular warfare.<sup>17</sup> Here is what the former wrote:

“The goal of a partisan corps is to have at all times an impressive enough force to worry the enemy, to be able to take it everywhere needed to badger the enemy unceasingly, undermine it little by little, prevent its provision of supplies, destroy its convoys, abduct them, take its dispatches, intercept its communications, and surprise all the isolated men one runs into. This war, when well waged, led by a skilled commander, will raise terror among the enemy, who will occupy cities in vain, and as it will need to cross roads to communicate with one another, it will be attacked on the roads; it will have to sustain combat at every gorge; it will no longer dare to let a carriage out without an escort; it will tire out its troops, will not be able to recruit, and will be destroyed, little by little, without any great loss at any one time.”

As for Clausewitz, who as a Prussian patriot took part in the War of 1812 alongside the tsar, he regarded irregular combatants as auxiliary forces to a regular army. Basically, as partisans. Because partisans act on the margins of a regular army with classic irregular-army techniques: mobility, surprise, harassment.<sup>18</sup> Guerrilla warfare,

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17 Le Mière de Corvey, Jean-Frédéric-Auguste (1823), *Des partisans et des corps irréguliers, etc.*, Anselin et Pochard, Paris; Clausewitz, Carl von (1997), *On War*, Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, Wordsworth Editions Ltd., Ware, UK. See also: Clausewitz, Carl von (1966), “Meiner Vorlesungen über den Kleinen Krieg”, in *Schriften – Aufsätze – Studien – Briefe*, Werner Hahlweg, Göttingen.

18 This is admirably covered by Davidov, op. cit.

born more or less spontaneously through the movement of a social, religious (Vendée uprising in France), or patriotic revolt, can be waged on its own.

### **On the ground...**

This is, generally speaking, what would be met by colonial troops, limited in numbers, frequently at a one-to-ten ratio, fighting in a square formation, with discipline and cohesion, and indisputably more powerful armament than their adversaries'. It should definitely be added that the first enemy, especially in the tropics, was disease, including the fevers. The advent of quinine at the time was of unparalleled help. The tropics were daunting. Wounds degenerated into gangrene and diseases caused three times more victims than combat.

Designed for conventional warfare, European armed forces had to adapt to the ground. It was Bugeaud who, benefiting from his own experience in Spain, imposed as of 1844 a strategy adapted to the conditions, which included making the army train shorter, mobile columns, a network of points of support, and the particular brutality so often adopted in the colonial conflicts.

In Great Britain, Field Marshal Wolseley, one of the most outstanding colonial soldiers, published for the first time a small practical handbook adapted to colonial conflicts: *The soldier's pocket-book for field service* (1871). But of course, at war, decisions are wrested on the ground. The British had, in addition to the great Wolseley who was present on every field of battle, Jardine in China, Field Marshal Frederick Roberts in Afghanistan, General Sir Herbert Kitchener in South Africa, while the French, with General Louis Faidherbe and above all, Captain Joseph Gallieni and General Hubert Lyautey, developed a brand new counterinsurgency corps.

## *From guerrilla warfare to counterinsurgency*

The first work on small wars as seen from the counterinsurgency angle was written by the British Major-General Sir Charles E. Callwell.<sup>19</sup>

Although small wars drew attention in Europe between the events in Spain and, to a lesser extent, in Russia, not much more was written on irregular wars because it was no longer being practiced, except marginally in Poland and Italy. After Sadowa and Sedan, the major military event since the Napoleonian period was the sudden rise of Germany.

Colonial conflicts or wars were often brief operations, though repeated (they were seldom finished in certain areas, usually mountainous ones), and counterinsurgency was a critical part of them.

With small troops, hence few losses, the European powers conquered India and Burma, humiliated China, and after that, occupied Sudan, southern Africa, New Zealand (the British), Algeria, the African west, Madagascar, Vietnam (the French), or central Asia and the Caucasus (the Russians).

Lost battles were rare: Afghanistan (1842), Isandlwana (South Africa, 1879) against the remarkably disciplined Zulus, and Majuba Hill (South Africa, 1881) against the Boers on the British side; Lạng Sơn (Tonkin, 1885) on the French side; Annual (Rif region, Morocco, on the Spanish side, 1922), and finally a war lost by the Italians in Abyssinia in 1896, which Mussolini would claim to avenge in 1935 by using mustard gas. It would be wrong, however, to believe these successful achievements to have been easy and final. Various societies, including those with martial traditions (in India,

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19 Callwell, Colonel Charles E. (1896), *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* (1896), His Majesty's Stationery Office, London.



those of the northwest, which was the route for ground invasions), fought back, sometimes fiercely. This was the case of the Maoris in New Zealand.

For the major colonial power in the Victorian era, examples of these difficulties were recurrent (see box).

### **British counterinsurgency wars**

Burmese Wars: 1824-1826; 1852-1853.

Wars against the Maoris: 1843-1848; 1860-1861; 1863-1864; 1868-1870.

Wars against the Sikhs (northwestern India): 1845-1846; 1848-1850.

The Great Mutiny (northern India of North) 1857-1859; mutiny in Bengal 1859-1862.

Wars against the Kaffirs (southern Africa): 1850-1852; 1880-1881.

Wars against the Basutos (southern Africa): 1851-1852; 1880-1881.

Wars against the Ashanti (Gold Coast, Ghana): 1863-1864; 1873-1874; 1893-1894; 1900-1901.

Wars against the Afghans: 1839-1842; 1878-1880.

War against the Zulus: 1879.

Wars against the Matabele (southern Africa): 1893; 1895-1896.

Wars against the Boers: 1880-1881; 1899-1902, the latter being a legendary war.

Wars in China: 1840-1842; 1856-1860; 1900 (Boxers).

Wars against Mahdism (Sudan): 1885; 1896-1898.

Conquest of northern Nigeria: 1897-1903.

Somalia: extended Mahdi resistance (the "Mad Mullah"): 1898-1920.

Campaigns were led almost yearly in the North West Frontier, and in Swat and Waziristan in the current border area between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

There are also many examples for the French penetration—Algeria was one of the most difficult conquests along with Tonkin (northern Vietnam)—or the much lesser known, virtually uninterrupted wars waged by Portugal in Angola.<sup>20</sup>

The Russians' imperial expansion was achieved based on territorial continuity as early as the sixteenth century by driving back the Mongolian advance. Later, in the eighteenth century, they had no difficulties in conquering the Kazakh steppes, and their conquest of central Asia (Kokand, Khiva, and Bukhara [1857-1882]) was effortless. Not that of the Caucasus, however, where the nature of the ground, the region's martial-arts traditions, and the role of Imam Shamil, who was a member of the Naqshbandi order, explain the long resistance sustained for more than a quarter of a century (1834-1859) against the Russian takeover.

### *Great figures of the colonization era*

The great figure of the French colonial period is Joseph Gallieni. He began his career as second lieutenant under General Faidherbe's orders in western Africa until 1888. He was assigned to Madagascar, then to Tonkin. It was there that he experimented with the "pacification" technique under the "ink blot" principle.<sup>21</sup> The idea

20 Pélissier, René (1977), *Les Guerres grises. Résistance et révoltes en Angola (1845-1941)*, 2 volumes, self-published.

21 The French expression used by Faidherbe, "*faire tâche d'huile*", which calls up the image of a spreading oil stain, was taken up by the United States in the twenty-first century as

was to expand gradually, starting from the controlled zone, in which significant economic improvements had been made and had been immediately felt.

“It is the combined action of politics and force that must result in the pacification of the country. . . . Political action is by far the most important; it draws its greatest strength from knowledge of the countries and their inhabitants; these are the goals toward which the first efforts of any territorial command must tend.”<sup>22</sup>

It was necessary, he wrote, “[to] develop as quickly as possible, the electricity-supply network. . . . It is certainly more thanks to roads and telegraphs that a colony is conquered, than to using troops. Money is never more quickly recovered than when it is thrown massively into spending on the first installations. A telegraph line is immediate savings in military manpower.”

From this point of view, however, the French were amazingly shy and parsimonious, especially when compared with the processes used by the English, for whom building telegraph lines was to be done, step by step, along with, if not preceding, penetration. The French, on the contrary, despite the means extensively made available to them by the existing state of science, were still waging colonial wars overall as they had been in the eighteenth century.

“In sum, for all colonial enterprises, like for every industrial enterprise, the first capital outlay must be as large and speedy as possible.”<sup>23</sup>

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the “ink blot” theory. According to *War Slang: American Fighting Words & Phrases Since the Civil War* (Dickinson, Paul [2003], Potomac Books Inc., Dulles VA), “ink blot” is the “[t]heory that hundreds of thousands of men had to spread out like an ink blot (alternatively like an ‘oil slick’) to ensure that ‘pacification’ was taking hold.”

22 Instructions given on May 22, 1898 relating to Madagascar.

23 Instructions given on May 22, 1898. Underlined by Gallieni. This brings to mind the summer of 2003, when US forces did not put in the means to restore electricity in Baghdad, despite the torrid summer heat.

No country was to be, on any account, directly administrated. Any organization more or less approaching direct administration would require staff in proportion with the population numbers, which would be impossible to deliver. The basis of the colonial regime was therefore to be a protectorate.

The general idea for the English was that in India, in Burma, “next to each indigenous chief a European agent [was] to be placed for supervision and control. But here, the difficulty [was] to react against the innate tendency among all the French to replace the local chief completely, down to every detail, and to indulge in direct administration.”

Hubert Lyautey, who remained in Morocco for a long time, had been under Gallieni’s orders in Madagascar and regarded himself as the spokesman of the latter’s methods.<sup>24</sup> At the time, in the French colonial army, officers were assigned to a given territory for only three years. Lyautey argued for them to settle lastingly in the country where they had gotten projects underway.

“No wonder there are not more officers studying the languages. How encouraging can it be to learn Madagascan if you won’t be using it anymore? Let officers stay assigned to the same colony if they wish to, as other nations are showing us...”<sup>25</sup>

In Morocco, Lyautey used the “ink blot” technique dear to Gallieni. Economic development was central to his strategy. During World War I, even though he was deprived of two-thirds of his military staff, who had been sent to the front, he preserved “the apparent contour of ground occupation” and waited for the European conflict to be settled, when he would isolate every mountain range with a solid front, marked with advances into the

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<sup>24</sup> See Lyautey, Hubert (1900), “Du rôle colonial de l’armée”, *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Vol. 157.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

valleys and the blocking of mountain passes (1919). He would leave Morocco after the failure of Abd el-Krim's great insurrection (1922-1926), which had begun in Spanish Morocco in the Rif region.

### *What was the human toll?*

On the whole, whatever the specific defeats or prolonged resistances, an idea of which is provided by reading the catalog of British colonial conflicts during the Victorian era (see table on page 58), the colonial wars produced, for considerable results, few human losses on the European side.

China itself was not able to resist, not in 1840-1842, nor in 1860, nor in 1900. France triumphed in Algeria and in Tonkin, as it did against Samori Touré in the African west. The Russians won in Daghestan despite the fierce resistance of Shamil's mountain people. After hard combat, the British succeeded in overcoming the Maoris in New Zealand and the Zulus in South Africa. Significant loss of lives occurred only in the war against the Boers, where the British declared more than twenty thousand dead (including many from injuries and/or disease).

Throughout the entire colonial period, Europeans played on ethnic, tribal, or religious divisions and used local back-up troops. The British Indian Army was exemplary in this respect.

The US Army, during its only colonial experience overseas, in the Philippines, regrouped the rural populations (1899-1902) before practicing the techniques they had used in their recent conflicts with native American Indians (1870-1890).

Colonial campaigns were waged, except in very few cases, with great brutality, and there was very little concern over the losses inflicted among the adversaries. The Germans were particularly

heavy-handed in their repression in Tanganyika of the (Muslim) Maji Maji rebellion (1905-1906) as they had already been when they nearly exterminated the Hereros (1904-1907) in the southwest of Africa. By 1907, little more than fifteen thousand out of eighty thousand Hereros had survived. General Lothar von Trotha, who was responsible for the genocide, was summoned back to Berlin.

This brief reminder of the nature and conditions of colonial wars helps to measure just how much, in the past decades, conceptions and perceptions in the West have changed. And, it should be added, *only in the West*. Gone are extreme repressions, massive massacres in good conscience, and Western public opinion's relative indifference of what might happen to populations of "color," or "savages." The last events of this kind that did not raise widely shared indignation go back, for France, to Sétif (1945) and the repression in Madagascar (1947).







PART II

# THE REVERSAL



## THE “CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS”

This expression was popularized by Samuel Huntington to indicate, shortly after the Cold War, that conflicts would henceforth be played out with Islamists and Confucians.<sup>26</sup> Actually, the clash of civilizations was related much more to what had been felt in the past, in the Asian and African worlds.

Only Japan was able to come up with an appropriate response to the danger of white imperialism, which was to learn from the European school. This was helped by its insularity, its national cohesion (all Japanese Catholics, previously evangelized by the Portuguese, perhaps three hundred thousand of them, had been eliminated), and by Emperor Meiji's ability, with the support of two samurai clans, to impose a revolution from the top on a highly disciplined society.

Elsewhere, the clash was experienced with distress and incomprehension. Why were these foreigners so powerful? Nonetheless, foreign domination not only brought humiliation and exploitation, it also spread, willy-nilly, radically new ideas. This was admirably summarized by a long, relevant text by Maxime Rodinson, who wrote:

“Europe, at the same time that it was digging its iron heel heavily into the peoples of the continent, was also showing something else. It was the oppressor's much-hated country. But at one time or another, it revealed a model, even several models of liberation. To the elites crushed by despotism and hopeless before it, the West

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26 Huntington, Samuel P. (1993), “The Clash of Civilizations?”, *Foreign Affairs*, summer, pp. 22-49.

exhibited a model of government in which all subjects could make actions in favor of their interests and aspirations felt institutionally. To all those who had been broken by so many centuries of resignation, it gave the example of a world of perpetual protest. As this face of the Western world unveiled, it was understood that fighting for a better state or society was possible.<sup>27</sup>

Discovery and adoption of the oppressor's values happened gradually, which means that several generations can be distinguished within the resistance movements.

### *The oppressor's values*

The first generation, in countries with a state tradition like Egypt, China, and Vietnam, could find no other response to the challenge of colonization than to take refuge in religious (Muslim) or moral (Confucian) values. In fact, these resistance ideologies were not good for taking up the challenge. Might the emperor have lost the "Mandate of Heaven"? Was the Muslim leaders' faith perhaps not strong enough? In any event, the elites often collapsed and it was in fact people from more modest backgrounds (provincial scholars among the Vietnamese, for example) who resisted.

The following, urbanized generation, among which some spoke the colonizer's language—after having studied in London, Paris, or Geneva—was better informed. It now knew that the colonizer's superiority was not due only to its weapons. The new elites attributed this superiority to their institutions: political parties, deliberative authorities such as parliament, a constitution, and so on. The early twentieth century was the time of the Constitutional

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27 Rodinson, Maxime (1972), "Marxisme et tiers-monde", in *Marxisme et monde musulman*, Seuil, Paris.

Revolution in Iran (1904-1911), the Young Turk revolution (1908), the Xinhai Revolution in China (1910) and, a little later, in Egypt, the foundation of the Wafd Party. These headways were more or less successfully achieved, but did not seem to be the key to the problem.

The third generation—including among others Gandhi, Hồ Chí Minh, Zhou Enlai, Sukarno, and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk—is the one to be credited with having understood the role of modern nationalism. It grasped the importance of a body of emancipatory ideas, and they saw no reason why these should be an exclusively European prerogative. But these avant-gardes were very much a minority, lacking grounding in the masses. How could these be mobilized?

### **The role of ideology**

In eastern Asia, the Bolshevik seeds of anti-imperialism resonated among the people and led to some severely repressed workers' uprisings in Canton and Shanghai in the mid-1920s. Marxism, in its Leninist version, offered a powerful innovation: the vanguard party. Lenin, in *What Is to Be Done?* (1902) calls up the need for a vanguard, a party of professional revolutionaries made up of intellectuals and semi-intellectuals intended to lead and organize the labor movement, which according to Lenin, was spontaneously more trade-unionist than revolutionary.

The image given of the world was otherwise undoubtedly a simplified one, but easily comprehensible and, above all, a mobilizing one. After many failures, the Chinese Communist Party, against the backdrop of the war against Japan (1937-1945), succeeded in changing into a daunting force and in ultimately being victorious in 1949, to everyone's surprise.

The effects of Leninism had been much less convincing in Western Asia. The Baku Congress (1920), which portrayed itself as anti-imperialist and invited peoples to free themselves from colonial subjection, went practically unheard in the East.

In India, Gandhi managed to mobilize a mass movement all the more difficult to counter that it was nonviolent. There were protests in Great Britain after troops fired on an unarmed crowd in Amritsar in 1919 and killed about four hundred demonstrators. This third generation, which included nationalists and Marxists (especially in eastern Asia), called the established order into question in increasingly organized ways and would turn against the colonizers the nationalist ideology that had been so useful to the latter for imposing their domination.

### *Effects of the Great War*

Already, shortly after World War I, while the colonial system was at its peak, harbingers of its possible decline had appeared, to which perhaps out of pure sufficiency, not enough attention was paid. This was the case for the Rif insurrection.

Abd el-Krim inflicted a severe defeat on the Spanish forces at Annual, in the Spanish Sahara (Rif region). About twelve thousand men were killed (1922)! In the years that followed, the Rif insurrectionists went largely beyond the perimeter held by Spain. In the spring of 1925, it opened the road to Fez. Out of some sixty-five outposts, the French troops had to evacuate about thirty of them in haste and lost a dozen. That year, Abd el-Krim's forces amounted to twenty thousand men and ten thousand back-up troops. They had about one hundred 75 mm field guns and machine guns taken from the enemy. To oppose this advance and counter Abd el-Krim, no less than a hundred thousand men were needed, with support of

artillery and aviation. Abd el-Krim surrendered the following year. But what was new was the extent of the means henceforth necessary to win, in singular contrast with those needed before the Great War.

During World War I, the western front was the main theater—the eastern front had collapsed as testified by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk while the Gallipoli (Dardanelles) Campaign had been a costly failure— in a classic conflict, where belligerents discovered just how much fire was lethal, and that applying the ‘*attaque à outrance*’ (all-out offensive) doctrine got nowhere while devouring men.

Guerrilla warfare, at the time, was playing only a very marginal part in secondary theaters. Two figures stood out in it: Thomas Edward (“T.E.”) Lawrence and Paul Emil von Lettow-Vorbeck. The first belonged to the winning side. “To the frontal offensive at all costs that prevailed at the time, the irregular soldier that was Lawrence substituted a dynamic use of space, thus changing into an advantage the weaknesses of the Bedouins, who were unfit for the cohesion of a disciplined shock troop. . . . His advantages: accurate intelligence to prepare effective raids, surprise, material superiority at a selected point (machine guns, mortar), and mobility.”<sup>28</sup>

Lawrence, a British agent dispatched by his state to try to exploit to the advantage of Great Britain the anti-Ottoman revolt being led by the Sharif of Mecca, carried out his mission remarkably well, with creativity and courage. Thereafter, he would transform it into a literary work.

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28 Lawrence, Thomas Edward (1920) “Evolution of a revolt”, *Army Quarterly of Defense Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, translated into French in 1992 under the title, *Guérilla dans le désert, 1916-1918*, with an introduction by Gérard Chaliand, Éditions Complexe, Brussels. The quote is taken from the introduction. See also: Lawrence, Thomas Edward (1922), *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, Book 3, Chapter 5, Oxford Times printing works, Oxford.



The second character, a Prussian officer, arrived in Tanganyika, then a German colony, with about two hundred German officers and two thousand local back-up troops, to face down one hundred fifty thousand men of the British army.<sup>29</sup> Using guerilla-warfare techniques, falling back when necessary to close-by Mozambique, he finished the war unvanquished and did not surrender until several weeks after the Armistice. He was welcomed in Germany as a hero. His testimony, a factual report, is very interesting but does not have Lawrence's literary genius. Moreover, he belonged to the losing side.

When World War I ended, the two major colonial states divided up most of defeated Germany's possessions: Tanganyika, the African southwest, Cameroon, and Togo in Africa, and all its island possessions in the Pacific.

### **The Sykes-Picot Agreement and Kemalist Turkey**

The Sykes-Picot Agreement (1916), which had planned a three-way division from which Bolshevik Russia was now excluded, was applied in its main features. In 1920, the Ottoman sultan signed the Treaty of Sèvres. This treaty was a compromise between what had been provided by Sykes and Picot, and US President Woodrow Wilson's will to add the granting of Armenia. And so a state, cut out on a map, was granted to the Armenians who had survived the mass killings of 1915-1916, which would be later designated as genocide.<sup>30</sup>

The Ottoman Empire, reduced to Turkey, was severed in the northeast of the future Armenia (which the survivors hardly

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29 Lettow-Vorbeck, Paul Emil von (1920), *Meine Erinnerungen aus Ostafrika*, Hase & Köhler, Leipzig.

30 It was the scale of these exterminatory massacres that inspired Raphael Lemkin during World War II to coin the word "genocide."

populated anymore and did not have the means to defend except in the event of a US mandate, as was President Wilson's intention) and in the southeast of Cilicia, which came under French protectorate.<sup>31</sup> As for the southwest, it came under the authority of Italy, a late-coming ally. The straits (to which the Russians had aspired) were controlled de facto by the British Empire. Meanwhile, the Greeks, concentrated on the Ionian coast, wished to widen, with military means, the settlement area that they had occupied around Smyrna for nearly three thousand years...

The treaty was accepted by the sultan, but Mustafa Kemal, the hero of Dardanelles, having gathered a national parliament in Ankara and having armed forces at his disposal, was opposed to it. The colonial dismemberment left to the Turkish state only a portion of territory in the northern center of the country.

Two years later, Mustafa Kemal reversed the situation by the force of arms. The Armenians were easily driven back around Erevan; the French, deprived of military means, were forced to leave Cilicia. The Greeks started an offensive with no logistics or political cohesion and collapsed while Smyrna went up in flames.

Mustafa Kemal established an officially homogeneous nation state, based on the European model—just like in its time Meiji's Japan had done. A population exchange of Greeks for Muslims was organized following the Treaty of Lausanne, giving birth to modern Turkey (1923). The caliphate was abolished in 1924, and Mustafa Kemal declared that Turkey was the exclusive country of the Turks. This is when the "Kurdish question" arose, involving about twenty percent of the population, whose only alternative was to assimilate or revolt.

In 1928, Turkey adopted a secular constitution, and Islam ceased to be the state religion. From 1925 to 1937, the Kurds rose up and

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31 Many Kurds populated this area, the same as Cilicia, handed over to France.

were repressed with the fiercest severity; they were deported and their region was left to deteriorate economically while being most of the time under siege.

## **The British and the French in the Near East**

During the war, the British had suggested the prospect of an Arab kingdom in the Near East. Faisal I, the Hashemite, would finally have to be content, not with Syria, which the French wanted at all costs, but with Iraq. Contrary to the Turks, the Arabs had no means to impose their will.

Iraq, which geographically covers Mesopotamia, was formed by the British out of three *vilayets* (provinces): Basra, Shia; Baghdad, mainly Sunni; and Mosul. This latter province was added to Iraq because Great Britain (unlike France) knew that it was an oil-producing area. It was Kurdish in its majority and included many Turkmens. From the start, the Kurds and the Shias went into dissidence while the British relied politically on the Sunni Arabs (approximately twenty percent of the population), a logical choice in a Muslim world, Sunni in its large majority and dominated by Great Britain from Egypt to India. Militarily speaking, the British back-up troops were Assyrians who, in the 1930s when the country had become independent, would pay a heavy price for their collaboration.

The severe casualties of World War I determined the British to utilize aviation, of very recent use, to subdue the rebellions. The Royal Air Force, in the early 1920s, was used in Iraq, in Afghanistan, in Darfur (Sudan), and in Somalia. The insurrectionists, initially surprised and distressed, learned to disperse in order to minimize their losses. In Syria, the French had to face the Jabal al-Druze revolt in the 1920s. It should be pointed out that it was France that established the Alawite state.

## The Bolshevik Revolution facing resistance

On its side, the Bolshevik Revolution was fighting off with strength and determination, every attack on what it considered to be the correct line: the peasant rebellion in Tambov (1921), that of Kronstadt (1921) paradoxically led by working-class sailors, guerrilla warfare in Daghestan in the Avars (1920-1921), the Dashnak insurrection of Armenians opposed to the Sovietization of their republic (1920), and Finnish guerrillas in Karelia (1921). And, of course, the Bolsheviks struggled to put down Makhno's massive anarchist insurrection in Ukraine (1919-1921), with which it had to make do for a while.

Many revolts were attributed to the Kulak land-owning peasantry, whereas resistance was, depending on the area, ethnic and often religious or was activated by brutal collectivization.<sup>32</sup>

In Central Asia, a Muslim revolt led by the Basmachi broke out; its most active phase went from 1920 to 1923, then it continued with less intensity until the late 1920s. It was during this revolt that the Turkish leader Ismail Enver Pasha was killed, he who, shortly after the end of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, had offered his services to Lenin then gone over to the insurrectionists' side. His dream had been to found a Turkish-speaking empire in Central Asia. He was killed in 1922. The Soviet counterinsurgency was led by Mikhail Frunze, who knew the societies involved well, and by Marshal Mikhail Nikolayevich, who published his conception of counterinsurgency at the end of his campaign.<sup>33</sup> Neither of the two

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32 Castagné, Joseph (1925), *Les Basmachis*, Ernest Leroux, Paris; Arshinov, Peter (1974), *History of the Maknovist Movement, 1918-1821*, Freedom Press, London; Bennigsen, Alexandre (1983), "Muslim Guerrilla Warfare in the Caucasus (1918-1928)", *Central Asian Survey* Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 280-294; Olcott, Martha B. (1981), "The Basmachi or Freeman's Revolt in Turkestan 1918-1924", *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 33 No. 3, pp. 352-369.

33 Nikolayevich, Mikhail (1926), "The Struggle against Banditry", in LaQuer, Walter (ed.) (1977) *The Guerrilla Reader*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, pp. 180-182.

hesitated to strike without a second thought, all the less so that the Bolshevik Revolution was being threatened by more or less archaic counterrevolutionaries who were using Afghanistan as a sanctuary.

### *The turning point of the 1930s*

In Morocco, although Abd el-Krim's insurrection had been crushed in 1926, "pacification" operations were extended until 1934. In Nicaragua, the United States defeated Augusto Sandino's insurrection (1927-1933). During this period, two organizations would stand out for their use of terrorism in their attempt to make a national cause triumph. One was the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization (IMRO), from 1890 to the 1930s. The IMRO would perpetrate the most spectacular attack of this half a century against the Sofia Cathedral in Bulgaria, killing nearly one hundred eighty political leaders and international representatives during high mass. But politically, it would fail. The other organization was the Irish Revolutionary Army (IRA) (1919-1921), led by Michael Collins who managed, shortly after World War I, to wrest the independence of Ireland (Eire), except for Ulster, where the majority of the population were Presbyterian protestants who had migrated to Ireland from England centuries earlier.

Outside of the North West Frontier, where insurrections were chronic, the major feature of the British way was to use primarily its police force. It was only when the latter failed to maintain order that the army intervened as a last resort. In India, the country was held by seventy thousand British soldiers for two hundred fifty million inhabitants. Very quickly, Gandhi's passive-resistance movement gave protests a unique style. Riots were rare: during the Moplah Rebellion in 1921 and at Peshawar in 1930.

A colonial power dominating a considerable share of the world's Muslims while having, through their reading of the Old Testament, particular bonds with the Jewish religious tradition—which was not the case in the Catholic states—Great Britain was in an ambiguous position. The ambiguity had already been expressed in the very terms of the Balfour Declaration (1917), in which a “national home” was to be provided for the Jewish people without encroaching on the prerogatives of the local populations.

In 1920, Arab enmity to the Jews was very clear; these were perceived as foreigners in every way, and culturally closer to the British than to the Arabs. The situation became worse after 1933, when some sixty-five thousand Jews emigrated to Palestine, including many from Germany. Riots broke out against the British, and in 1936, attacks were perpetrated against the Jewish settlers and were followed by a general strike of nearly one week, showing the extent of the movement of rejection.

It became necessary to resort to arbitration by the Peel Commission (1937), which proposed a partition into two states, a Jewish state in north and an Arab state in the South with, in the center, a buffer zone controlled by the British. Neither of the parties agreed to the Commission's proposals. Armed hostilities increased while Arab volunteers came from Iraq to bolster the Arabs in Palestine. A British officer, Orde Wingate, trained units of the Jewish armed group Haganah to protect the Jewish settlements. Order was nonetheless restored. A conference held in London committed to restricting Jewish immigration and considered granting independence with no partition, which satisfied the Arabs temporarily and raised Jewish indignation.

The last act of the British Mandate would be played in 1944-1947, in an impassioned climate in which the Jewish side was determined to use force to compel Great Britain to change its policy. In the end, the destiny of Palestine would be entrusted to the

United Nations, which would decide on a partition plan that the Arabs would reject. By winning the war (1948-1949) against four Arab armies (Egypt, Transjordan, Iraq, and Syria), Israel would ensure its right to existence.

The great Paris Colonial Exhibition (1931) symbolized both the pinnacle of the colonial period and its swan song. In Vietnam, the Yên Bái uprisings of the 1930s were brutally repressed. Protests were being heard in France. The young André Malraux prefaced Andrée Viollis's explosive report, *Indochine SOS* (Gallimard, 1936).

But in the Far East in 1937, the situation was already changing radically. The Japanese, who had been in Manchuria since 1931, were engaging in an overall attack on China. The Chinese Communist Party had suffered serious reversals in urban areas (1927) and had retreated to rural areas. Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang tried in vain to destroy the Communist Party in 1930. The annihilation campaign was followed by three, better organized ones between 1931 and 1934. The last campaign forced the Communists to withdraw to Shaanxi in the north. The pressure from the Japanese led the Chinese nationalists to impose an anti-Japanese alliance on their leaders.

During the Communists' retreat, known as the Long March, Mao Zedong became the unquestioned leader of the party apparatus (1934-1935). It was during the period extending from 1936 to 1938 that he innovated on the ground and managed to change the Communists' guerrilla warfare into revolutionary warfare.

The Japanese were not, however, seeing the Communists as the main adversary. The Kuomintang seemed more dangerous to them, and in fact the Communist guerrillas had launched only one major offensive, in 1940. In 1941-1942, the Japanese unleashed a fierce

repression policy for which the Communists paid a heavy price, as they lost one-fourth of their troops.

### *Breaking the status quo*

For Asians, from India to China in particular, World War II would be a fabulous catalyst and would change the status quo. Many in Asia and elsewhere were not happy with the colonial status. Japan demolished the United States in the Philippines in 1942. The Dutch, who were in Indonesia, occupied Indochina and beat the British in Malaysia. Singapore fell in 1942. The chaos generated by the war encouraged all those who wished to put an end to their subjection.

The Japanese had demonstrated that the order imposed by the “whites” could be challenged. The disorder brought about by the war allowed nationalists as well as “Marxist-Leninist” revolutionaries to organize the conditions of a future liberation, in most cases by the force of weapons.





# THE END OF THE COLONIAL WORLD

## *From guerrilla warfare to revolutionary warfare*

Mao Zedong, without having formulated it theoretically because his innovation was unorthodox under Marxist theory, focused mobilization not on the proletariat—which in China was cadaverous and had been demolished during the urban insurrections led by the left wing of the Party—but on the impoverished peasantry. During his experience on the ground, he found that it could be mobilized as long as it was given good leadership.

So he applied this unorthodox line, and drafted officers who blended in with the peasants in the villages and worked over time on spreading propaganda and mobilizing the people; this would allow him to transition from guerrilla warfare to revolutionary warfare. The latter used the same methods: surprise, mobility, and harassment. But with a different goal, which was to constitute, progressively, not irregular but regular forces, and not to weaken a regular army but to seize power through a war of destruction. The peasant insurrection organized as a guerrilla was one step of the plan; it was intended to be used as back-up for a regular army being constituted. It thus played the part of an army of partisans, since its role was to support the regular army, which would deal the final blow when the adversary had been weakened.

Mao Zedong's innovation, which was to convert guerrilla warfare to revolutionary warfare in order to seize power, would not be perceived until well after his victory in 1949. The only ones to have understood the originality of the Chinese revolutionary

approach and methods were the top Vietnamese officers in contact with China during its civil war. They would be able to put these lessons to work during the Indochina War, inflicting the Diên Biên Phu defeat on the French colonial forces in 1954.

The victory of 1949 was unexpected. Who, two years earlier, would have predicted Mao's triumph? US assistance to the nationalist troops was considerable. Stalin, for his part, had advised Mao to set up a coalition government with the Kuomintang. Mao's contribution, through his writings and the practice of his armed forces, in which General Zhu De's action was far from meager, was both political and military: mobilizing the population thanks to officers organized as an underground political infrastructure; changing, over time, its weakness into strength through a lengthy war; winning over to the cause the prisoners from the nationalist army and turning them into propagandists of choice; using tactical defense under an overall offensive-strategy framework intended ultimately for nothing less than suppressing the adversary. In a civil war, there can be no compromise; power can be seized only if the enemy is flooded.

The Japanese aggression (1937-1945) allowed the Chinese Communists to show themselves as patriots and revolutionaries fighting against foreign invasion and at the same time for social justice in the countryside. The Kuomintang was also fighting, perhaps even more so, against the Japanese, who, given their numerical inferiority, were battling with relentless rigor and practicing a policy of terror.

On his side, Mao was determined to carry out an extended phase of strategic defense, given his inferior resources, but his political objective remained offensive since he claimed military victory to be the expected outcome. Throughout the war, he had to articulate the partisans' actions with the army's in order to combine tactical defense and strategic defense. On several occasions, Mao ordered

evacuation of the ground because what was most important was to preserve the armed forces. Withdrawal and dispersion proved to be necessary against the destruction campaigns initially perpetrated by the Kuomintang, then by the Japanese when they decided to practice a policy of intense repression.

Revolutionary warfare consists in combining agitation and propaganda, leadership of the masses and armed struggle. The coordination role of political commissars was crucial. As war chief, Mao used irregular-warfare methods against the Kuomintang before moving on to regular army operations when he had the means to do so, then moved back to partisan warfare against the Japanese oppressor, and after defeating the Japanese, back to partisan operations combined with a general counteroffensive carried out by a regular army against an adversary whose morale was broken. The strategic defense based on time and space (in the case of China) would gradually impose a favorable balance of power by multiplying tactical successes exhausting the adversary. As for the general offensive, it consisted in concentrating resources for the decisive clash.

In the case of China, there was a first civil-war phase until 1937, then a foreign-war phase (1937-1945), then a return to civil war (1947-1949). The revolutionary-war model was then initially adopted by the Việt Minh, then increasingly imitated by organizations not connected to Marxist-Leninist ideology. When the Taliban dispense justice in the villages, they are practicing a model inspired—whether they know it or not—by Mao Zedong. Indeed, irregular warfare is not won only at a strictly military level. It is mostly won through administrative control of the populations.

This is where the Western failure of the past fifty years lies, from Indochina/Vietnam to today.

## *The mobilizing ideology*

From beginning to end, the “mobilizing ideology” plays an essential part. This fundamental aspect cannot be overstated. Whatever the nature of the ideology, it has to be so highly motivating for the combatants and those who support them that they will consent, in its name, to risking their life and to losing it.

At the end of World War II, the Soviet troops were in Berlin and occupied all of central Europe and part of the Balkans. Europe, exhausted, went from being a major player to become an issue, while the European colonial empires were at the end of their rope. In Asia the colonizers had simply lost their prestige. Had they not been defeated by the Japanese in 1942-1945, in Indochina, in Indonesia, in Malaysia (the fall of Singapore in 1942 had been a traumatic experience for Great Britain) and all the way to Burma? It was during the war, in a chaotic context, that liberation movements, whatever their nature, were able to organize.

All respect for the colonizers had been lost among the colonized. In Asia, the former were thenceforth seen as illegitimate. They had been contested in the inter-war period by elites encouraged by the Bolshevik Revolution, especially in Asia, but the masses had not responded. In 1948, the Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed in San Francisco. This was a turning point. Should it be recalled that the United States was opposed to European colonialism? In the wake of World War I, the League of Nations had granted the right to self-determination only to Europe. In the wake of the elimination of Nazism based on racial superiority, could the latter still be used against the colonized peoples? In the wake of World War I, the Japanese delegation had asked the League of Nations to include an article condemning racism. This had been opposed by the United States. Black people in the United States,

now renamed African Americans, would not be granted civil rights for another forty years.

### *The end of imperial Europe*

Great Britain was the first to take note of the change, the effects of which it had already been able to measure in India. India became independent—with all the ensuing religious problems (Kashmir). As for France, defeated in 1940, it had intended to keep its empire in order to preserve its status. And in the immediate post-war period, repression was applied in the colonies with a severity that was every bit as cruel as that of the pre-war period: Sétif massacre in Algeria (1945), Madagascar (1947).

### **From the Indochina War to the Algerian War**

The independence proclaimed by Hồ Chí Minh in August 1945 in Hanoi in the vacuum between the north occupied by Chinese nationalists and the south occupied by the British troops was not ratified. Reconquest began in 1946. The Việt Minh had already established, especially in north, organized political bases. The Vietnamese, although Communists, were also nationalists and were combating a foreign expeditionary corps. But times had changed.

Like the Chinese, the Việt Minh organized village militia, provincial militia, and regular units. The fact that they were fighting against foreigners, even if these had local allies, showed the national character of their struggle, and, with time, won over the support of an increasing part of the population.

Starting in 1950, backed by Communist China, which in October of the previous year had taken over, the Việt Minh began to carry out large-scale offensive operations. These would be very

costly, but lessons would be learned from them, and the offensives, starting in 1953, were better prepared and made it possible to thwart the best colonial troops. The process was the same as in China: coordination of partisans with regular troops, and control and support of the population. The latter allowed the routing of logistics during the battle of Diên Biên Phu. The lessons of the war, on the French side, would not be learned until later.<sup>34</sup>

The Algerian War burst out shortly after the end of the Indochina War. Already in Tunisia and in Morocco, there had been unrest and, obviously, independence was moving in.

The Algerian Revolutionary Committee for Unity and Action (CRUA), founded by nine members who would become famous, went into action on November 1, 1954. This very small minority committee intended to engage in battle despite the reservations of the nationalist parties, including the one led by Ahmed Ben Messali Hadj. A series of terrorist attacks marked the beginning of the insurrection. These were passed off as banditry, but the following year, the turmoil spread and the very recently established National Liberation Front (FLN) was soon joined, in early 1956, by the other nationalist parties, moderate or not. A harsh power struggle arose between the FLN and Messali Hadj's Algerian National Movement (MNA). There was an attempt to set up a coordination of the movements at the Soummam conference. In vain. Exclusions would follow, and the FLN became the only organization representing Algerian nationalism.

In France, "available" forces were called to arms. The war, starting in the summer of 1956, now involved the contingent, and mandatory draft would be extended from eighteen to twenty-seven months. The insurrectionary war was mostly waged in the Aurès Mountains and in Kabylie. The number of *katibas* (combat units)

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<sup>34</sup> *Revue militaire d'orientation*, March-April 1957 (articles by Ximenes, Tacheray, Hogard, and so on).

increased and required search and cordon operations. To isolate the rebellion, the authorities put up electrified lines in 1957 at the borders, east and west. In Algiers, paratroopers inflicted systematic repression intended to dismantle the FLN's underground infrastructure. Blind terrorist attacks were responded to by torturing suspects.

Under pressure from the army, France's Fourth Republic made way for the rise to power of General de Gaulle. Senior officers considered that they had learned the lessons of the Indochina War and sought to turn the insurrectionary-war techniques back against the insurrectionists and the population, which they attempted to rally to their cause. But a Muslim population with a lower status had no interest in rallying around the myth of French Algeria. Military initiative was snatched from the rebels in 1960, but in December that same year, the Algerian population held a massive demonstration in the capital for independence. As General de Gaulle had admitted the principle of self-determination, a small part of the army attempted a putsch (1961), which failed because of the president's determination and the greater share of the army's refusal to support this act of sedition.

The Organisation de l'armée secrète (OAS) went underground and attempted to assassinate the president. Public opinion in mainland France was tired of the war and was won over by the slogan "Peace in Algeria." The last few months of the war were chaotic (including on the mainland), between the FLN, the OAS, the army, and the intelligence agencies. The chaos engendered massive departure of the Algerian French, while the majority of Harkis, Muslim Algerian loyalists who had fought alongside the French army, were left stranded and out in the cold.

Won from the military point of view, the Algerian War was lost from the political point of view. For France, the Indochina War and the Algerian War were "retardant battles," hence useless.



## Less and less effective counterinsurgencies

The essence of what is called “decolonization,” that is, the emancipation movements, through violence or not, of the colonized peoples, ranges between 1945 and the early 1960s. The balance of these years is controversial, but over time, counterinsurgencies tended to fail, and most of all, the spirit of the times was changing, with: the Declaration of Human Rights in San Francisco (1948); the Bandung Conference, where recently independent countries, especially Asian, expressed their determination to take their full part in history (1955); the Suez Crisis (1956), where Great Britain and France were forced to give up their last imperial-type expedition, and so on. On the other hand, in the Philippines, the United States were victorious against a “Marxist-Leninist” guerrilla after having granted the country independence (1946), while the insurrection remained concentrated in the island of Luzon.<sup>35</sup>

In Greece, under English domination, the Communists, deprived of Yugoslavian sanctuary and logistics shortly after the break between Stalin and Tito (1948), were defeated. In Cyprus, forty thousand British troops did not succeed in crushing the few hundred men using terrorism under General Georgios Grivas. They nonetheless prevented the island’s union with Greece and ultimately brought a moderate Cypriot archbishop to power. In Kenya, a settlement colony, Great Britain repressed the Kikuyu insurrection, which was poorly organized, badly armed, and had no external support. Pacification was successfully achieved between 1952 and 1956.<sup>36</sup> Finally, we know the reasons for the victories of

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35 William Pomeroy’s pathetic account ([1963], *The Forest: A Personal Record of the Huk Guerrilla Struggle in the Philippines*, International Publishers, New York) shows how poorly the Huks were organized.

36 Kitson, Frank (1971), *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency and Peace-keeping*, Faber and Faber, London.

counterinsurgency in Malaysia in historical circumstances that will never happen again.

The Chinese of Malaysia had fought against Japan without support from China, and they constituted, at least part of them, a Marxist-leaning movement based on a few hundred thousand “squatters,” that is, on the category least integrated into the Malayan economy and society. The Chinese community (thirty percent) was essentially made up of merchants and did not take part in the insurrection.

The first phase of the British counterinsurgency—based on good knowledge of the country since the mid-nineteenth century—was conducted with severity (1950-1951) and included: regrouping of the populations involved (the squatters) in highly supervised “strategic hamlets” intended to isolate the population from the insurrectionists; and collective punishment in the event of an infringement in order to push people into denunciation. In 1951, the guerrilla was at its height and even managed to assassinate the British representative in Malaysia.

The second phase was of a very different nature. The British sought to gain the sympathy of the regrouped populations by distributing land, improving their living conditions, and doing away with collective punishment. The idea was to win over people’s “hearts and minds.” At the very least, they won over people’s stomachs ...

Isolated, the rebellion, estimated at eight thousand men with no external support or sanctuary, grew weak. Above all, in a country where seventy percent of the population was Muslim and the elites were conservative, the British had had the intelligence to promise independence as soon as the insurrection had been cut down. Which is what happened.

Where, since then, have there been such favorable conditions?

## *The Vietnam War*

The big turning point in lost contemporary wars was the Vietnam War. It was waged by the United States, replacing France, which had just been defeated in *Điện Biên Phủ* (1954).

### **Việt Minh advantages and the American adversary's mistakes**

The Việt Minh victory was due, among others, to its ability to ensure logistics far from its epicenter: all the material was brought over through several hundred miles of jungle on bicycles loaded with about two hundred kilos and pushed by men on foot. Such an exploit supposed an exceptional mobilization capacity.

Other factors were at play, particularly the mistakes made by the United States and their ally, Ngô Đình Diêm. The latter, brought into power by the United States, was a Catholic, hence necessarily part of a minority. It was not long before he alienated all the sects and other religious currents, including the Buddhists, through a narrow policy of rejection. The Việt Minh had gained control of parts of southern Vietnam, confiscated big landowners' land, and distributed it to the peasants. Ngô Đình Diêm returned the land to them.

In 1956 (the year when there was supposed to be a vote on possible reunification), Diêm made the capital mistake of getting rid of elected village councils and replacing them with his Saigon agents. The villages' autonomy had always been guaranteed, whatever the regime. State authority "stopped at the bamboo fence surrounding the village." Diêm's agents, foreign to the villages, distinguished themselves by their corruption and authoritarianism. They would be the first targets of the future Việt Cộng, which would then be able to have influence in the rural areas. The

Communists came in as defenders of village autonomy and were soon to have the villages under their control. The National Liberation Front was officially born at the end of 1960.

Between 1961 and 1963, US advisers (they were sixteen thousand under John F. Kennedy's presidency) applied to Vietnam the "Strategic Hamlet" experience that had been effective in Malaysia. The idea was to regroup the population in order to isolate it from the guerrilla.<sup>37</sup> But Việt Cộng officers had already blended in with the population and the hamlet experience was a failure. In September 1963, however, US Commander General Paul D. Harkins reported that the United States was winning the battle of the Mekong Delta. This was the year when the South Vietnamese army, with US approval, got rid of the cumbersome Diêm whom they had brought to power.

One year later, out of the eight and a half thousand strategic hamlets, more than seven thousand had been broken up. In addition, in a total of sixteen thousand hamlets, ten thousand village chiefs had been killed by the Việt Cộng. War correspondent Bernard B. Fall provided a political explanation of this (1961) by noting after his investigation that three-fourths of the villages were no longer bringing in tax receipts. In other words, they were no longer controlled by the Saigon regime.

In 1964, General William Westmoreland replaced General Harkins and in July, the number of US advisers (some of which were taking part in the operations) had risen to twenty-one thousand five hundred.

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37 Thompson, Robert G.K. (1966), *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam*, Frederick A. Praeger, New York.

## Escalation

Robert S. McNamara, US Secretary of Defense, declared that military action could essentially be completed by 1965. That was the year, in fact, when the Vietnam War became a full-fledged US war. The marines landed at Da Nang. General Westmoreland was confident, US fire power was considerable, and air control was massive. US technology was sure to be victorious, all the more so that the war was being waged assertively by the United States, confident that it was morally right and that this would prevent South Vietnam, and through the domino effect Southeast Asia, from falling under the Communist yoke.

Given that the assistance that North Vietnam had been providing to the South since the 1960s via Cambodia had to be stopped, the United States decided on a gradual escalation of air strikes north of the Seventeenth Parallel. The idea was to force the North to cease its assistance or else they would pay a very heavy price, that is, the destruction of all the infrastructure patiently built by Hồ Chí Minh's regime (despite some serious agrarian policy mistakes that ended up causing a revolt in the Nghệ An province, the effects of which would be the subject of a correction campaign).<sup>38</sup>

Hanoi's response to this air offensive was to move urban officers to the provinces and districts, and the industries to provincial workshops. The regime was determined to stand, whatever the cost. The destruction was significant.

In the south, the Việt Cộng forces suffered considerably under the deluge of US fire. The tonnage of bombs combined with the use of napalm, phosphorous bombs, fragmentation bombs, the free-fire

<sup>38</sup> Chaliand, Gérard (1968), *Les Paysans du Nord Vietnam et la guerre*, Éditions Maspéro, Paris.

zones, and so on, took enormous amounts of lives among combatants and civilians, but the Việt Cộng were not eradicated.

At the end of 1967, after two years of bombings and counterinsurgency operations carried out by the United States and their allies, General Westmoreland announced that the final phase would soon begin.

## **The Tet Offensive**

The Tet Offensive was launched in South Vietnam on January 31, 1968, at the beginning of the Tết holiday, the Vietnamese lunar new year. It involved thirty-six of the forty-four provincial capitals as well as more than twenty US bases. Until early March, Huế, the precolonial capital, remained completely under the control of the Việt Cộng, who proceeded to liquidate the regime's agents. With painstaking efforts, US troops eventually regained control of the city. In Saigon, in a highly spectacular way, a sacrificed Việt Cộng commando broke into the US Embassy and held its ground for many long hours. Việt Cộng battalions led an attack against the presidential palace and occupied the radio station. It took US troops nearly one week to regain control of the capital.

On the strictly military level, this direct confrontation was a failure for the Việt Cộng. But it was a considerable political success. As the offensive was unfolding, US and Western media described it as a disaster for the Saigon regime and proof of the failure of the US war.

The Tet Offensive marked the turning point of the war. After that, it became honorable in the United States to be against the war in Vietnam. US public opinion had been misled, the Việt Cộng was not in its death throes. The North Vietnamese had done all it could

to get US public opinion on its side (visits of Jane Fonda, Joan Baez, Noam Chomsky, and so on).

Never, before or after Vietnam, was war shown so freely; never has public opinion been so well informed during a conflict. Criticism was liberally expressed in the media (Walter Cronkite and his daily reports). In fact, after the Tet Offensive, the center of gravity of the war was largely US public opinion, in a country where, at the time, people expressed themselves at liberty. This would no longer be true with the Patriot Act in the wake of September 11, 2001, no more than it would be ten years earlier during the Gulf War, when the only images shown and commented on were those aired by CNN, which was ruling over all information.

A long period of negotiations followed the Tet Offensive. The resounding publication of leaks from *The Pentagon Papers* by the *New York Times* at the end of 1971 dealt a very hard blow on US authorities.<sup>39</sup>

## Lessons of the Vietnam War

Mobilizing the whole of the nation for a colonial-type war seemed counterproductive. This type of conflict can, in theory, only be engaged in with professional troops. When the war ended after a grueling but short period of intensive bombing (late 1972 to early 1973), the United States had lost more than fifty-eight thousand soldiers and officers. A great many were wounded for life and traumatized. Politically speaking, the “Vietnamese syndrome” prevented any reaction in 1975 when the North Vietnamese pushed around an extensively trained and well-equipped South Vietnamese army, which had no desire to fight and save the Saigon regime.

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39 Gravel, Mike (ed.) (1972) *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel edition, 4 volumes, Beacon Press, Boston.

This was a total political defeat. Robert McNamara, the former Secretary of Defense, declared in 1995, thirty years after the military intervention in Vietnam of which he had been one of the architects: “I had never been to Indochina and did not understand its history . . . its culture . . .” It would have sufficed for him to read Bernard Fall.<sup>40</sup>

The belief that technology was the answer to all and ultimately solved everything had not factored in the undoubtedly most important aspect of asymmetry, which was the prerequisite of having previously constituted a substantial social base and agreed to pay the price of war for the long haul. The major asymmetry was *ideological*. This is what is usually known as the moral factor. What matters is less the actual content of the ideology than the total motivation that it can generate.

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40 Fall, Bernard B. (1961), *Street without Joy: Indochina at War, 1946-54*, The Stackpole Company, Harrisburg PA; (1963) *The Two Vietnams: A Political and Military Analysis*, Praeger Publishers, Westport; and (1968) *Last Reflections on a War*, Doubleday, New York.





PART III

THE WESTERN  
QUAGMIRE



# THE FIRST WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

## *Evolution of the situation in the Middle East*

After World War II, the states in the Middle East that had not yet acquired independence obtained it without violence. All the states were nominally independent, but Great Britain remained very influential in Egypt until 1952-1956; in Iraq until 1958; in the Gulf Emirates until 1971, and in Jordan as well.

The kingdom of the Saud dynasty, first founded in 1744, had been conquered since 1925 in the vacuum left in the Arabian Peninsula. The Saud family took over most of the peninsula militarily, holy cities included, at the expense of, among others, Yemen (1932). In 1945, Saudi Arabia became an ally of the United States thanks to its oil and received in return the assurance of security.

The Wahhabis were rivals of the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928 in Egypt by Sheikh Hassan al-Banna in an anticolonial context. The rigorism preached by the Wahhabis sought to rebuild a militant Islam, which in the mid-1950s was opposed to Nasserite Pan-Arabism.

The Muslim Brotherhood, for their part, had actively helped the “free officers” to seize power. They were marginalized, then repressed by Gamal Abdel Nasser. Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, was assassinated (1949). The movement was radicalized with Sayyid Qutb, who opposed Pan-Arabism and preached an offensive Islam. He was executed in 1966. Imprisoned,

persecuted, the Muslim Brotherhood embodied a both theocratic and populist movement that was well integrated among the dispossessed.

Almost all the monarchies, except for Saudi Arabia, Oman and Jordan, were overthrown by military coups. The small Gulf Emirates and Kuwait, protected by the Anglo-Saxons, escaped this fate.

During the 1950s and the 1960s, Pan-Arabian nationalism seemed to triumph. The prestige of the USSR, after its launching of Sputnik (1957), brought various Arab regimes to more or less adopt a Socialist-leaning posture in the 1960s (Egypt, Syria, South Yemen, Iraq, and Algeria). Secular regimes, or those claiming to be secular, had the upper hand. And yet there was no lack of failures: the Syrian-Egyptian union (1958-1961) broke down, among other reasons, because of Egypt's paternalism. In Yemen, Egypt got bogged down as it faced Yemeni mountain dwellers supported by Saudi Arabia (1964). Most of all, in 1967, the disastrous defeat of the Arab states (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq) in their conflict against Israel really turned the tables. The region then obviously became militarily dominated by the Hebrew state.

### **The Palestinian national question**

The Palestinian issue, up to that point considered to be a problem of refugees who had been despoiled of their land, soon became the Palestinian national question. And yet between 1949 and 1967, the West Bank and Gaza, now claimed in order to constitute, with East Jerusalem, a Palestinian state, were in the hands of the Arab countries: the West Bank had been annexed by Transjordan, and Gaza depended on Egypt. Nothing was proposed to the Arabs of Palestine other than to wait for a possible victory of the Arab armies, which would restore a homeland for them.

As for the national Palestinian movement, it came out into the open shortly after the Arab defeat of 1967. Thus far instrumentalized as refugees, the Palestinians became the Arabs' newly found honor because they dared, as in the Battle of Karameh in 1968, to stand up to Israeli tanks. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) intended nothing less than to create a "democratic Palestine," which implied defeating Israel and a religious-minority status for those Jews who had been in Palestine before the institution of Israel. The Fatah's Utopian program was to be achieved thanks to guerrilla warfare—after all, the Vietnamese were foiling five hundred thousand US troops—and help from the Arab countries. As for the movements of the left or the far left such as the George Habash's PFLP or Nayef Hawatmeh's DFLP, they saw themselves as the revolutionary vanguard fated to bring in the Arab masses of the Near East in its wake by challenging all the existing regimes.

The PFLP's publicity terrorism, which consisted in hijacking planes, made the Palestinian national question widely known as of the summer of 1968. But no state would have allowed that a movement, no matter how popular, be allowed to negotiate illegally with a foreign state, which the PFLP claimed to do in Jordan after having hijacked two US planes. The Black September repression (1970) cut off the Palestinian national movement from Jordan, its essential base.

The active participation of Palestinians in the Lebanese civil war hardly advanced the Palestinian cause. Anwar El Sadat sent back Egypt's Soviet advisers (1972), made overtures to Washington, and considered a limited war intended to improve his capacity to act upon a situation dominated by Israel. In October 1973, the Israelis were surprised to discover that they had dozed off on an excessive feeling of superiority, and the Sinai border was far from their vital concerns.

The process of colonization in the West Bank was accelerated with the rise of the Likud (1977).

The peace signed with Egypt after Anwar El Sadat's trip to Jerusalem (1979) and the Oslo Accords (1993) intended among others to allow the creation of a Palestinian state, were responded to with the assassination of Sadat (1981) and that of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin (1995). Did not Saudi Arabia's offer, in 2002, of the Arab League's recognition of Israel in exchange for a return to the borders of 1967 come too late?

Everything indicates, when examining the map of the West Bank, that as far as the coalition in power in Israel was concerned, the physical possibility of creating a state was no longer on the table nor, in fact, the political will to contribute to it. Contrary to what Yasser Arafat thought in 1969, time will not have worked in favor of the Palestinians. A territory cannot be disputed only with demographic growth.

In his own way, General Ariel Sharon got rid of Gaza, which was waging its war on its own. With the passing of years, Israel found itself with a neutralized Egypt, then an occupied Iraq, in any case divided for a long time, and soon a Syria in civil war, while the Palestinian question moved into the background with the rise of Islamist radicals leading multicontinental jihadism against a backdrop of quarrels between Sunnis and Shias.

In addition to the Palestinian question, the major events in the Muslim world for the past forty years or so have been a militant Islam in Saudi Arabia and a theocratic state in Iran.

### **Saudi Arabia's diffusion of militant Islam**

The oil crisis, a consequence of the war of October 1973, caused the price of oil to quadruple, giving Saudi Arabia considerable

means. The country took advantage of this situation to undertake a systematic militant re-islamization of societies from West Africa to Indonesia, where a sustained campaign, together with financial assistance, the building of mosques and madrasas (Islamic schools) equipped with preachers sowed the ground on which Islamism has proliferated. A rival of the Muslim Brotherhood and much more powerful financially, Saudi Arabia did not produce any thinkers, contrary to Egypt, Syria, and other countries.

### **Creation of a theocratic state in Iran**

In Iran, in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini proclaimed a revolutionary theocratic state, which was offered to the Muslim world as an example. It lashed out at the United States, which it called “The Great Satan,” and at Israel, “The Little Satan.”

This message from Khomeini, a Shia and a Persian, was inadmissible to Saudi Arabia. The ayatollah’s tactical qualities may have been indisputable, but the coherence of his strategy was questionable. He had no allies, could not solicit the atheistic USSR, and despite his anti-Israelism, could not champion the Sunnis. So it was he alone against the world. When Saddam Hussein’s Iraq began hostilities against Iran, he was universally supported except by Syria, which could not suffer a Baas rival, and by Israel, which did not want a battle-hardened Iraqi army. According to Henry Kissinger, the ideal situation for the United States was for the two adversaries to be worn down. Iran, unconquered, was finished off by an embargo.



## *Soviet failure in Afghanistan*

Unexpectedly, around Christmas 1979, the USSR intervened in Afghanistan, a nearby state where its influence had not ceased to grow during the 1970s. Moscow wanted to save a “Marxist-Leninist” regime at the end of its rope. The USSR had to prevent the collapse of a Communist regime, which would set an unfortunate precedent.

A year earlier, in 1978, a coup had brought to power the most radical faction of the Communist Party, Khalq, one of the goals of which was to modernize the Afghan populations. Implemented with typical Stalinist rigidity, reforms aimed at customs and traditions were all the more badly experienced that the party leadership was seen, rightly so, as hostile to Islam. In early 1979, the United States was already secretly helping the Afghan resistance.

By that fall, it had become obvious that the sitting regime would collapse. Discussions were held at the Soviet Central Committee, which after much hesitation and against the general staff’s advice, decided not to leave the Communist regime to its fall. At the end of December 1979, Soviet troops invaded Kabul, got rid of the Khalq leader, and replaced him with Babrak Karmal, a moderate from the other Afghan Communist Party current, the Parcham.

The Soviet mistake of intervening in Afghanistan to save the Khalq Communist regime in power since 1978 would make it possible for Saudi Arabia to retake the initiative. The CIA, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan agreed to support the Afghan insurrection as of 1980, and to facilitate, thereafter, the arrival and incorporation of jihadists come to support the Afghan resistance against the “infidels.” Saudi Arabia, assisted by the Gulf Emirates, was the state that provided the greatest financial contribution, while Pakistan

supplied logistics and a sanctuary for the jihadists... This Jihad, it would be noted much later, was Sunni.

Ten years later, in February 1989, after a political defeat, the Soviet troops withdrew in good order. Apart from its special forces (Spetsnaz), the Soviet army was not in the least adapted to this type of war. The major part of operations had been carried out by paratrooper units and special forces, especially since 1983, often successfully.

What explains the Soviet defeat? Compared to the Vietnamese, the organizational capacities of the Afghan resistance, divided into more than a half-dozen movements, were of confounding mediocrity. The Afghan forces, whose propaganda machine had been provided by the United States and its allies, were largely overestimated. Were they not claiming to have defeated the Soviet enemy, and even caused the fall of the Soviet regime, when it had taken them three years to overthrow Mohammad Najibullah's regime, which had all the country's cities under its control? The Mujahideen's operational weakness was blatant. Throughout the entire war, the number of Soviet troops remained lower than one hundred twenty thousand, that is, two times lower than the US forces thereafter, with just as little success.

The Soviets and their Afghan auxiliaries emptied the countryside of almost one-third of its population (fifteen million) and tripled that of the capital (from seven hundred thousand to nearly two million).

From beginning to end, the Pakistani sanctuary was vital. The logistics from this country, like the combatants, were not at any time seriously jeopardized. The Afghan resistants' tenacious pugnacity was rewarded and, starting in 1986, fearsome anti-aircraft weapons (Stinger) made the intervention of Soviet helicopters problematic. In terms of guerrilla warfare, Afghanistan did not

bring any innovations. The change was occurring in Moscow, with Mikhail Gorbachev in power, rather than on the ground.

The Soviets made the same mistake as the United States had done in Vietnam. This type of colonial war should never be waged by a conscription-based army. This was a mistake the British had never made. The Soviets were paradoxically the victims of democracy, because the war was not popular, neither among the Russians nor among the non-Russians.

The Afghans were able to hold their ground thanks to the segmentation of their society (first ethnic, then religious and ideological), which allowed the guerrilla not to be dismantled since it had neither a leader nor an underground political infrastructure. With no central leadership, but equipped with an unconquered symbol in the person of Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, the “Lion of Panjshir,” the resistance was very difficult to take down. The Afghans’ disadvantage in terms of revolutionary warfare turned out to be an advantage. The Pashtuns had basically waged regular war instead of using modern and structured guerrilla warfare. Massoud was the first—and his example was scarcely followed—to impose the idea of a full-time irregular combatant.

Added to the traditional warlike qualities of the Afghans—who had an ideal ground for guerrilla warfare—Afghan underdevelopment was a major advantage in a population accustomed to a very frugal existence, and the impact of the war had relatively limited material effects.<sup>41</sup> Massoud was practicing a “diversion of Leninism.”<sup>42</sup>

No more than the United States did at the beginning of the Vietnam War, did the Soviets have troops that were adapted to the

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41 On this subject, see Chaliand, Gérard (1989), “Remarques sur l’intervention soviétique en Afghanistan”, *Stratégiques*, No. 2.

42 The French weekly, *L’Express*, July 16-22, 1982.

type of irregular warfare they were running up against. Under Brejnev, it was hard to imagine the Soviets withdrawing from Afghanistan. Dictatorships do not withdraw unless they collapse. To their credit, the Soviets contributed to strengthening the Afghan intelligence services, the Khad, and applied an ethnic-based strategy in the colonial tradition. Even though there was a high rate of desertion from the Afghan army, a solid core remained operational to the end (1992).

As previously mentioned, the turning point of the war did not happen at the military level, but at the political level, in 1985, with the rise to power of Mikhail Gorbachev, who with *Glasnost* (democratization) and *Perestroika* (economic restructuring) started a new policy that he was ultimately not able to control. As support for the combatants was growing, Gorbachev announced the imminent withdrawal of the Soviet troops, which was to be in 1988. There were anti-war demonstrations before that, particularly in Transcaucasia,.

In 1987, the former head of the Afghan intelligence agency, Mohammad Najibullah, was appointed head of the Afghan state and launched, in vain, a reconciliation process with no reference to Marxism. Starting in 1986, the Soviet forces virtually ceased their offensive operations. From then on, the main burden of the counterinsurgency was in the hands of the Afghan army. Volunteers for the Jihad were organized by a Palestinian from Jordan, Abdullah Azzam, with assistance from the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). To the end, the United States and their Middle Eastern allies supported the most Islamist of the Afghan movements, which were divided between more or less extreme Islamists and traditionalists attached to the royalty. Hezb-e-Islami and its leader, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, were the main beneficiaries of this foreign assistance. Among the foreign jihadists was Osama bin

Laden, who would come to public attention after Abdullah Azzam was killed in a car explosion at the end of the war.

The Mujahideen made no headway between 1989 and 1992, while in these three years the Najibullah regime, which was well organized and did not have corruption as its main feature—something that deserves mentioning—did not lose any cities except for the small frontier city of Khost.

After the Soviet Union disappeared and the Najibullah regime fell, the years 1992 to 1994 were two years of violent civil war around Kabul between the partisans of Massoud the Tajik and those of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar the Pashtun. It caused many victims and did a lot of damage. In the countryside, disorder and insecurity enabled banditry while the economic situation seriously deteriorated. The United States lost interest in the country once the USSR was out of Afghanistan.

It was in 1994 that the Taliban, Pashtuns educated and trained in Deobandi madrasas, organized and armed by the ISI, penetrated Afghanistan and seized Kandahar, and two years later, Kabul. The people, particularly in the Pashtun spheres, were relieved to welcome an organized force that would ensure their security. Dissatisfactions would be expressed later, in urban areas, against the rigid moralism of the new regime, which otherwise had no economic agenda.

Osama bin Laden, who like all the foreign combatants had left the country shortly after the Soviet withdrawal, returned to Afghanistan in 1996. His influence was gradually felt on Mullah Omar, who was leading the country. A new wave of apprentice jihadists moved into Afghanistan. Gradually, through a boomerang effect, jihadism turned against the impious Arab regimes (including Saudi Arabia) and “the Crusaders and the Jews.”

## *The first Gulf War (1991)*

Caused by Saddam Hussein's annexation of Kuwait and his refusal to withdraw from it, the coalition led by the United States included four Arab states and all the Western allies while Iraq was isolated. Toppling Hussein's regime was wisely avoided so as not to strengthen Iran by bringing the Shia majority to power.

The Kurds, fiercely repressed, were saved by Western television. A no-fly zone was guaranteed to them after the French, then the British, intervened in their favor. The United States launched Operation Provide Comfort.

In 1993, a truck-bomb attack was aimed at the World Trade Center (seventeen dead). In Saudi Arabia, unclaimed attacks in 1995-1996 killed twenty-four US soldiers. It was in 1998 that al-Qaeda loudly claimed attacks against the United States Embassies in Nairobi (Kenya) and Dar es Salaam (Tanzania). Another attack left seventeen dead in the crew of US Navy guided-missile destroyer USS Cole at the port of Aden, in Yemen (2000).

## *From September 11 to the punitive expedition in Afghanistan*

The most spectacular attack ever carried out took place on September 11, 2001 with grotesquely ridiculous means and a classic modus operandi. It left nearly three thousand dead in New York City while the Pentagon was also struck. These were major symbols and consequences were guaranteed to be considerable. The majority of the terrorists were Saudi nationals. It has been forgotten since then that shortly after the attack, the staff of the Saudi embassy left

the United States and that Saudi assets were withdrawn from US banks. The attacks had a terrifying psychological effect. And for US public opinion, they were traumatic.

September 11 allowed the Neocons, led by Paul Wolfowitz and supported by Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, to impose their views on President George W. Bush.<sup>43</sup> Shortly thereafter, Paul Wolfowitz designated Iraq as the target. As of September 20, the “War on Terror” was declared before becoming the “Global War on Terrorism,” and the Patriot Act was issued in October of the same year.

Al-Qaeda’s goal was to reconstitute the community of believers, return to the real or supposed purity of Islam at its beginnings, restore the caliphate, and in the shorter term, eliminate corrupt and/or impious regimes such as that of Saudi Arabia whose territory “had been soiled” by the presence of US troops and Egypt.

*Jihadism, whatever its version, breaks with all other violent movements by the fact that it has nothing to negotiate.*

Mullah Omar refused to hand Osama bin Laden over to the United States, so a punitive air expedition was conducted in Afghanistan with participation on the ground of a few dozen US and British special forces. On the ground, the war was sub-contracted to the Northern Alliance made up of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, Commander Massoud having been opportunely the victim of an Islamist attack coordinated from Belgium two days before September 11. Against US advice, the Northern Alliance seized Kabul. In the Pashtun part, in the south, the United States made deals with tribal war chiefs of fluctuating loyalties, something that allowed the Taliban and al-Qaeda staff to exfiltrate to Pakistan.

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<sup>43</sup> The Neocons at the time included William Kristol, Richard Perle, Elliott Abrams, Brent Scowcroft, John Bolton, Douglas Feith, Michael Ledeen, Lewis Libby, and Dan Senor. Karl Rove’s communication role as Senior Advisor was particularly effective.

Kabul, and only Kabul, and its surrounding area were made safe by less than twenty thousand US and British troops. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) was established at the end of 2001; it included about thirty countries, and eighteen months later comprised five thousand five hundred men.

After a series of negotiations, the leader chosen by the United States, Hamid Karzai, was placed at the head of the country. He would remain there more than a dozen years with a very mediocre record. Gorge W. Bush mentioned once that a Marshall Plan would be set up in Afghanistan; it was never again to be heard about. Considering this business settled, Afghanistan being, in their view, a minor theater, the Neocons turned to their core project: the plan to reshape the “Greater Middle East,” aimed at producing a regime change in Teheran. Meanwhile in Washington, an “axis of evil” had been designated, made up of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. One can definitely wonder in what way they formed an axis ...

Held as victorious, the war in Afghanistan with Hamid Karzai placed in power would be, in fact, a collateral victim of the Iraq War. This latter was actively prepared in people’s minds on the diplomatic and political fronts through intensive propoganda spread by the United States, and in Great Britain by Tony Blair (did he not declare that Iraq had the means to strike Europe within forty-five minutes?) claiming the presence in Iraq of weapons of mass destruction that would not be found, and supposed contacts in Prague between the Iraqi regime and al-Qaeda, when in fact al-Qaeda would come to Iraq as a consequence of this “war of choice.”

The Iraq War, contrary to that in Afghanistan, did not get UN approval, and Germany and France, contrary to Great Britain, refused to take part in this imperial project.

The fall of the Soviet Union (1989-1991) had left the United States with no rival. US hegemony, particularly on the military level,



seemed absolute. In fact, the United States stated the law, applied it, and sought to have it applied with or without United Nations approval.

## THE IRAQ WAR

### *The plan to reshape the “Greater Middle East”*

In the wake of September 11 and after the successful punitive expedition in Afghanistan, the Neocons, supported by Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, contributed to defining a new foreign-relations doctrine.

As the threat now came from “failed states,” preemptive war could be waged to rule out a surprise attack by the adversary. Preemptive action was advocated in the event of suspicions of hostility.

The “Greater Middle East” and its reshaping became a “crusade,” as inopportunistly stated by George W. Bush in a vocabulary familiar to Americans but very badly received in the Muslim world. The “unfinished war” was increasingly mentioned in order to condition public opinion. The Patriot Act made it possible to disqualify any criticism of the administration’s policy as antipatriotic. The Bush administration agreed to request the authorization of the United Nations while stating that it would preserve its freedom of action if it was not granted.

All-powerful, the United States had opposed the institution of an International Criminal Court (ICC) on war crimes, rejected the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, opposed the prohibition of land mines, and refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol on global warming or the Rio Convention on Biodiversity. Moreover, Paul Wolfowitz had declared that “the road to Jerusalem [went] through

Baghdad,” meaning that the Palestinian problem depended on a change in Baghdad.

The Neocons had the de facto support of Saudi Arabia, for which the major enemy remained Iranian Shi’ism. Pakistan, for its part, had been a Sunni Islamist state since the rise to power of Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq (1977).

On the domestic level, telephone tapping without a court order was introduced. A new department was instituted: the Department of Homeland Security (two hundred thousand employees).

The Global War on Terrorism warranted putting in this category all armed movements whose goals were contrary to those of Washington and its allies. G.W. Bush’s rhetoric was particularly virulent and denounced even traditional allies who did not wish to take part in this “war of choice.”

### *From the fall of Baghdad to the occupation*

The Iraqi state created by Great Britain shortly after the disappearance of the Ottoman Empire was a state led by Sunnis (twenty percent of the population), reigning over Shias (sixty percent) and Kurds (twenty percent). At first it was made up of two *vilayets* (provinces): that of Bassora (Shia) and that of Baghdad (mostly Sunni), to which was attached the oil *vilayet* of Mosul, populated in its majority by Kurds (and Turkmens). Given the correlation of forces, this latter *vilayet*, claimed between 1923 and 1925 by the Turkish Republic led by Mustafa Kemal, had been allotted by the League of Nations to Great Britain.

Iraq had always been governed by Sunnis. In 1991, after the Iraqi defeat consecutive to the annexation of Kuwait, George H. Bush

(Senior) had taken care to leave Saddam Hussein in power, who though weakened, was hostile to Iran.

During the year 2002, Iran strengthened its positions among Iraqi Shias and trained Shia militia in preparation for the regime change announced by the United States. The US forces' victory came easily, given that Saddam Hussein had no aviation. The bombings lasted a few weeks, and then a quick armored-tank breakthrough completed a war started because of the supposed existence of weapons of mass destruction. There were none. No more than any contacts with al-Qaeda.

According to Donald Rumsfeld three months after the fall of Baghdad, thirty-five thousand men would be left in the country, which would carry on with growth thanks to its oil.

### **Fatal mistakes**

As soon as Baghdad fell, US authorities made one mistake after another due to their political and cultural unpreparedness.

While Donald Rumsfeld limited protection to the Ministry of Oil, Baghdad was the theater of degradation and plundering. This came partly from the ordinary prisoners that Saddam Hussein had released, intentionally, during the conflict. No curfew was issued. Urban insecurity was constant for several weeks and damages were enormous.

On the advice of Ahmed Chalabi, a Shia who had gained the trust of the Washington Neocons, the Iraqi army and the police force—that is, more than five hundred thousand men—were sent home. The head of the British MI5, Eliza Manningham-Buller, spoke up against this measure. Paul Wolfowitz, probably advised by Ahmed Chalabi, maintained his call, as many of the officers of the

Iraqi army were Sunnis (the following year, US authorities suspected Ahmed Chalabi of working for Iran).

From May 2003 to June 2004, Paul Bremer was appointed Director of the Coalition Provisional Authority. The fact that this position was simply invented indicated that a period of occupation had just been decided, since no government had been formed, not even for a limited period. The Kurds and the Shias, however, had their leaders.

In addition, after the army had been fired, so to speak, Paul Bremer made it known that no member of the Ba'ath party (six hundred thousand members), whatever his rank, would be allowed to belong to the country's future administration. With senior officials numbering no more than a few tens of thousands, this amounted to marginalizing the Sunnis. A capital fault.

Never had even a previously Communist state rejected outright all the members of the party. Becoming a party member, at the lower echelons, was a job guarantee. This measure, by excluding the Sunnis from the political chess-board to the benefit of the Shias—which the Sunnis regarded as heretics—and the Kurds—who were not Arabs and whom they had fought since the birth of Iraq—was intolerable to the Sunnis, who saw themselves as the legitimate leaders of the country since the Ottoman period, during that of the British mandate, then of the royalty, and finally under all the following republican regimes.

### **The fast emergence of the insurrection**

At the beginning of the summer of 2003, the insurrection was in full swing. In August, the representative of the United Nations Secretary-General was killed in Baghdad in an attack, soon followed by others. Usually, organizing resistance requires time, weapons,

money, and support. Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney thought in 2003 that these were isolated attacks with no further consequences. It was in fact all the opposite, as the apparatus of the toppled regime's intelligence services went underground, intact, with the support of elements from Saddam Hussein's Special Republican Guard and some Fedayeen. It would not be long before this core would be joined by a notable part of the Sunnis, now convinced of their political marginalization. They had weapons, money, know-how, and soon, outside support.

The US Army, remarkably effective in its traditional formation ("Mission accomplished," declared G.W. Bush), was not suited for counterinsurgency. The crushed adversary had not admitted its defeat and applied a strategy of the weak against the strong, based on time, harassment, and sabotage. Outside assistance and sanctuary were discreetly provided by Syria.

Donald Rumsfeld, despite pressing requests from his generals, refused to increase the number of his troops. Apart from Great Britain, the other countries offered only a few hundred men's worth of reinforcement. Washington had to call on private companies, which turned out to be as much a problem as a solution.<sup>44</sup> Some of them filled police jobs, others military jobs.

In 2003, the Shia leader Muqtadā al-Sadr played troublemaker and his damaging power never ceased to grow over the four following years, to the satisfaction of Iran, the presence of which had been strong within each Shia faction *since before the conflict had broken out*.

More than anything else, the major weakness of the occupying forces was intelligence gathering. Practically none of the US

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<sup>44</sup> Hubac, Olivier (ed.) (2006), *Mercenaires et polices privées : la privatisation de la violence armée*, Universalis, Paris.

political or military leaders spoke Arabic (contrary to the British, who were occupying Basra).

### **An occupant hated by all**

Over the entire summer, in particular, of 2003, US forces were unable to restore electricity properly, and there was not enough gas for vehicles, much to the Iraqis' surprise as they discovered the negligence of US power. For six weeks, there was neither radio nor television broadcasting in Arabic. The US troops were soon perceived as occupants (except by the Kurds).

In Fallujah, the tense situation blew up in 2004 after serious incidents with the private firm Blackwater Security Consulting's security agents. A Sunni insurrection was backed by the Shia Muqtada al-Sadr, probably encouraged by Iran. The United States responded with aerial bombardments, which raised protests, including from the UN representative; even the Foreign Office criticized these methods!

A survey conducted by the US authorities indicated that eighty percent of Iraqis considered the US-led coalition an occupying force. The interest of the survey was less to learn what was already known—the twenty percent of Kurds said they were satisfied with US presence—than the much more astonishing fact that the Shias, under Iran's influence, had reached the same conclusion as the Sunnis even though their status had basically improved!

Al-Qaeda, which was non-existent in Iraq under Saddam Hussein's rule, made a dramatic entrance with attacks organized by the Palestinian from Jordan, Abu Musab al-Zarkawi ("Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Two Rivers"), with the official approval of Ayman al-Zawahiri from Pakistan. The tension between Shias and Sunnis, revived by the US intervention, would be taken to incandescence by

al-Zarkawi's excesses, criticized by al-Qaeda central leadership. But the damage was done. The break was sharper than ever.

It was in 2004, that is, one year after the US intervention, that the Abu Ghraib prison scandal broke out. Photographs came out, inconveniently revealing how prisoners were being treated. All of them show sexual humiliation and are singularly shocking, particularly for Middle-Eastern societies for which male modesty is paramount. In Abu Ghraib, a cultural taboo was breached (a female soldier holding a naked prisoner on a leash like a dog, on all fours). The psychological war, already jeopardized by the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo, was lost with these photos. What kind of democracy was the United States exporting with this sort of behavior? No one in command would be punished, and the Red Cross made it known that for months it had protested, in vain, by discreetly denouncing these methods.

Paul Bremer, after having accumulated a series of irrevocable mistakes due to cultural incompetence, left the country in mid-2004, when US intelligence services were estimating the number of insurgents at twenty thousand, with foreign combatants being only a minority. In November, G.W. Bush was easily re-elected in a climate of apparent insecurity, so much had fear been instrumentalized. The alert level in the United States during his two mandates will have oscillated between serious and very serious.

### **From the civil war to US departure**

Equipped with institutions—a provisional Constitution, a National Assembly, a President—the Iraqi people voted and the poll indicated that the votes were denominational in the case of the Shias, ethnic in that of the Kurds, while the Sunnis did not vote. How would a prime minister be chosen? The attacks redoubled in violence. Al-Qaeda struck the Shia mosque of Samarra (at the



beginning of 2006) to get the greatest number of casualties. In Baghdad, the civil war bordered on denominational cleansing, with the Sunni west and the Shia east, each on its side, liquidating the mixed districts of Baghdad, which had become uncontrollable.

Abu Musab al-Zarkawi was killed (2006) and, thanks to General David Petraeus the following year, Sunni tribes in Anbar, paid, armed, and organized by the United States, took down part of the Islamists. From then on, US forces patrolled Baghdad and separated the denominational communities spatially. But that year (2007), Nouri al-Maliki came to power in Iraq and endeavored to appropriate it not only by systematically marginalizing the Sunnis, but also by moving out all Shias who might turn out to be rivals. Nothing was settled: not the sharing out of the oil, nor the fate of Kirkuk, nor the possible place of the Sunnis. When in 2011 the US forces were preparing to leave, the attacks, which had never ceased, were intensified.

## **Taking the toll**

Instead of the thirty-five thousand residual troops envisaged by Donald Rumsfeld, in 2006 in Iraq there were a hundred fifty thousand US soldiers and a hundred eighty thousand men belonging to private security firms (Blackwater, DynCorp International, Vinnel Corporation, Military Professional Resources Inc., and others). Recruited with agreement from the Pentagon, these firms could be in charge of managing the prisons (this was the case at Abu Ghraib, with Titan Corporation and CACI International, Inc.). For example, Kellogg, Brown & Root alone had fifty-four thousand employees working under contract in Iraq. Blackwater, before its name was changed, was characterized by its brutality. However, no US citizen could be judged by Iraqi (or international) courts, nor were these firms accountable to the US

Congress. They will have certainly made up for the army's numerical deficit, but they seriously hurt the counterinsurgency, which was completely foreign to them. The security firms, very well paid, were a body even more foreign than the US army itself. Considerable sums were spent to train some two hundred fifty thousand Iraqi soldiers, if not more.

The one hundred thousand Sunnis of the Anbar Governorate, organized by General Petraeus (who with Ambassador Ryan Crocker was one of the rare persons to understand the nature of the ongoing conflict), were theoretically to be incorporated into the national army under construction. This was opposed by Nouri al-Maliki. The hostility between Sunnis and Shias would grow much worse during the years when he was head of state. The United States withdrew completely from Iraq on his instigation (he was probably advised in this by Iran). As soon as the US personnel were gone, al-Maliki tried to arrest the two Sunnis who were part of his government, including the vice president, who found refuge in Turkey after going through Iraqi Kurdistan. Nouri al-Maliki held the most important ministries himself. Power was no longer only strictly denominational, it was confiscated by him. But this corrupt government had practically no consistency, as the events of the summer of 2014 would show; Mosul's collapse, with the Iraqi forces' frantic flight, was pathetic, recalling the last days of the Vietnamese army in 1975. What matters in an army above all is its willingness to fight—which obviously depends, among others, on the nature of the regime being defended.

On the whole, the achievements of G.W. Bush's presidency in the Middle East were of the utmost mediocrity. The US President's rhetoric cultivated the anachronistic "clash of civilizations" topic. And contrary to presidential declarations, the Iraq War neither strengthened the security of the United States nor made the world a safer place. "Spreading democracy" will have been a propaganda

slogan. In this respect, it will suffice to recall the deceitful declarations or erroneous assertions in connection with Iraq, such as those issued by Tony Blair, who would acknowledge after twelve years of lying that he “had been mistaken.” Or Vice President Dick Cheney’s, claiming in 2005 that the insurrection was “in the last throes.” Or a few years later, that waterboarding was “not torture.” George Bush Senior’s authorized biography published in 2015 ruthlessly reflects his judgment of Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld’s actions as well as of Paul Wolfowitz’s.<sup>45</sup> In his view, in all fairness, however, responsibility for decisions ultimately fell on the president, who was none other than his own son. This too is democracy.

Nothing will have been solved in Iraq. The Kurds benefitted from the US intervention, the Shias too, and consequently, Iran. Was this why the war of choice had been waged? The active if not exacerbated hostility between Sunnis and Shias has been the direct result of US intervention.

Thirty years after the political failure of Vietnam, the same initial mistakes were made: no plan or preparation for after military victory, underestimation of the adversary’s resistance capacities, a confounding ignorance of the local culture, unsuitability to the conditions of irregular warfare, inability to recognize the potential of an insurrection, illusions on the ability to win the support of the populations (except in the case of the Kurds). In fact, no serious attention was given to the political goal of the conflict, other than the project of supposedly reshaping the region.

In the end, the offspring of the US intervention in Iraq is called the Islamic State.

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<sup>45</sup> Meacham, Jon (2015), *Destiny and Power: The American Odyssey of George Herbert Walker Bush*, Random House, New York.

## THE AFGHAN DEADLOCK

While the Iraq War started in 2003 was regarded as central, Afghanistan was considered a sort of consequence, a secondary theater to be dealt with militarily, and frugally. For a country of about two hundred fifty thousand square miles, mainly mountainous, the coalition troops at the end of 2003 did not even number thirty thousand; moreover, administrative control of the ground had never been achieved, or even tried. Hamid Karzai ruled Kabul and his close family ruled Kandahar. Economically speaking, corruption and subcontracting consumed part of the aid, which for that matter, was modest compared to the military expenditure. This latter had amounted to ten billion dollars since 2004, whereas the Agency for International Development Reconstruction budget was of one billion dollars. The supposed democratization will have only amounted to the decentralization of corruption.

In addition, the feeling that the situation was basically stable in 2002-2003 through to the beginning of 2004 was largely shared. All the more so that very few observers went out into the provinces, save for a few cities. And yet nearly twenty thousand villages were considered damaged or destroyed. No drinking water or electricity was supplied in the south and the east of the country. The irrigation system had become practically unusable and nothing was done to restore it.

During those two years, US troops strove, in vain, to find Osama bin Laden while Hamid Karzai endeavored to control the country and reined in the Northern Alliance, too prevalent in his view. Warlords who controlled strongholds, like the Uzbek Abdul

Dostum in Mazar-i-Sharif and Ismail Khan in Herat, were gradually neutralized by being handed ministerial posts, which were attributed based on co-option in order to avoid conflict.

Meanwhile, rural-urban migration and the return of refugees quadrupled the population of Kabul in two years. Of course there was no employment for the overwhelming majority of them. In October 2004, Hamid Karzai was elected president with fifty-five percent of the votes. While ninety-five percent of the national budget came from foreign aid, seventy percent of public expenditure, excluding wages, was allocated to Kabul. Corruption was facilitated by the fact that aid was not coordinated (International Monetary Fund and World Bank). Notwithstanding, officially, the situation was declared to be on the right track, well on the way, and the adversary's offensive capacity to be essentially broken. It was only by going out on the field oneself, like to Wardak for example, that one learned what in Kabul was only known by a few.

### *The Taliban comeback*

The Taliban were back by 2004, though in small numbers.

In the beginning, the Taliban were rural and educated in Deobandi madrasas preaching a rigorous and puritanical vision of Islam that had been encouraged during General Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship in Pakistan in the 1970s. As Pashtuns, they were embraced by the population, especially in the Pashtun area in the south. Their legitimacy was supported by restored security and stemmed from sharia law. This was perfectly suited to the rural world.

The state that the Taliban had set up since 1996 allowed them to control more than eighty percent of a country that in the absence of

economic growth relied on a subsistence economy, hence on the countryside. The Taliban state was mostly confined to a sterile and formal moralism and allowed itself to be drawn by al-Qaeda into global jihadism, where it had nothing to gain. The price was paid shortly after September 11. Military defeat came quickly and, contrary to Mullah Omar's expectations, his troops were not given the opportunity of a face-off with US infantrymen.

In addition, the Taliban's allies were accomplices of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, former leader of the Hezb-e-Islami movement, which had been the greatest beneficiary of US aid (the group was directly responsible for the Uzbin Valley ambush, which had resulted in ten French casualties). Lastly, the Haqqani network (which had originated in Paktia) was well established in both Paktika and in Paktia.

Reorganized by Pakistan, the Taliban quickly made their presence felt in the south and the east of the country, and attacks resumed. Sporadic in 2004, they were suicide bombings aimed at killing police and Afghan army soldiers. At the time, they were attributed to foreign terrorists, because suicide bombings, it was claimed, were not part of the Pashtun culture. Nor had they been part of the Tamil culture before the Tamil Tigers began to use them systematically. These latter were modern-day pioneers in this area. By resorting to suicide bombings, their goal was to obtain the greatest effectiveness with the smallest investment. And using female terrorists allowed them to double the contingent of a minority amounting to only fifteen percent of the population in Sri Lanka.

Suicide bombings were no more a part of the Chechen culture and even less so with female perpetrators. But *modi operandi* were changing, and insurrectionary movements were happy to copy one another when an effective innovation materialized. Irregular warfare makes it mandatory to be on watch, a difficult practice both for

bureaucrats and for a regular army convinced of its superiority and contemptuous of an obviously less powerful adversary.

There was constant talk for about fifteen years about eradicating poppy farming, but it did not happen. In 2005, according to US sources, it was estimated that Afghanistan provided nine-tenths of world poppy production. Ten years later, this share had virtually not budged. The populations of the provinces involved made a modest living off poppy cultivation; the Taliban and the administration derived substantial benefits from it, with the state taking its cut before the crops left the country toward Iran.

In 2005, the coalition forces officially established that some fifteen thousand “infiltrators” had been eliminated. It was announced in the provinces of Kandahar, Urōzgān, and Kabul that the adversary’s offensive capacity had been significantly curbed. Field investigations showed that neither in Kandahar nor in Urōzgān was there any security, and that living in Afghanistan was made of illusions that had been deliberately spread. There were sporadic terrorist activities. Kabul was essentially secure (particularly compared in the same period with Baghdad, which had been changed into a bunker for foreigners and was otherwise in the midst of a civil war). The Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen regions in the north of the country were calm. The Hazara area even more so.

The Minister of Defense complained, rightly so, that he had only thirty-five thousand men. The United States had decreed that seventy thousand would be needed, while the ministry estimated that at least twice that many were needed. But obviously the United States did not seem to have the capacity to wage two wars at once. As for the police force, badly paid and corrupt, many a time reorganized, it added to the mayhem instead of contributing to reduce it. After suffering one hundred ninety-one casualties in 2006, NATO troops had to face the brutal facts: the return of the Taliban,

discreet in 2003, had become a threat stretching over the entire southernmost part of the conflict.

Under the shelter of Pakistani sanctuary, the Taliban had not just reorganized, as could be seen in the combatants' qualitative improvement. For those who had known the Mujahedeen in the very early 1980s, the contrast was striking. The lessons of the Iraqi insurrection had obviously been learned: suicide bombings were escalated in the cities in order to establish continuous presence; and propaganda for outside consumption was in Arabic and in English. The most singular paradox cutting across the entire war was US aid to Pakistan, part of which was transferred to the Taliban to kill US troops and foil their goals.

Equipped with a sanctuary, receiving logistic assistance, and having, in Pakistan, an inexhaustible pool of recruits, the Taliban could not be crushed. For the Pakistani services, the Taliban served their purpose, which was to establish Afghanistan as an allied state in view of countering India.

An ambiguous ally to say the least, throughout the war Pakistan will have behaved as *de facto* protector of the enemy of the international coalition.

### *The international coalition side*

Whether among the reconstruction teams, stingily spread over the Afghan territory, or among the troops confined to a half-dozen camps, the atmosphere was same: we are among our own. We eat our country's cooking—this was the case for Americans, who were the most numerous—we watch our own television, listen to our own music, and watch DVDs from back home. We pump iron. We hardly go out, and when we do, it is always in convoys preceded by cars clearing the road to avoid car bombs. Contacts with the



population are rare, except when searching for suspects or when searching a house.

Now that communications make it possible, we are in touch with our family and our loved ones every day. We belong to a professional army with a one-year rotation—sometimes less than one year, for some coalition nationals—with combat units that must above all keep safe and not suffer losses. The major part of the troops is in fact psychologically and physically *in transit*. It is not surprising, in these circumstances, that in about fifteen years, US troops only lost less than two thousand five hundred men, that is, an average of approximately one hundred fifty per year.

The famous reconstruction teams, each made up of two to three hundred soldiers, were building wells, schools, and health centers—and gathering intelligence. This military and political use of humanitarian aid disqualified the work of NGOs, which were seen as instruments of the occupying forces. As there were not enough men, private security firms, like in Iraq, proliferated, with the number of their members soon exceeding that of the coalition soldiers.

It was only when conducting investigations in the provinces in 2005-2011 (I was able to go to nearly ten of them) that one could measure what was not reflected in the propaganda of the regime and its backers. The criticism and reservations of international civil servants, when they were expressed, were non-official (off the record). Sometimes an observer would publish a critical assessment to be lost in the water wheel of the media, which would essentially reproduce the official propaganda of the moment. Nowhere did the “gray beards” from the rural areas or the boroughs mention any improvement in their living conditions.

With the passing of the years 2006-2007, it became evident that the Taliban were progressing and that using the air force multiplied

“collateral damages,” enough for Hamid Karzai to soon feel obliged to protest on several occasions. In May 2006, there were violent anti-US riots in Kabul. The US forces were mainly confined to a succession of camps (close to Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad, and elsewhere). Sometimes the air force proved effective: one of the important military leaders, Mullah Dadullah, was killed by a Predator (2007). But the population came under Taliban control as of 2007-2008.

### *The 2007 reversal*

It was in 2007 that the war really took an opposite turn. In Kandahar, the Taliban were able, with complete impunity, to blow up the city’s prison walls, release three hundred Taliban and an even greater number of common criminals, and retreat in a bus, scot-free. Just a few miles away, a Canadian Provincial Reconstruction Team heard the explosion but did not budge. The fact was that Kandahar, despite the offensives of an administration controlled by the Karzai family, was a Taliban stronghold. None of this was reflected in the official discourse, and the foreign media themselves remained vague on the situation. Few people investigated seriously and when they did, the results of the investigation were known only to a small number of politicians, at the top, who continued to not change course.

On the field, right in the middle of the country in the province of Urōzġān, it could be noted that the Italians had paid the Taliban to avoid clashes, and that the Dutch remained strictly confined and were not holding the ground. The governor of the province spent most of the year in London and received his guests in the garden of his strongly guarded villa. In 2008, it was decided to send additional troops (perhaps ten thousand). Too little, too late. Was it possible to hold a country like Afghanistan, which had an active sanctuary at its

disposal, with some seventy-five thousand men, even if there were twice that many when including the security firms (almost exclusively in cities, especially three or four cities)?

By 2007-2008, the war was lost, not at the military but at the administrative level, at least in the Pashtun area—or more than the southern half of the country. The Taliban, as noted, were present at the scale of the villages. This was obviously not newsworthy. There is nothing spectacular about groundswells affecting the social field underhandedly, especially when they occur in such a surreptitious way. The Taliban technique was classic, based on the mobilization methods that Mao Zedong, in another ideological context, had popularized in China.

The Mujahedeen I had known in 1980, especially during my second stay, longer than the first, had reacted spontaneously to the foreign (and impious) intervention, even if the local traditional authorities had set the tone. In a quarter of a century, many things had been shaken up by the war: the local leaders had made way to young commanders, and tribalism had lost ground. Undoubtedly partly thanks to their training by Pakistani intelligence services, the Taliban had adopted Leninist-Maoist-style persuasion/coercion techniques to impose themselves. They denounced the regime's corruption, significant in the cities but in the countryside as well, and the presence of foreigners who claimed to impose rules contravening religion. They established their first contacts in mosques and followed them up with shows of force. And once their presence was established, they stood in for the state, which was absent and corrupt anyway, and rendered non-negotiable justice according to rules familiar to the populations.

Facing them was an Afghan army with many weaknesses: insufficient troops (fifty-eight thousand men in 2008); too many non-Pashtuns in its ranks, an obvious disadvantage in the Pashtun region; defective logistics, which made it dependent on the

coalition troops; and finally, chronically, numerous deserters, even if there are no reliable statistics.

The Taliban, for their part, had serious advantages, in particular thanks to Pakistan, which, in addition to logistics and sanctuary, offered them an inexhaustible reserve of volunteers (with a population of at least fifteen million Pashtuns, if not more). In addition, the Taliban exercised administrative control over the population in the south and, gradually, the north of the country. Moreover, they had understood that the center of gravity of the conflict resided in Western public opinion, which had become unable to bear military losses. Thus, in 2009 in Uzbun, not far from Kabul, the French forces lost ten men in an ambush. The French president of the republic went there to pay them homage. The French media—and part of public opinion—adopted a victim's interpretation of the ambush, stating, overall, that the soldiers had not fallen in the line of duty, or even of their commitment, but because of an unfortunate accident, which should have been avoided.

There were other advantages offsetting the relative military weakness of the Taliban: the Taliban opposed the presence of foreign troops while combating a manifestly corrupt regime, which, in ten years, had done nothing for the rural areas, or so little; the values preached by the Taliban were more familiar in rural areas than for instance “democracy” or the role of women; and finally, their ideological motivation (whatever the judgement on its nature) was infinitely higher than that of their adversaries, whether Western or Afghan.

False hopes had been built up since 2007 on the possibility of rallying certain Taliban. This turned out to be a delusion. In this type of civil war, the aim was not nothing less than to destroy the adversary as soon as the foreign troops evacuated the country. In

fact, the Taliban's main condition for any negotiations was the departure of all foreign troops.

The situation in the country in 2007 (six years after the beginning of the presence of the coalition gathered around the United States) was one of dismaying mediocrity: very few combatants on the Western side; and a badly armed, unmotivated Afghan army (often joined just to have regular wages).

In spite of appearances, Hamid Karzai was essentially the master only of Kabul. A few provincial capitals were under control, but with the passing of time they mostly depended on the local governor's capacity to manage an increasingly restricted domain.

On the whole, never were counterinsurgency and reconstruction of the nation (a pretty much impossible task for foreigners) anything other than slogans. It is difficult to see, in fact, how such ambitious tasks could have even been considered with no knowledge of the local culture or language. Once again, the contrast with the colonial period is striking. The worst was not having the slightest information on local culture, customs, and behavior. Failure was contained in the project itself.

Apart from tiny inflation, all the indicators were negative: three-quarters of the population were suffering from malnutrition; just as many had no access to drinking water; infant mortality affected twenty percent of children under five; sixty percent of Afghans had no access to health care; and finally, three-quarters of adults (and ninety-two percent of women) were illiterate, with primary school being attended by sixty percent of the boys and thirty percent of the girls.

Under these conditions it is easy to understand why the slogan "Nation building" was Utopian. Seven years after the intervention, the balance was pathetic. Globally, Afghanistan was ranked 176<sup>th</sup>

out of 178 countries for corruption. And according to the World Bank, it was one of the five poorest countries of the world.

### *What solutions?*

In November 2008, Barack Obama was elected president. He had opposed the Iraq War and had denounced at the time the strategic error of opening a second front—all the more that this was an unnecessary war. In addition, he had announced that priority would be placed on the war in Afghanistan and after a lengthy consultation period, he chose a new approach. On the suggestion of Generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal, he decided to adopt a counterinsurgency strategy and to reinforce military presence on the ground with thirty thousand additional men. To reassure his public opinion, Obama announced withdrawal from Iraq—under certain conditions—starting in 2011.

But to restore a situation so badly started more than a half-dozen years earlier and from which the adversary had largely benefitted during last years (2004-2008) was no easy task. What were the necessary (but nonsufficient) criteria? First, time was needed. But from the start, an unalterable commitment had to be made to be out in three years. Then troops were needed: thirty thousand men were therefore the bare minimum, not even to improve the correlation of forces but simply so it would not deteriorate. Above all, a government was needed, one that would try to improve the economic situation of a considerable part of the population. The one that had been placed in power was characterized by the corruption of a clique that made it a habit of co-opting potential opponents by paying them off. In such conditions, how would it be possible to win over the rural population, that is, the country's majority?

In addition, the situation had been made even worse by two serious disadvantages. The war had been mainly waged by foreign troops, whose rejection by the local population, grown stronger, had been skillfully exploited by the Taliban. How long can foreign armies claim to be fighting for the liberation of a people? Above all, the Taliban had found assistance and refuge in Pakistan; a state receiving US financial aid was backing its donors' very adversaries. This dilemma was never solved, nor even approached (except during the secret operation carried out in Pakistani territory to eliminate Osama bin Laden).

This was the lame Catch-22 situation of US troops in Afghanistan. (It is true that Pakistan's nuclear status constituted an obstacle to applying pressure on the country.)

One last element can be added to this picture shedding light on the US failure in Afghanistan. The Afghan army, which was getting classic training (unsuited to hunting down the Taliban), was made up, according to US estimates, of thirty thousand operational soldiers out of a total of one hundred thirty-four thousand (2008), that is, no more than twenty-five percent. The soldiers' wages were one hundred sixty-five dollars a month, which could explain the attractiveness of the military function but did not contribute to their willingness to fight. For years, the police force had been a plague for its behavior and corruption. Its recruits were much worse than the army's. According to US sources, forty-seven percent of them had not completed their training period.

Something that is remarkable about US democracy is related to its capacity in times of crisis to take rigorous stock and to act. This was the case regarding Iraq in 2006 with the Baker-Hamilton report, and regarding Afghanistan, with General McChrystal's lucid report. By comparison, in France we are a very long way off. For having given a rigorous account of the Afghan situation in a French daily, General Vincent Desportes, at the time director of the École

de Guerre, the official body in charge of setting military doctrine, was upbraided by the Army Chief of Staff and lost his post. This type of attitude is a recipe for failure.

In his report (published on September 21, 2009 by the *Washington Post*), General McChrystal established, in substance:

- Wanting above all to protect US troops for fear of suffering casualties is partially the cause of collateral damage and has distanced the troops from the Afghan population, both psychologically and physically.

- The weakness of the state, the corruption, and the errors of the coalition has dissuaded the Afghans from supporting a government that has done so little for the population. The crisis of confidence with regard to a state that has guaranteed security, justice, and basic services so poorly, together with the absence of an economic outlook has facilitated the adversaries' propaganda.

- In many areas, the existence of a Taliban shadow government has been found, which has the populations under its control. The Taliban are taking the lead, and are seeking to exercise even greater control over the population, breaking the coalition's determination.

These were his proposals to improve the situation:

- To gain the initiative, put troops on the ground, protect the populations, and improve their living conditions.

- The coalition has an advantage over the Taliban: financial means to improve the situation in the rural areas.

- Success will depend, in the long run, on an effective administration perceived as being at the service of the population, and on reliable security forces.

The first panel of this tryptic was attempted but did not modify the situation for lack of both follow-up and men. The third panel



was unrealistic from the start. The country's administration was non-reformable.

Given these conditions, there has been very limited leeway. In fact, counterinsurgency was abandoned just one year after being attempted. Instead, the proven "ink blot" technique was applied, which consisted in cleaning up an area, then moving on to another. The southernmost province of Helmand was selected to be the theater of the new strategy. The "ink blot" method consists in spreading out from a center and pushing the adversary to the periphery. This of course requires that the adversary is not evasive. The Taliban, however, did not try to hold their ground. They preferred to withdraw and take the combat elsewhere, in particular to the province of Kandahar.

To occupy the ground lastingly and to change the populations' living conditions while continuing to hunt the Taliban in the neighboring provinces, more troops would have been needed. Tactical victories were possible. But to take over administrative power on the ground at the scale of the country, at least half of which was controlled by the adversary, was hardly possible without more time and men, both of which were out of the question.

The differences openly expressed by General McChrystal and published in the *Washington Post* led to his resignation in 2010. By 2011, in my view (one unofficially shared by top-level officers on the ground), the war had been lost politically. Thereafter, it was no longer possible to foray outside of Kabul without taking considerable risks. The north of the country was invested as far as the Badakhshan province. As for the Taliban operations, by 2011 they were being carried out by several hundred men.

US objectives for 2014 were the following: to restore security, to improve the country's administration, to create jobs, to develop the economy, and to fight against drug trafficking. None of these was

reached. Meanwhile, Hamid Karzai, re-elected in 2009 under more than dubious conditions, would finally withdraw officially to make room for a fairly unpopular leader who would not be able to change anything fundamentally. The military situation remained just as poor.

Pakistan had shown its capacity to cause trouble in the fall of 2010 by preventing trucks essential to the coalition's logistics from going through its territory. Not to mention the presence of Osama bin Laden, who had taken refuge there for a dozen years...

In 2015, when the death of Mullah Omar was announced (he had been dead for about two years), minor dissensions arose but not a serious crisis. Power was assumed by Mullah Akhtar Mansour. In November of the same year, a group of dissenting Taliban took as their leader Mullah Mohammad Rasoul. A month earlier, the Taliban had managed to seize for a brief moment the town of Kunduz, in the north of the country, showing their capacity to make trouble, even in the state's urban strongholds. Kunduz was taken back thanks to US intervention, but this also meant that departure of US troops by the end of 2016 as promised by Barack Obama was no longer on the table. The generals demanded to have ten thousand men after this deadline, and the president authorized a few more than five-and-a-half thousand.

The war in Afghanistan was at a point of non-victory from the military point of view and of political failure, which could have easily changed into a military defeat if US troops were withdrawn. The Afghanistan problem, collateral damage of the Iraq War, had appeared to be solved in 2002.<sup>46</sup> Nearly fifteen years later, it had turned out to be one more fiasco, after that of Iraq. Although it had been costly financially, it had not been so in terms of men, neither for the United States nor for the coalition allies. Nonetheless, like in

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<sup>46</sup> Goya, Michel (2009) "Impressions de Kaboul", *La Lettre de l'Irsem*, November.

Iraq, due to pressure from public opinion, some contingents were withdrawn (Spain's, among others) showing the strong misgivings of public opinion experiencing the permanent anxiety diffused by the media, television in particular.

The last year of US presence will undoubtedly be remembered for its spectacular growth in urban attacks. What the United States called "Afpak" will have been, from 2001 to 2016, a complicated game of duplicity, with Pakistan, thanks to its atomic weapons, playing both sides to get substantial economic aid from Washington. Pakistan is a state in serious difficulty, which lost its competition with India a long time ago. While its army was fighting against its own Taliban, it never stopped supporting, and monitoring, with its intelligence services (ISI), the Afghan Taliban who were fighting the United States and their allies. A second constituent contradiction can be added to this one, namely, how, with foreign troops knowing nothing about the cultural context, could a war intended to consolidate an unpopular and corrupt power possibly be won?

## THE SYRIAN IMBROGLIO

The wave of protest engendered by a fortuitous event in Tunisia (2010), after having brought down the Tunisian regime, soon caused the fall of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, then that of the Yemeni regime. The West, by getting rid of Muammar Gaddafi, stirred up lasting local and regional chaos. Lastly, more discretely, Saudi Arabia dispatched troops to consolidate the established order in Bahrain, where the Shia majority was protesting against the dictatorship of the Sunni minority.

The protest wave reached Syria in late 2011 with peaceful demonstrations in Daraa, at the Jordanian border. The Alawite minority (thirteen percent of the population) in power chose to engage in a showdown with the Sunni Arabs, who were two-thirds of the total population. The regime, in power for two generations (it had repressed an Islamist protest movement in Hama in 1982) relied on Christians (ten percent of the population) of various observances and on a large part of the Sunni bourgeoisie, which benefitted from the stability of the regime.

Otherwise, the country was made up of Druze (three percent), whom the Sunnis did not like at all, and of Kurds (ten percent) along the Turkish border, who under Hafez al-Assad, Bashar's father, had been partly deported to make room for Arabs. Several hundred thousand Kurds had no official documentation. The Kurds traditionally occupy the Al-Jazira Province (they are many in Aleppo). Although Muslim and Sunni, they have suffered decades of repression in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq (and to a lesser extent in Iran), never defended as Muslims but always ostracized as Kurds.

## *Beginnings of the civil war*

The civil war was well underway by the end of 2012. At that time, a number of observers considered that an intervention aimed at removing Bashar al-Assad and his regime from power could have given way to a “democratic” option. It is however possible that this was never an option, even if, at the time, Islamist radicals and other jihadists were obviously less powerful.

Geographically speaking, the country is not, like Iraq, endowed with great quantities of oil nor does it have an economic potential comparable with Iraq’s. It should be recalled that it was France, during its mandate over Syria, that had created the “Alawite state.” More than two-thirds of the country is barren to the east of the coastal strip, in which an overwhelming majority of the population is concentrated.

In the east of Syria, held by the Islamic State (ISIL), only the banks of the Euphrates River are populated, modestly, with the towns of Al-Raqqah and Deir ez-Zor. Palmyra is isolated in the desert center of the country. Human occupation in this part of Syria is extremely limited. It is concentrated along the Aleppo-Homs-Hama-Damascus line up to Daraa, which constitutes the country’s backbone and is where most of the conflict is being played out.

Along the Turkish border, the Kurds, with their three centers, Al-Qamishli, Kobanî, and Afrin, have been solidly organized for nearly three years. Built according to a model inspired from the PKK in Turkey, the Democratic Union Party (PYD) rules over Rojava (Syrian Kurdish country). This movement has succeeded in setting up a centralized organization linking together various religious or ethnic groups under the umbrella of the Syrian Democratic Front, along the model once used by Marxist-Leninist movements.

A Free Syrian Army (FSA) was formed at the beginning of the insurrection, as well as a Syrian National Council, half of the members of which were outside Syria (2011). These organizations, supported by the United States, would prove disappointing. Between a regime knowing that it is fighting for its survival and Islamists fueled with the desire to win, these organizations, whose motivations are lukewarm and that are being kept afloat by foreign assistance, do not have much of a fighting spirit. The forces trained by the United States to fight against the regime have evaporated over the years (in October 2015, the United States, after having spent substantial amounts of money, terminated this type of program).

The political polarization to which Bashar al-Assad largely contributed was not entirely on him. In fact very early on, as of September 2012, on the ground there were only Bashar al-Assad's regime and a proliferation of jihadist movements gathered under the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, a coalition of seventeen Islamist organizations assisted by Turkey and Qatar, including the al-Tawhid Brigade (close to the Muslim Brotherhood), the Farouq Brigades, the Suqour al-Sham Brigade, and others. Starting in the spring of 2012, Jabhat al-Nusra (an emanation of al-Qaeda) became active, soon to be followed by Ahrar ash-Sham.

A particularly effective attack in July 2012 against the National Defense headquarters in Damascus made it seem like the insurrection had the means to topple the regime. The attack killed the minister of defense, the vice-minister, and Bashar al-Assad's most important adviser, General Hasan Turkmani, right in the regime's bastion. And a de facto war of attrition set in. What forces were involved in it?

The regime lined up more than two hundred thousand men, seventy-five thousand of which seemed dependable, headed by the fourth armored division made up of elite troops, five well-trained

divisions and two special-forces divisions. Opposite them, the insurrectionists were credited in 2013 with forty to fifty thousand men (including Tunisians, Libyans, Saudis, Iraqis, Afghans, Chechens, and others).

The Syrian regime can count on various regional allies including Lebanese Hezbollah militia with their five to eight thousand men, who fought and won the battle of al-Qusayr (May 15 to June 5, 2013). Added to these are a number of Iranian Pasdarans (the Quds Force), including advisers and trainers in charge of training about fifty thousand militiamen (al-Jaysh al-Sha'bi), the Baghdad regime, and finally Iran. In March 2013, a crisis broke out following the use of chemical agents, which was supposed to constitute the "red line" set by Washington. There were several hundred casualties and each side was blaming the other. In addition to the regime's responsibility, there was mention of chemical agents provided to the Islamists by Turkey in order to hasten the fall of Bashar al-Assad by prompting US intervention. Which did not happen. And Vladimir Putin astutely suggested to the Damascus regime that they dismantle their entire chemical arsenal.

In 2013, the Islamist movements, which had greater assistance, had more weapons and were estimated at about fifty thousand men. They may very well have been more at that date, but how is it possible to evaluate the number of battle-hardened combatants compared to those who had just joined the insurrection in order to take part in the Jihad?

At the beginning of 2013, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar ash-Sham were established close to Idlib, which they would be able to take over the following year. These movements also took control of Al-Raqqa, which they would later have to yield to ISIL. In April 2013, the Jordanian border went under rebel control.

That year, the United States tried, in vain, to set up a “Syria Revolutionaries Front.” Polarization was obviously occurring at the extremities.

### *ISIL’s intervention*

Come from Iraq in 2012, the Islamic State of Iraq would have many advantages in Syria: proximity of the Turkish border, which volunteers for the Jihad were allowed to cross, and contacts with the Turkish intelligence service (MIT) eager to undermine the Syrian Kurds’ PYD. This would be particularly obvious during the long siege of Kobanî, where a few thousand Syrian Kurd male and female combatants held their ground for months against better armed and more numerous ISIL troops, now supported by Ankara.

In June 2013, ISIL broke away from Jabhat al-Nusra. Ayman al-Zawahiri, the leader of al-Qaeda Central, declared that Jabhat al-Nusra was the only legitimate movement in Syria. In January 2014, ISIL clashed briefly with other Islamist movements. Al-Raqqah became the epicenter of ISIL power in Syria. In September, ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra clashed. To Turkey’s great displeasure, the United States decided to support those defending Kobanî by bombing ISIL forces.

While until the end of 2013 Bashar al-Assad’s regime appeared to have the upper hand, the Syrian army seemed to have run out of steam in 2014. According to the Syrian Human Rights Watch (under control of the opposition), from March 2011 to June 2014, or in three years, the number of casualties caused by the conflict amounted to one hundred sixty thousand, including forty thousand “rebels,” fifty thousand Syrian soldiers, and fifty thousand civilians.

In the north, Turkey’s influence is significant. Considering that Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was doubly concerned, the



situation has been followed closely. At the November 1, 2015 parliamentary elections his party obtained a better national score (more than 49 percent) than he had gotten in the previous summer's presidential elections (41.9 percent) by exploiting the ultranationalism of part of the Turkish electorate and by granting himself the greatest amount of television air time while striking his Kurdish adversaries, namely the combat movement, PKK, and Selahattin Demirtaş's Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), a democratic parliamentary movement. Erdoğan wished to weaken the Kurds of Syria so as to prevent them from establishing an autonomous unbroken area between Kobanî and Afrin. This was where Turkey planned to establish a no-fly zone. To get it, Ankara allowed the United States to use the NATO Incirlik Air Base again, and committed, in theory, to striking ISIL. Russia would later de facto oppose the plan. Turkey would respond by shooting down a Russian airplane.

Otherwise, in agreement with Saudi Arabia (which had so far refused to assist movements sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood) and Qatar, Turkey actively helped all the Islamist movements federated under Jaish al-Fatah (March 2015) and unofficially, Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar ash-Sham.

In June 2014, ISIL achieved a spectacular breakthrough in the direction of Iraq, held by the army of Baghdad. Sometime earlier, it had already seized Fallujah in Iraq, a Sunni bastion. About two or three thousand ISIL soldiers moved toward Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, to fight it out against Nouri al-Maliki's much more numerous armed forces. Al-Maliki had completely alienated the Sunnis with a policy of exclusion, which had been a mistake, but then he made an even bigger one: his armed forces, undermined by corruption, incapable of fighting, disbanded and left quantities of material behind. In their rush to run away, they even left with ISIL the capital they had from the state bank.

It would not be long before ISIL's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, would use this easy victory to proclaim himself caliph. Sowing terror, ISIL penetrated the Sinjar area where Masoud Barzani's KDP troops, poorly trained, poorly armed, and surprised, made a hasty retreat, leaving Sinjar's Yazidis to their fate. After perpetrating massacres and kidnapping women and children, whom they would later sell as slaves, the ISIL columns penetrated actual Kurdish territory in early August, threatening Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan and the place of Masoud Barzani's KDP headquarters.

A quick intervention on August 8 by the US Air Force would stop ISIL's victorious offensive in its tracks. Meanwhile, the success of the fall of Mosul, the political impact of the terror in Sinjar, and the progression of ISIL elements into Kurdish territory set an impressive attraction trend. Candidates for the Jihad hailed in numbers from the Maghreb, Western Europe, the Middle East, and Northern Caucasus to join a movement that had been able to impose itself in a spectacular way and gave the feeling that victory was at the tip of the rifle.

Working the social networks with great command and imposing themselves in the media and social networks, sometimes with a policy of terror, sometimes by dramatizing horror, ISIL fascinated Western television, which relayed their propaganda abundantly. This contributed to the organization's aura and to destabilizing spirits in the West. With the help of television ratings, the game was all on ISIL's side and its most effective achievement. At the strictly military level, ISIL's progress had been modest (in a year, Ramadi in Iraq and Palmyra in Syria), but its ideological and psychological impact was now considerable.

In a less spectacular way but militarily more effective, the Kurdish forces of Syria managed in 2015 to seize the strategic position of Tell Abyad, made a successful offensive toward Al-Hasakah, and linked the two districts of Al-Qamishli and Kobani.

Al-Raqqa will be one of their next objectives. Above all, the PYD aims to extend this linkage to the district of Afrin. If they are successful, the Kurds of Syria will have an unbroken autonomous area, ruining the Turkish plan for a no-fly zone. Seeing that Bashar al-Assad's armed forces were running out of steam, Russia decided to intervene directly.

This intervention allowed the Russians to put their Ukrainian failure behind. Because, whatever one thinks, recovering Crimea, which is Russian, and backing the insurrectionary movements in East Ukraine had not erased the fact that they had lost Ukraine, populated with forty-five million Russian-speaking Slavs who would not be part of the Eurasian Economic Union. Admittedly, Vladimir Putin was able to stop Ukraine's inclusion in NATO.

Richard K. Betts, one of Washington's most prominent political observers, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* (November-December 2014): "In its beginning, the crackup in Ukraine was caused hardly more by Russian President Vladimir Putin's aggression than by unthinking Western provocations, including unbridled NATO expansion, the humiliating dismissal of Russia as a great power, and the EU's efforts to convince Kiev to cut its ties to Moscow."

In addition, Syria is Russia's only ally in the Middle East today, and this is Russia's chance to play an important role in a situation where the United States and their allies are forced, by their alliances with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, to adopt a cautionary stand. For the United States, stopping ISIL in its march on Palmyra would have appeared as if it was defending the regime's army. In this respect, Russia has much greater freedom of action and has no qualms about striking Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar ash-Sham in addition to ISIL. It is hard to understand why these highly subversive movements of yesterday, one of which is a member of al-Qaeda, have become respectable since ISIL supplanted them.

Russia has access to the Mediterranean through the port of Tartus and is to have a military base in Lattakia—both in Alawite territory. In addition, Russia has no interest in allowing the return of Caucasian jihadists, yesterday's nationalists, nor of the Chechens, who are henceforth fighting under the banner of the most radical Islamism.

Vladimir Putin, who had been demonized in connection with Ukraine (the United States had systematically pushed the former USSR back to the borders of Russia), has thus had an international comeback in the Near East. While he is not regarded as a partner, he is at least a useful player insofar as he is openly fighting Islamist organizations that Westerners do not in the least wish to see in power in Damascus. The Russian intervention, without being decisive, weighs heavily in the complex correlation of forces being played out in Syria, the consequences of which are for the most part regional.

Against this background, the role of the Syrian army, for better or for worse, is currently indispensable, in addition to that of the Kurds of Syria, also particularly necessary.

Thanks to the Syrian civil war, ISIL has succeeded in gaining some political substance and in imposing itself as the most dynamic Islamist movement, bringing about an incoming rush of several thousand volunteers.

It is easy to dismiss the caricature of a caliphate and to see ISIL as a terrorist movement (an official designation that muddles a proper understanding of the adversary's strategy).

ISIL does indeed employ terrorist-type actions, but it also uses guerrilla-warfare techniques, and like in Mosul and Palmyra, goes for traditional-warfare combat with limited, albeit frightening means, given its volunteers for death. In Iraq, the movement is busy actively building a framework for the populations by providing care,

electricity, and schools, and organizing it through social control, not to mention the propaganda addressed to the younger generations, who are more malleable than the adults. On the other hand, in Syria, ISIL is essentially occupying a scarcely populated area. ISIL's core is Iraqi and more than two-thirds of its combatants are not Syrian. Many do not even speak the Arabic spoken in Syria. Actually, while Syria is ISIL's battle field, Iraq, in its Sunni area, is really its backbone and its mass-population base. After years of vexations and discriminations from Nouri al-Maliki's Shia regime, the people are favorable to them. How strong support for ISIL is, is not known, but it would be wrong to underestimate it. (After all, several hundred members of the Abu Nimr tribe were executed for having refused to pledge allegiance.) And well, ISIL plays the part of a revolutionary movement by attracting many youngsters from across the Muslim world, as well as from Western Europe, to join the Jihad.

Like it or not, the movement cannot be conveniently defined as nihilistic. Whatever the Utopia of their project to return to the real or supposed purity of the Islam of the first centuries, theirs is a rallying appeal. Was this not also true of yesterday's "Marxism-Leninism," in the name of which so many militants fought and gave their life?

We are dealing with a revolutionary movement condemned to lose because its goals are completely unrealistic—contrary to those of the Chinese or the Indians—but whose *disturbance capacity* is substantial, lasting, and preoccupying to us. It goes without saying that in this context, any ISIL military success on the ground is propaganda by the deed, and dangerous. This is why, whatever the ambiguity of our official alliances, we need to act to make sure that Islamist movements do not achieve any military victories, neither in Syria nor anywhere else.

Contrary to the Islamists, Bashar al-Assad's regime, for which we have no sympathy at all, is not conspiring for our defeat. In politics, it is important to know who, in every given situation, is the main adversary. Otherwise, there is no doubt that the goals of our two major regional allies among the Muslim states, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, are opposed to ours. And we might add, not only in Syria, but at the regional level and even at the scale of the Muslim world, diaspora included. We should finally point out that we are not directly concerned by the antagonism between Sunnis and Shias. These two rival currents are condemned, like they were yesterday and will be tomorrow, to coexist, and it is preferable that neither of them prevail decisively over the other.

## IN CLOSING ...

Through this work, we have garnered a better understanding of why on the European side we formerly won colonial wars and why, since Vietnam, the United States and Europe can no longer win wars.

The spirit of the age has changed since then end of World War II. All adversaries have come to know us and can manipulate our increasingly faint-hearted and aging public opinion in a demographic context unfavorable to us.

We might add, since Vietnam, the US handicap of what political scientist Stanley Hoffman called “perpetually renewed historical virginity” inhibits remembering the lessons of experience. Which also results in dumbfounding ignorance among decision makers of the cultural field with which they are dealing, and among the military, all too often, in excessive confidence in the capacity of technology to solve problems that are not technological. Added to this are soldiers who remain too little time on the ground without even attempting to know it, practicing unsuitable warfare, and both psychologically and physically in transit.

And then, how can we claim to fight for a people about which we know nothing, not the language, nor the history, nor the culture, when, in addition, we are supporting a manifestly corrupt regime that we have ourselves brought to power? This was in fact already the case in Vietnam.

The armies that we form in our image, or at least based on our model, are not suited to the tasks that befall them: no motivation, no esprit de corps, clunky and badly maintained material, and defective logistics. In a nutshell, they are armies with no desire to

win. This was the case yesterday in South Vietnam, as well as not so long ago in Iraq and will still be tomorrow in Afghanistan. As for our troops, overall, they have neither the frugality, nor the rusticity, nor the *psychological solidity* of the French colonial troops of the Indochina War or of the British at the time of the counterinsurgency in Malaysia. This is the price of peace and prosperity.

The problem lies today in the political will of decision makers who need to consider their respective public opinions, which the media have undermined by selling them daily anxiety.

Admittedly, the United States has been burned, in Iraq like in Afghanistan, by about fifteen years of political failure. It is easy to understand the reservations of the public and the caution of the administration, but the latter knows that it is far from doing in Syria and in Iraq what it had done not so long ago in Kosovo. The bombings there had been more massive by far.

The United States is curbed by its alliances with partners like Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which are pursuing different goals than Washington's. In this respect, Russia's intervention makes it possible to counter, in addition to ISIL, other Islamist movements, which is by no means contrary to Washington's and Western interests. Of course, Russia will not bring in any fundamental changes. This war of attrition, despite talks aiming to find a compromise, is set to last, given that Islamist movements are not lacking in combatants and that their backers hope that these will be victorious in Syria in the long run.

For Saudi Arabia, which incidentally is opposed to the Muslim Brotherhood, this regional war, the epicenter of which is Syria, is in fact targeted at Iran and what Riyadh considers to be the Shia Crescent. But Iran is an old, particularly tenacious state. The lifting of the embargo (January 2016) was a victory for Iran, which in



addition, contrary to other states, does not draw most of its revenue from oil.

Turkey is not aiming at anything less than to be the hegemonic Muslim state in the Middle East (its historical rival in this respect still being Iran). A Sunni and Islamist Syria, more or less under Ankara's influence, is one of its goals. The other is to crush both the PKK and any Kurdish armed movement (which also includes the Kurds of Syria), as well as all Kurdish peaceful political protest. This is fully in line with Kemalism, according to which Turkey is the country of the Turks, the Turkified, or individuals subjected to its rule. At the end of December 2015, to make the world forget its military failure in Yemen, Saudi Arabia formed a Sunni coalition with thirty-four other African and Asian Muslim countries, officially designed to fight against terrorism. The fuzzy denomination allows any interpretation. Is it about fighting against ISIL or about setting up a common front against Iran? In any event, among these states only a handful is able to act effectively over the long term, including Pakistan, with its known duplicity.

### *What are the short-term outlooks of this conflict?*

With regard to our allies on the ground, the Kurds of Iraq, better armed and trained than in the summer of 2014, are holding up a front longer than six hundred miles thanks to US, and more modestly French, air cover.

Since last year, they have recovered about seven thousand seven hundred square miles and made solid progress in the Sinjar district (with the support of the Kurds of Syria and the PKK). It is unlikely that they will go any farther—into non-Kurdish country—all the less so that an offensive against Mosul, for example, would be costly. There is already a lack of young Peshmerga, rotation is apparently

not ensured, and the North (DPK) and the South (the PUK and the Gorran) are still highly divided in terms of armed forces as well as politically. Absence of state tradition comes with a cost. The North of Iraq's Kurdistan is dependent on Turkey, and the South on Iran. In 2015, the Kurds of Syria, remarkably organized and motivated, were the most offensive elements against ISIL. They are seeking to join Kobanî and Afrin together in order to have unbroken territory. This, precisely, contradicts Turkey, which is determined to establish a no-fly zone in this area, over which it would have de facto control. Helped by the United States, the Kurds are also supported by the Russians, and drawing out the conflict is their best chance to consolidate their position, even their survival, which depends partly on the duration of the war. What would their situation be in a future settlement between Turkey's militant hostility and that of the majority of Syria's Arabs?

Need we add that for Iraq it is very difficult, even in light of the ambiguous case of Tikrit (most of the Sunni population preferred to flee), to fight against ISIL with Shias or Kurds in Sunni territory. Sparking off Sunni resistance against ISIL would be ideal.

In his time (2006), General Petraeus had succeeded in Anbar Province by paying, organizing, and arming tribal elements to get them to fight against al-Qaeda. But they were marginalized by Nouri al-Maliki, who refused to incorporate them into the Iraqi armed forces.

In Syria, the United States has on several occasions since 2011 recruited Sunnis to fight against ISIL. In vain, in spite of years of efforts. In October 2015, the United States gave up this plan, the results of which had never been anything but disappointing. It finally had to be understood that *Sunni "moderates" do not wish to die*. This type of risk is taken by the Islamists and by the Kurds of Syria in the name of different, but mobilizing ideologies.

ISIL can be weakened by inflicting military defeats on it on the Syrian territory it controls, which is actually, contrary to appearances, its weak point.

A great part of the movement's aura has come from the collapse in Mosul of Nouri al-Maliki's Shia forces, followed by its victorious offensives against Sinjar and Iraqi Kurdistan before US air intervention. In Iraq, territorialization in a densely Sunni area has allowed ISIL administrative control over the population, to provide for its minimal needs, and to organize the young. We should note that in Syria, like in Iraq, ISIL suffered a series of reversals in 2015. Ideally, at the military level, it would have been effective for the allies to conduct blitz-type raids by special forces in order to break the adversary every time conditions were favorable.<sup>47</sup> Looking back, there have been plenty of opportunities of this kind: Mosul, Sinjar, the breakthrough into Iraqi Kurdistan (2014), the offensive toward Palmyra (2015), and so on, but this option was ruled out.

In addition, it is important to reduce ISIL's economic resources, particularly from selling oil, which Turkey buys from ISIL at a good price. The oil wells and their routing logistics must be destroyed.

Might it be necessary to wait for the end of Barack Obama's term of office for a more offensive policy to be adopted at the beginning of 2017, possibly conducted by a female Democratic president? Although of course, the Islamist attack in San Bernardino (December 2015) has reminded Americans that they are involved in this conflict.

Lastly, ISIL and the Islamists need to be fought internationally—and this is no simple task—on the twofold front of information and ideological propaganda. ISIL is very effective in this area. Its influence in Africa like in Asia is significant, particularly in Libya.

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<sup>47</sup> Michel Goya seems to favor this option.  
See his blog (<http://lavoiedelepee.blogspot.fr>).

Its revolutionary warfare, conducted in the territories under its control where it mobilizes the young and provides the eldest all kinds of services, is also being conducted outside, in sectors that it does not control, but seduces. From this point of view, what we have to offer as an alternative is neither attractive nor operational. Ideologies die less quickly than men.

At the margins of the attacks perpetrated on four continents (France, the United States, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Libya, the Sinai, Tunisia, Turkey, Indonesia, Belgium, and so on) in 2015-2016, other techniques have been used. For instance, sexual assaults in Cologne in January 2016, where the point was to get reactions of brutal rejection from Europeans in order to break all the communities apart and to spread the feeling that coexistence is impossible. ISIL, in this respect, has potential allies among part of the young in Europe.

The center of gravity of the civil war was focused in early 2016 on the northeastern part of the territory, along the Aleppo-Menagh-Azaz corridor, which leads to Turkey. The Russian air strikes, which have intensified, have loosened the noose around the government forces, which have moved to the offensive.

Turkey, which at home is trying to crush the Kurdish combatants of the PKK, is worried about advances of the Syrian Kurdish forces (YPG), the armed branch of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). Their breakthrough toward Azaz could make it possible to constitute an unbroken Kurdish territory, shutting off the Turkish border. This would ruin the Turkish plan of a no-fly zone and would greatly obstruct the Islamists' logistics. Ankara is pounding the Kurdish forces of Syria and threatens to resort to other measures despite exhortations from Washington and Paris.

Taking advantage of the relative paralysis of the past few months of Obama's second term, during which his concern has been more

focused on domestic issues, Vladimir Putin has sought, successfully, to change the correlation of forces on the ground. He has consolidated the Syrian regime while at the same time actively supporting the Kurds of Syria. These latter are also supported by the United States insofar as they are an effective combat force against ISIL. But by intensifying their advance toward the Turkish border, the Kurds of Syria have added to the embarrassment of the United States with regard to the ambiguous ally that Erdoğan's Turkey has become.

The specter of a Russian-Turkish conflict is wildly exaggerated but the tension is real. Turkey is clamoring for an international intervention "against all terrorisms," to which only Saudi Arabia seems to be favorable. But, as recently noted in Yemen, Saudi Arabia's capacities are limited.

Settlement of the conflict still seems as dubious as it is remote. In the current circumstances, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime would lead to chaos similar to that in Libya. And whatever feelings one might have with regard to this dictatorship, the fact is that it currently controls at least two-thirds of the Syrian population.

The game is far from over.

As far as France is concerned, the November 2015 wake-up call in Paris was needed for the authorities to finally decide to take measures, some of which are inadequate and debatable, when not simply uncalled for. Although social harmony had been undermined for a long time, the various governments of the last decades had endeavored to keep up its appearance, and its flaws and limits have now been revealed.

France is not "at war," a terminology that recalls the verbal inflation of President G.W. Bush in the wake of 9/11. The declaration, on the other hand, must have delighted ISIL by conferring on it a dimension that it is far from having. But the

foundations of the militant Islamism that can lead to Jihadism have already been liberally diffused in France for a long time, under the umbrella of the republic's democratic traditions.

In addition, in France we have not undertaken, either on the left or on the right, essential and unpopular economic reforms, still called for but postponed out of re-election concerns. These will be incontrovertible when we have our backs against the wall and domestic tensions will have been growing ever higher.

*February 2016*



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# ABOUT GÉRARD CHALIAND

Gérard Chaliand (born in 1934) is a French expert in geopolitics who has published extensively on irregular warfare and military strategy. Chaliand's analyses of insurgencies in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East, mostly based on his field experience with insurgent forces, have appeared in more than 20 books and in numerous media articles. An independent thinker, he has worked as an autonomous agent throughout his entire career, unconstrained by the perspectives of national governments and policy institutes. His work thus provides a nonpartisan viewpoint on many of the major conflicts that have characterized the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. He is also a published poet.

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