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Weaponizing History

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Religious extremists in the Middle East, both Sunni and Shia, wield historical precedence to inform and legitimize their actions and strategies. It is one of the most powerful tools in their polemical arsenal, one that can successfully mobilize young men to action and, when necessary, explain away their temporary setbacks. This propaganda works because it stands on a firm, pre-existing foundation of how history is remembered by those they seek to recruit. Yet Islamic history provides an opportunity for pushback against extremism. Surprisingly, even with an abundance of tools at our disposal, the extremist version of history goes largely unchallenged.
decade ago, I was zipping around the mountains of the Syrian coast pretending to look at castles. Castles big and small, some well preserved, others crumbling, once Crusader, then Assassin, at other times Arab. Castles that have changed many hands over the course of time, and some of which have found new strategic value in the current Syrian civil war. But what I was really doing was stealing a visit here and there to the Alawite shrines that dot the high ground across the mountain range. I was motivated by sheer curiosity. There was a five hundred year gap in the story of the Alawites, a secretive and schismatic Shia sect, who went on to capture absolute power in the 1970s. Five hundred years that somehow went missing from the historical record. The saints and holy men who led their communities during those five centuries are still venerated at those idyllic shrines, lit with candles, incense and prayers—where strangers to the sect, such as myself, are suspect and unwelcome. I just wanted to map out who was buried where and when, hoping to gain some insight into that historical gap. At one point, while driving through a pine forest up to the castle of Abu Qubeis, I spotted a bush laden with caper berries by the side of the road. An opportunity for pickling, I thought. I hadn’t noticed the old man across the sparsely-travelled road, sitting among the trees by a mountain stream. He was the proprietor of an outdoor coffee shop, blessed with gorgeous views and shade, albeit with no customers (at the time) and a few chairs strewn about. He beckoned me over, curious as to what this stranger was doing on that quiet afternoon. A conversation that began with pickling techniques veered somewhat rapidly into how much that old man hated Sunnis.

Having conversations about history, politics, sectarian identity and, really anything, to do with current events can lead to many security complications for a curious wanderer in Asad-ruled Syria. I was hesitant but the old fellow wanted to get a lot off his chest. I also felt somewhat safe since he seemed to believe that President Hafez al-Asad, who had died seven years prior to our encounter, was still alive and well. This old man would be an unlikely informant for the secret police, I thought. His most memorable line was “those who hated your grandfather are unlikely to be kind to you. I am an Alawite and I spit on anyone who has the slightest problem with that.” His gripe with the Sunnis extended from what he had seen during their uprising in the early 1980s, when “they killed the flower of the Alawite community” to hundreds of years back when they hounded his ancestors out of the cities and plains of Syria into their mountain redoubts. He also drew a line from the past into the future: “If they come at us again, President Hafez will smash them again. And in the worst case scenario, if we lose the rest of Syria, then we will fight them on this mountain, and go our separate ways, as we did before.” This was said to me in the summer of 2007. The stirrings of the Syrian civil war were still five years away. The old man was short on short-term memory, but history gave him the long view into the past, and into the future. A view that was at once cautionary about what to expect, and instructive as to what should be done.
The use of history in constructing the narratives of identity, of common origins, of a shared experience, and of a soon-to-be fulfilled purpose is not new or unique. Sects, religions, ethnicities, tribes, political ideologies, and other corporate bodies borrow heavily from history to frame their trajectories, to propagate, and to undergird their authenticity. In this sense, history confers legitimacy and infers destiny. There are many examples to cite from the twentieth century as various ideologies and regimes in the Middle East constructed new identities for themselves. Arab nationalism borrowed from the might and vitality of the Arab conquests of the region in the 7th century to highlight the redeeming possibilities of an Arab awakening after a centuries long slumber at the margins of empire. The Turks remembered their own distinct story, departing from Central Asia and swarming over vast territories and leaving newfound empires in their wake, even breaking into Europe and reigning supreme over large tracts of that continent. The Shah of Iran resurrected the pomp and splendor of ancient Persia to lend regality and majesty to his reign. In the same vein, what is Zionism if not an archival land deed, remembered, dusted-off, and yearned for as one laments what was lost? In Iraq, Saddam Hussein not only rode the heady visions of Arab glory but specifically called the Iran-Iraq War the ‘Second Qadisiyya’ in reference to the first battle of its name where the Arabs delivered a mortal blow to the Sassanid Persians and evicted them from the land of Mesopotamia (636 AD). Saddam went back further into the annals of that land to refashion himself as a latter-day avatar of King Nebuchadnezzar’s, he of Biblical fame, ruling from the land of Babylon and projecting expansionist designs, while breaking the spirit of the Jews in the process. Much like Nebuchadnezzar, Saddam rebuilt the ruined city of Babylon—committing archeological and cultural desecration by doing so—and inserted his name into the brickwork, laid thousands of years ago, by Jewish captives taken into slavery.

History not only enables those who cite it to define themselves, but to define their enemies as well. They can connect the dots between historical episodes to extrapolate conspiracy: the ‘enemy’ has always been the enemy because that is who he is. That was how that old Alawite man understood the enmity of Sunnis. Saddam was demonstrating that the Arab-Persian rivalry was as old as time, and that the Jews, empowered as they are in the modern era by the rebirth of Israel, have always been a nuisance; one that previous (and present) kings of Mesopotamia were destined to deal with.

Yet the extremists of the Middle East today, both Sunni and Shia, are employing history differently, in a way that is not only reactive and descriptive, but rather prescriptive. They use it in a way that is both specific and strategic to instruct policy. That history is “readily intelligible to both educated and uneducated Muslims,” as Bernard Lewis, the British-American historian who boasts the distinction of being the first to articulate the challenge of radical Islamism for the West, put it in his book The Crisis of Islam (2003). “It offers a set of themes, slogans, and symbols that are profoundly familiar and therefore effective in mobilizing
support and in formulating both a critique of what is wrong and a program for putting it right,” he adds. Remembering the past is not a tool of mere inspiration or for marking enemies when utilized by the extremists, the past is their blueprint for resetting history back to a time they could take pride in.

Islamic State fighters parade in Mosul

It is analytically useful to understand the Islamic State as it understands itself. As far as they are concerned, their story did not begin with the proclamation of the resurrected caliphate in June 2014, nor its predecessor the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Theirs is a ten-year venture that began during October 2006, when they put the world on notice with their announcement of the Islamic State of Iraq. The jihadists, back then, understood the implications, and the hazards of what they were about to do. They knew that it would focus the hostility not only of their apparent enemies, such as the United States and the Shia, but also that of their ideological cousins, the other jihadist groups orbiting the Salafist constellation. The jihadists of the nascent Islamic State anticipated the refrain of rejection and hesitation: this is too bold, too grand, too soon. Their ideological cousins would immediately recognize that this is indeed the caliphate, attempted. An attempt fraught with ideological peril and uncertainty, even though it is the end-goal of many Salafists. It would sow dissent and acrimony at a time when all groups should be singularly focused on the goal of waging
jihad against the West and the internal enemies lurking within Islamic lands. But the ‘trailblazers’ of the new caliphate had ready and—as far as they are concerned—convincing answers, for they were standing firmly on historical precedent, harking back to the time of early Islam. As such, they were not trailblazers at all, but were simply rediscovering a trail first embarked upon by Muhammed, the prophet, the actual trailblazer of the faith.

The Islamic State published a book in January 2007 titled ‘Informing the People About the Birth of the State of Islam.’ They sought to preempt the debate about timing and method. Their polemical coup de grâce was to cite the state-building venture of Muhammad at Medina. Muhammed did not wait around for the conditions to turn optimal in Mecca. His calling compelled him to strike out boldly, against incredible odds. He left his native city and found refuge among the Medinan ‘youths’ who had pledged themselves to his prophecy. His was a precarious venture, at once tenuous, and due for a number of setbacks. Muhammad did not reign supreme as he began to wield authority and manage the day-to-day affairs of his flock. He had to contend with a mixed city that boasted, for example, confident, armed and well-positioned Jewish tribes, that were not about to part with their faith for his. He had to wage war against his Meccan detractors, or consequently suffer their counter-attacks. Yet even in the bleakest of times, the jihadists remind us, Muhammad foresaw that what he was setting out to build in Medina would subjugate the mighty and nearby empires of Byzantium and Persia. These visions did not strike the true believers around him as loony, even during the darkest of times, so why would the detractors of the Islamic State in the twenty first century counsel against going too big, too soon? The territory they believed to be controlling in 2006 in Iraq was magnitudes larger than Muhammed’s tiny toehold. Conditions then did not deter him, they why should they do so nowadays? In fact, they argued, there were many similarities between what he faced and what was happening in Iraq. If only the jihadists would follow his example, and enact his steps by going back to the basics, then the jihad would recapture the path back towards redemption and righting what went wrong.

The motif of going back to the basics has a rich tradition in Islamic dogma, and thus the method and argumentation of the modern jihadists would not strike their ideological cousins, or the audience at large, as contrived. The medieval Syrian jurist, Ibn Taymiyya, writing at a time of Muslim decline following the Mongol invasions and the sacking of Baghdad, also argued for revisiting the early days of Islam to recapture the vitality of the faith. He inspired many later movements, most notably, in the eighteenth century, the Wahhabis of the Arabian Peninsula, who put his theories into practice to much martial success over successive attempts spanning three centuries. The vast majority of today’s Salafists draw inspiration from Ibn Taymiyya and the creeds he launched. The very meaning of the Arabic word ‘salaf’ connotes that community of early Islam, when it was pure, pristine and powerful, or so they believe. It also helps that Wahhabism eventually became the credo of modern, deep-pocketed Saudi
Arabia. ‘Going back to the basics’ is a well-funded and widely propagated idea. The jihadists of the Islamic State were merely stretching it further.

And further they did. Resurrecting a caliphate implies the necessity of picking a caliph, which is no easy thing. Theoretically, at least, he (and of course he would have to be a ‘he’) would be both the spiritual and temporal leader of the world’s billion or so Sunni Muslims. That alone would seem daunting. It does not help that historical precedence on this topic is itself problematic. The Salafists, and many more Sunnis, believe that only the first four successors to Muhammad, the caliphs, can be counted as ‘righteously guided’. Yet history tells us that the process of picking those four turned out to be politically acrimonious. Three of the four met their demise through murder or assassination. The fluidity and messiness of the politics over the course of those three crucial decades many centuries ago later solidified into sectarian antipathy, giving us modern-day Shi’ism and Sunnism. That, however, did not deter medieval theorists or modern jihadis from formulating a mechanism to pick a caliph based on the four test cases that followed Muhammad’s death. The historical record is elastic by its very nature, and polemics can stretch it out to fit current circumstances, rendering history books into recipe books. Not all the ingredients may be available, but the recipe can still be followed, albeit with some tweaking and minor substitutions, to arrive at a formula that works. Such was the formula the Islamic State leveraged as it announced its proto-caliph, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, the predecessor to ISIS’s Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ten years ago. Problem solved. Any questions? Kindly refer to early Islamic history, the jihadists would say.

They would say that because it works as a winning argument with their target audience: the Sunni populations of the Middle East that are to be incorporated into their caliphate in the first phase of its rebirth. By citing historical precedent to legitimize their actions, the jihadists enjoy standing on firm foundations. For the remembered and popularized past, such as Muhammad’s story in Medina, is present and mentally available for most of this audience, received as it were through curricula, the Friday sermon, and mass media.

The founding father of the particular strain of jihadism that gave us the Islamic State did not have to try very hard to stoke the fires of sectarianism in Iraq, for example. When the world watched Iraqis cheering on American soldiers pulling down Saddam’s statue off its pedestal in downtown Baghdad, Abu Musaab al-Zarqawi saw opportunity. He would frame his war as a fight against the Shias, who were now acting as the enablers of the Americans, a foreign non-Muslim army that had just occupied a gloried Sunni and caliphal capital, one that was specifically established to manage the sprawling Islamic empire. Zarqawi would employ sectarianism as the fast burning fuel necessary for mobilizing support for an even more ambitious enterprise, resurrecting the Islamic State. He was aided in doing so by a hate-speech campaign against the Shia that had primed his target audience to receive what he was about to advocate: the “total annihilation” of the Shia. Sectarian hate speech has been around for
centuries, but it was mass propagated two decades prior to the Iraq War on the occasion of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, led by the Shia cleric Ayatollah Ruhullah Khomeini in 1979. Those threatened by Khomeini’s revolutionary appeal, such as Saddam Hussein or the Saudis, felt compelled at the time to inoculate their populations against faith-inspired revolution by suggesting that Shi’ism itself was a grand conspiracy against Islam. Lots of money was marshalled by Iran’s enemies to saturate the airwaves, fill out library shelves, and lend wide currency to Shia perfidy. The result was that in many parts of the Sunni Arab Middle East, one would find many nodding heads, in 2003, when reminded that Shi’ism was ‘invented’ by a devious Jew-turned-Muslim called Ibn Saba in the early days following Muhammad’s death. European anti-Semitism (once re-propagated during the heyday of Arab Nationalism in the 1950s and 1960s) fused with the Islamic historical record to brand the Shias as the ‘internal Jews’. In the late nineties, one could find a book—an Arabic language forgery based thematically on an earlier Russian forgery—with the curious title of ‘The Protocols of the Elders of Qum’, on display in Amman and Cairo, purporting to be the secret plans of the Shia to take-over the region, a plan hatched in the religious seminaries of the Iranian city of Qum.

Consequently, Zarqawi could turn to Islamic history and find a poster boy for Shia treachery that would neatly fit the scenes of 2003. Actually, he would riff off a data point that Saddam had highlighted in his first letter following his ouster: For, prior to the last time Baghdad was dramatically sacked by a great power, the Mongols, in 1258, the day-to-day affairs of the once mighty Sunni Abbasid empire had been left in the hands of a Shia, the Grand Vizier Ibn al-Alqami. That was quite progressive of the Abbasids to put a minority candidate in charge, but that is not what Saddam and Zarqawi would like remembered from that episode. Their case was that Ibn al-Alqami conspired to weaken the defenses of the empire and to hand over Baghdad on a silver platter to the heathen enemy, much like the Shia of Iraq were doing nowadays, whom Zarqawi termed “the grandchildren of Ibn al-Alqami.” It is a neat and succinct narrative that organically grows out of a pre-existing anti-Shia narrative. Zarqawi leveraged the drama of history to explain the present, and it enabled him to suggest a solution, a final solution. There can be no moving forwards towards resurrecting the Islamic State until the Shia are dealt with, once and for all. Cue: civil war.

Yet pedantically citing historical instances as a propaganda tool is not enough. For it to truly resonate it must be dramatized. The drama of current events must match the drama of history. The actors of today must mimic and project the greatness of those individuals they cite from the early Islamic community. One literary minded jihadist authored a play depicting a late night conversation between the last Abbasid caliph and Ibn al-Alqami before the Mongol invasion. The ‘ghost of history’ lurks about, cast as the third protagonist on the scene. The drama seems to suggest that if only a jihadist of Zarqawi’s cut had been present, then he could have warned the caliph of what was coming, and could have exposed Ibn al-Alqami’s plot. The
jihadists dramatically recall the parts of history they would like remembered, while simultaneously erasing, to much fanfare, the parts they would like forgotten. Maybe that explains their fixation with leveling the monuments of ancient Assyria and Palmyra, and capturing it all on YouTube. The glories and very presence of pre-Islamic civilizations crowds out their absolutist messaging, and even in this they can cite precedence: Did Muhammad not personally destroy the pagan idols of Mecca upon his victory? There can be only one version of history, theirs.

The jihadist proto-caliph, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi, relished playing the role of caliph. He had a flair for spectacle, showcasing his craft over the course of many audio speeches. In March 2007 Abu Omar went ahead and announced that he is annulling the ‘Pact of Omar’—a purported document codifying the discriminatory rules against Christians enacted by its namesake, the second caliph of Islam, one of the ‘Righteously Guided’ ones, in the 7th century. Consider the audacity that a wannabe caliph in the twenty first century can determine that a 1,400 year-old pact no longer applies, since the modern-day Christians have broken the rules, and that it time for the Christians to renegotiate the pact with him, the legal guardian of the Islamic faith. When brandishing such confidence and gall, when claiming to be on par with a ‘proper’ caliph from lore, can a layperson listening to the speech be truly faulted for being swayed by such a display of certitude?

In projecting historical drama, the jihadists know their audience. Actually, it is not that difficult to figure out what they are working with, and how they are purposely manipulating it. I know it by my own example: when I leaf through stodgy, scholarly books on early Islam, I catch myself visualizing what I am reading as scenes from a particular movie, *The Message* (1976). My mental image of what the buildings looked like, the colors, how people dressed, the background noises, and even the haircuts that early Muslims sported derive from it. Growing up in the Middle East, I must have seen this movie some twenty times, for the simple fact that it would reliably get aired at every Islamic occasion dotting the calendar, whether it be Eid, or Ramadhan, or Muhammad’s birthday. It was an epic and compelling production: a Syrian director, Libyan money, two separate versions in Arabic and in English, with the later starring Anthony Quinn and Irene Papas. The score was exhilarating—its composer Maurice Jarre was nominated for an Academy Award but lost to *Star Wars* that year. The grand tales of early Islam that we had to read in schoolbooks came vividly alive on the screen. Eyes would widen as the warrior hero Hamza, Muhammad’s uncle, stole every scene. The movie had a big impact across Muslim lands and beyond: it was cited as one of the grievances behind the first act of Islamic terror in Washington DC, when a Nation of Islam offshoot occupied three buildings in the capital in 1977, leaving two dead. They deemed the movie sacrilegious and were incensed that it was due to premiere on U.S. soil. Salafists were never enthusiastic about it, sensing that it portrayed early Islam in a manner that was
sympathetic to the Shia version of history. They also have other issues to nitpick; one Salafist told me years ago that depicting the early Muslims as the movie did in all white garb is illogical since they would not have self-identified by their dress color, for example. Chillingly, the Syrian director was killed in November 2005 from injuries sustained after a suicide bomber, dispatched by Zarqawi’s organization, had detonated his explosive vest in the lobby of the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Amman.

Anthony Quinn as Hamza, The Message

The movie, although controversial, was eminently influential in how dramatized history reached great numbers of Muslims in countries such as Iraq and Syria. The jihadists don’t seem to have any qualms of using that imagery to their advantage, despite the nitpicking of their ideological cousins. In fact, they seem to borrow heavily from it. Take the flag of the Islamic State, for example. It is so omnipresent now that even the 2016 Eurovision Contest had to make it officially clear that it is banned along with such as flags as those of the Basques Country and Northern Cyprus. The jihadists claim that this is the banner of Muhammad, under which the conquering armies of Islam brought the high and mighty empires of their day to their knees. It certainly looks authentic, with its archaic font and old-timey seal. It looks as if it would be something that the art department of The Message would have come up with as background ‘color’. Consider the jihadist victory parade into Mosul. Their convoys of trucks
and tanks were preceded by a number of warriors on horseback. Their dress, and their manner of riding, evokes scenes from the aforementioned movie, as Muhammad returned to Mecca, a conqueror. Or let us take that sole televised speech of the current caliph, Abu Bakr, on the occasion of proclamation of the caliphate. There is something about the way he slowly ascends the pulpit in the main mosque of Mosul, how he turns to face the worshippers, how he speaks, what he is wearing (save for the watch), his stern yet contemplative mannerisms—it all seems very familiar. It seem so because modern media in the Middle East, whether through movies or television series, have depicted early Islam as such. Clearly, the jihadists have latched on to a pre-existing stage-set to amplify their messaging.

In another speech by that first, audacious caliph, delivered on the occasion of President Barack Obama being elected president in November 2008, Abu Omar al-Baghdadi addresses “the new rulers of the White House” by using the same words and tone that Muhammad had used in letters allegedly dispatched by the prophet to the emperors of Byzantium and Persia. Again, the jihadists seem to be purposely evoking memorable scenes from *The Message* when these letters were read out at the imperial courts of the Middle East that a new religion, Islam, has emerged in Arabia. The movie ends by portraying Islam’s resounding victory over paganism at the moment when Muhammad brings down the statuesque idols within the Kaaba. The jihadists knew exactly what they were doing as they filmed themselves smashing and hacking away at the statues of prior civilizations down the corridors of the Museum of Mosul.
In recent years, some Shias have developed an extremist credo of their own, one that also borrows from history to enact present policy, chiefly that of revenge and secession as statecraft. This credo is driving events towards conflagration across the region in tandem with the jihadist agenda. It is important to understand the cyclical nature of extremism today in the Middle East: one cannot focus solely on the challenge posed by the policies and propaganda of the jihadists of the Islamic State, for Sunni and Shia extremists feed into each other. It is a toxic loop, which perpetually rationalizes why they need to go to extremes. The Shias may blame Zarqawi for “starting it” but had it not been for Shia heavy handedness against the Sunnis in Iraq and Syria, then Zarqawi’s heirs may not have found an opportunity to stage a comeback.

Shi’ism, at heart, is a movement of restitution. Throughout the ages the Shias have justified their cause by citing what they perceive to be Sunni persecution of Muhammed’s dynasty, one whose claim to power was usurped, principally by the first three caliphs. They can cite one incident after another, stretching back 1,400 years, of how the prophet’s family had been wronged. The seminal event occurred in Karbala, on the day of Ashura, in 680 AD. Muhammad’s grandson, Hussein, was massacred along with most of his family. The battle is re-enacted every year among Shia communities, in all its gore and drama, so much so that those portraying the bad guys may get assaulted and chased down through the streets by incensed mobs. History is ever-present, or as one Shia thinker coined it, “Every land is Karbala, every day is Ashura.” The fabric of time collapses and folds unto itself as the past is intensely remembered while the future draws nearer with the eschatological expectation of the savior, the Mahdi, descended as he is from Hussein’s loin, who shall right all wrongs. But should his arrival be delayed, Shi’ism can rapidly mobilize for the purpose of revanchism, striking back at the wrong-doers. We are witnessing such an outbreak now, one that some Shia strategists in Tehran would like to see reshaping the Middle East. I have termed it ‘Shia chauvinism’ whose endgame would be to partition off Shia majority cantons around the Middle East, because Shias cannot go on living with Sunnis in unitary countries. There was too much bad blood, too much history, between the two sects.

The phenomenon of Shia chauvinism did not crystalize in my mind until I saw a photograph on the internet in 2012. The picture depicted a religious procession of Shia Iraqis, either in Iraq or somewhere in Iran, brandishing a banner. The banner had the visage of then Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki under the caption: “Support the Mukhtar of our age.” The Mukhtar being referred to is a historical character who led a revanchist campaign against those who had participated in the Karbala massacre. He defeated some in battle, executed others, and arranged for the assassination of more. As avengers go, al-Mukhtar was a superstar in populist Shia lore, and the banner was suggesting that Maliki is his rightful successor as the Shia avenger against the Sunnis in our day. But just in case some had missed the connotation,
the banner also depicted the Iranian actor who had portrayed the character of al-Mukhtar in a big production TV series first released in 2010 over the course of forty episodes. The Farsi language series was epic and very well made, dubbed eventually in Arabic, Urdu and other languages and shown across the Shia world. Someone was purposely reminding Shias of this historical precedent, and Maliki’s supporters, carrying that banner, were drawing a link between their man and a historical hero.

Banner proclaiming Maliki as the ‘Mukhtar of our age’

When I first saw that picture I thought that they had gone too far. That this picture would surely damn Maliki’s new line in mainstream Shia public opinion, one that could not possibly advocate wide revenge or strong-arm tactics against Sunnis. I was wrong. A large segment of Iraqi Shias thirsted for revenge following the excesses of Zarqawi and his heirs, even after the Sunni insurgency was soundly defeated in 2008-9. They wanted Sunnis humiliated. A year afterwards, Maliki’s political machine was commissioning songs that play up the ‘Mukhtar of our age’ appellation. The slogan was successfully put to use in the 2014 election cycle, the outcome of which gave Maliki a plurality of the vote. But it also gave us the ISIS comeback in Falluja in January 2014 (before the vote), and the fall of Mosul (after the vote). Shia chauvinism
had also mobilized Shias from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon and even Afghanistan to rally behind the pseudo-Shia Alawite regime of Bashar al-Asad in Syria to face off against the Syrian Sunnis challenging him. Sectarianism breathed new life in the jihadist cause there, riding a desire for Sunni restitution and revenge in Damascus. Seen through the prism of history, it all made sense to the target audiences: war was inevitable; the enemies of the past were standing in the way of the future.

By enveloping themselves in the cloak of history, the extremists from both sides can radiate an aura of certainty. This certitude will make it very difficult to convince them of the need for reconciliation, both with the past and with the present. It also means that it will be very difficult to convince them that they are losing, or have lost. By citing precedent and conspiracy, they can explain away setbacks. They can tell themselves that they got the recipe wrong somewhere, and all they need to do it to go back to the basics to try and try again until it gets going. The stench of past glories, the musky manuscripts that speak of ancestral feats, the decay of once-glorious cities, excite their senses. It is excessively hard to let go of the legacy of greatness. Its loss gnaws at them. It haunts them. They will keep trying. As far as the jihadists are concerned, they were left for dead in 2009. They were thought to be a spent force, its remnants living out a precarious existence in the deserts of Iraq. Then they came back. They made no excuses for the doctrinal overreach of declaring the Islamic State in 2006 that had turned so many other jihadist and Salafist groups against them. They felt they were right all along, and that their temporary setbacks mirrored ones that Muhammad had experienced himself. Not only did they make no excuses, but this time around they called a spade a spade: “Yes, world, this is the caliphate resurrected” they proclaimed. Their righteousness and certainty was foretold by precedence. History is their refuge, their sanctuary. They stand on firm ground. And if that terrain goes unchallenged, they will keep coming back. But it is not all doom and gloom: It just so happens that challenging them on the received facts of history is easier than what many may imagine.

Back in January, some three hundred moderate Muslim scholars gathered in Morocco to reaffirm the ‘Charter of Medina’. They did so to counter the excesses of the Islamic State against minorities such as the Christians and Yezidis who had the misfortune of falling under the new caliphate. The Charter of Medina was a constitution enacted by Muhammad to manage relations with non-Muslims like those Jewish tribes that lived in close proximity to his flock. The moderates called their reaffirmation ‘The Marrakesh Declaration’ after the city in which they met. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, the retired Archbishop of Washington who attended the meeting said, somewhat grandly, “This declaration can change the whole face of Islam.” He walked it back a bit to add, “Not change it, but bring it back to where it was.”

But there is a problem with “where it was” for that was the springboard, the solid ground, used by the extremists to leap forwards into their ambitious doctrinal ventures. Not only that,
but the moderates must contend with the extremists on a terrain that is advantageous to the latter. The moderates must argue that history should be interpreted in a new way, to reflect the spirit of the times then and now. Meanwhile, the extremists don’t need to prevaricate or qualify: their read-out of the text is literal. They do as it says. Why would the moderates need to second-guess the prophet or the early caliphs? Why not simply follow the historical precedent to the letter? After all, it worked back then, and going back to the basics might work again. They can refer to the same Charter of Medina to say that Muhammad’s venture eventually outgrew it, finding excuses to deport some Jewish tribes from the town, and to annihilate others. The jihadists earn points for being succinct and straightforward. After all, they have had centuries to figure out all the polemical angles and history is their impregnable bastion. The simplest literal read of history is a winning argument too.

What if there is a way by which we do not have to take the Charter of Medina at face value? There is no original, extant copy of the Charter of Medina under a glass display case in a well-guarded museum somewhere. We cannot even be sure if it was a written document at Muhammad’s time, or whether it was a verbal agreement as was the custom then. What we think we know about the Charter was jotted down, ink on parchment, 150 to 200 years after the event. That is the period when comprehensive chronicles of early Islam were written down, relying for the most part on oral transmission. One of those chroniclers, laboring six generations after the first community of Muslims had passed, may have seen an earlier, written charter somewhere, but again, we cannot know for sure. Our hearts should go out to that chronicler: difficult as it is to recall what one did last Tuesday, it is surely a heavy burden to recall the events on a Tuesday two hundred years ago. But that is precisely why the history of early Islam is enveloped in the fog of doubt. One need not worry though, because for the last two hundred years, Western scholars (whose discipline was dubbed ‘Orientalism’) took on the task of studying how that history was chronicled. They worked laboriously, with difficult languages, to figure out all the analytical angles. They have engaged in furious debates and disagreements, as scholars do, and they have made their respective cases in thousands of books, papers and symposia. Their work continues, with fascinating and insightful research coming out in print in recent years. At points, they were enjoined by Middle Eastern scholars who used those same methodologies that had been developed in the academies of the West—historiography, critical literary analysis, philology, archeology, exegesis, codicology, etc.—to delve into the fog. But such native efforts were sporadic, hesitant and ultimately minimalist compared to the corpus of work being done by German, Italian, British, Dutch, French, Russian, American, and the odd Czech and Hungarian Orientalists—and for good reason. The academies of the Middle East, as well as the general public discourse on history, were generally not amenable to raising doubt. Some of the most risqué works, written in Arabic, had to be published posthumously. Some authors were forced into exile or imprisonment. Some other
authors were killed. Their counterparts in the West, on the other hand, could work freely, for the most part.

In his book *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (1991), University of California, Santa Barbara professor R. Stephen Humphreys presents a case study in which he marshals the arguments made by various Orientalists over the course of a century regarding the Charter of Medina. Some took it to be authentic, making a rational case for why they would think so. Others argued that it could not have been a unitary document or agreement, suggesting that it was amalgamated into one from a variety of separate agreements. Still others dwelt on the wording, and some of the terms used, and they could not reconcile this document to what they would deem to be plausible wording and terminology during seventh century Central Arabia. After a century’s worth of study, what scholars are left with is intellectual angst: “We will never know for certain.” That is the expected lament of historians that have to deal with events that far back without any extant or contemporary evidence; they have to resign themselves to living with doubt. Now, consider the angst of the historian versus the certitude of the Islamic extremist when revisiting history. Surely that fog of doubt should have a place in the conversation when history is used so deliberately and, at times, horrifically to justify extremism.

Consider another document, that of the aforementioned ‘Pact of Omar’ that the proto-caliph of the Islamic State had so dramatically annulled in 2007. Yet again there is no extant copy of this pact, and all that we know about it was written many decades after it was allegedly drawn up. However, in this case, most scholars have come around to the view that it is not authentic, and that it could not have been a seventh century document that can be attributed to the original Omar. Not only that, but we have a short book written in Arabic by an Egyptian historian, published in the mid-nineties in Cairo, who conclusively determines that the pact is a forgery. The historian revisited the studies that the Orientalists had conducted into the authenticity of the pact, and expanded upon their efforts by employing indigenous Muslim methodologies of exegesis that qualify the reliability of oral reports about early Islam by studying the chain of transmission. Muslim theologians, polemists, and chroniclers had uncovered thousands of falsified reports over the span of centuries by employing these methods. By bringing both Western and Muslim disciplines together, the Egyptian historian stood on solid ground when crying foul. Shouldn’t his book have been part of the conversation about the historicity of the pact when Abu Omar so confidently annulled it? Abu Omar may have looked foolish then, or in the very least he would undermine his own certitude when having to explain why he believed the ‘original’ pact to be authentic; the ground he stood on would not seem as firm.

We can also demonstrate that the flag of the Islamic State is also a forgery. They don’t have an original version that we can verify through carbon dating. Theirs is an imagined banner
that they have attributed to Muhammad’s armies. Even the seal of the prophet at the center of
the flag, which they seem to have derived from a letter of his bearing it, is likely to be a
forgery, since the letter itself is widely believed to be a forgery.

The fog of doubt permeates much of the historical record. If properly harnessed, it can cast
a shadow on much of the extremist narrative. The character of Ibn Saba, the Jew who invented
Shi’ism, may well have been a fabrication. A strong case has been made suggesting that
medieval polemists concocted him out of thin air and inserted him into the historical record.
We can demonstrate this because some Orientalists conducted serious and in-depth academic
forensics about him and about the fabricators. What about the letters that Muhammad had
sent to the emperors of the Middle East that Abu Omar had mimicked in wording and in
tone? Those letters too are not extant, and it is perplexing that we have no contemporary
reports by non-Muslims at those imperial courts that remarked upon the fact that a new
religion had announced itself so dramatically. The character of al-Mukhtar that Maliki’s
followers had championed is a problematic figure for Shi’ism, should we actually revisit what
Shia sources say about the topic. The sole male survivor from the battle of Karbala, Hussein’s
son who would become the fourth Imam of Shi’ism, did not express much gratitude for what
the avenger had wrought on Hussein’s murderers. He considered al-Mukhtar to be a liar and
braggart, pushing his own agenda for power. Again, shouldn’t these impressions of al-
Mukhtar have been part of the conversation when Shia chauvinists resurrected his legacy and
rehabilitated his image as part of a strategy to redraw the lines in the region?

A war rages in the Middle East. A physical war premised on a war of ideas and revolution.
Ambitious actors are adeptly launching large-scale plans for statecraft, ones that are imperial
in scope. They understand the value of propaganda in war. They have leveraged the historical
record as a centripetal force that mobilizes youths across the region, and as precedent for how
to build out their ventures and grandiose visions. They exude supreme certainty in that they
are walking in the right path back to redemption and greatness, once lost but now within
reach—or so they believe, truly believe. They are aided in doing so because their target
audiences have been primed to receive this propaganda, one that pushes all the right buttons.
Yet whereas extremist Sunnis and Shias have successfully weaponized history, those of us—
Middle Easterners of all denominations, as well as many other nations around the globe—who
feel threatened by their ambitions can resort to weaponizing historiography. The history of
Islam is long overdue for a public conversation among Muslims as to what role it should play
in their present and future. Regular people in Muslim lands should have access to the various
opinions, even those emanating from Western scholars, about their own history, even though
it may raise doubts concerning the authenticity of the historical narrative. A faith grappling
with the challenges of modernity must be willing to live with a healthy dose of doubt. But that
is a medium to long-term process that needed to start yesterday. We need to deploy doubt in a
systematic and relentless manner right now to jam up the polemical weaponry of the extremists. Doubt, angst and cognitive noise should rain down like arrows into the bastions of ideological certainty upon which the extremists stand defiant.

Orientalism carries a stigma among left-leaning Western academies, where it is widely believed to have served Western imperialism. Orientalism is rejected by like-minded leftists in the Middle East for the same reasons. Columbia University’s Palestinian-American literary critic Edward Said, the late author of the supremely influential book *Orientalism* (1978)—which almost single handedly managed to turn its title word into an academic pejorative—boasts the distinction of being the sole intellectual luminary from around the world to have two portraits, not one, hanging on the walls of the Writers’ Café in old Basra, where crusty old Marxists gather for tea and conversation. Conservative and religiously-minded Muslims, on the other hand, believe that the field of Orientalism is part of a Western effort to undermine their faith. One can find 200 Arabic books on the internet available for full download that attack the Orientalists. Many are parked on websites amply funded by conservative Arab regimes. Yet even so, the scholarly methodology of applying critical analysis to the historical record is ‘agenda neutral’, and it is desperately needed in light of the extremist use of this record. Two hundred years’ worth of scholastic legacy is parked on bookshelves in Western libraries. Little of it is available online. Much less of it has been translated into the languages spoken in the Middle East. If the internet is supposed to be the great equalizer of content, then why is there such a disparity when it comes to a sober and systematic conversation about early Islam? Why is this the case at a time when many young Muslims are watching what extremism has wrought and asking themselves “is this really our religion”? The extremist affirmation that it is indeed “our history, refer to page X, paragraph Y in such and such book” goes unchallenged. Many of those young Muslims have not been trained to take on the task of revisiting the historical record themselves. There is no funding from the local powers-that-be for it. However, they need not start from scratch. Parts of the Orientalist methodology and its output can be made available for them, online and in their languages, and should. Whichever way the subsequent conversation goes is left to them. But a conversation needs to begin somewhere, and on solid scholastic ground. Should it be somewhat controversial may actually be helpful. That controversy could provide the drama that matches the theatrics of the extremists.

I wish I could back to that mountainside café, but this time armed with a particular book. The cantankerous proprietor may still be around, or he may have succumbed to old age, leaving his grandson in charge—probably a scion of his grandfather’s rage. I would wonder whether this young man had seen much fighting in the civil war, raging downhill in the valley, or had heard many war stories from brothers and cousins dragooned into that existential fight. I would wonder how many young Iraqi, Iranian, Lebanese, and Afghan Shias had enjoyed a
respite from the fighting while sipping coffee under the shade, rifles at their feet, across the road from that caper berry bush that had drawn me to this spot in the first place. They had ostensibly come to Syria over the last five years to protect Shia shrines from being desecrated at the hands of extremist Sunnis, to keep the bones of their saints safe from exhumation. That is what the young men had been told. What they were really doing there was to prop up Asad’s regime, for that is what extremist Shia strategists in far-away Tehran had ordained. I would arrive with a book called *The Shrines of ‘Alids in Medieval Syria* by Stephanie Mulder (Edinburgh University Press, 2014). Ideally, someone would have gotten the copyright to translate it into Arabic, so I would be carrying a version of it in that language. The book is mostly concerned with architecture, but there is a valuable subtext in there: most of the Shia shrines studied in the book were erected and subsidized by powerful Sunni patrons back in medieval times. Those Sunnis venerated the shrines as much as modern Shias do, even though some modern Sunni extremists are keen on blowing them up. I would conveniently forget the book there, leaving it on one of the chairs. The old man, his grandson, or even those transient fighters from the Shia internationale may rifle through its pages, driven by sheer curiosity, for this is a book written by a Westerner about their beloved shrines. One or two of them may pick up on the subtext to infer that not all Sunnis are so bad, after all. Or maybe that is too much to hope for after all they had been told, and after all that they had seen. Yet with the din of battle thudding in the background, it seems it would be worth a try.

*This essay is drawn from remarks delivered by the author at the Westminster Institute in McLean, Va., on June 1, 2016.*