

My Islam Is Better Than Yours

The United States has no right to re-educate Iraqi detainees in the ways of their faith.

BY ERIC L. LEWIS

Grab them by the beards, and their hearts and minds will follow: Thus has Maj. Gen. Douglas Stone, who oversees thousands of detainees in Iraq, updated a below-the-belt epigram from the Vietnam era.

In a Defense Department roundtable with bloggers held in late September, Stone said he was re-educating fundamentalist Muslims—some as young as 11—in a more moderate version of Islam. Recently, these newly minted moderates, under the watchful eye of their U.S. guards, identified some of the unrepentant fundamentalists, “threw them up against the fence, and shaved the frickin’ beards off of them,” exulted Stone. “I mean, that is historic.”

Historic, yes, in the sense that we’re repeating our own mistakes. Again, as in the Vietnam War, we’re expecting that intimidation and humiliation can help win over civil society in a time of civil war.

One lesson that we, in theory, learned from Vietnam was the importance of “soft power” in building confidence among the population and draining support for insurgents. To build soft power, the United States must convince the Muslim world that we have a fundamental respect for their beliefs, their practices, and their dignity. It also requires that we hold ourselves to the same ideals we espouse to others—tolerance, pluralism, and the free exercise of religion.

But Stone’s program is part and parcel of this administration’s scorn for soft power and its casual disrespect for Muslim belief and practice, which is likely to reap a whirlwind in the Muslim world for years to come. Stone wants to use new religious training by moderate mullahs to isolate what he calls the hardcore extremists. Using a telling metaphor, he told the bloggers, “They’re like rotten eggs, you know, hiding in the Easter basket.”

Unfortunately, this theological egg hunt is the wrong response to the wrong problem with the risk of severe adverse consequences.

IT’S NOT ABOUT FAITH

Just as it was a tragic mistake to view the Vietnam War as an ideological conflict, it is equally a mistake

to view the Iraq War as mainly a religious conflict that can be resolved with “religious enlightenment courses.” The millenarian, nihilistic vision of Osama bin Laden has few supporters and no real basis in Muslim doctrine. We should not confuse the violent extremism of al-Qaida—which the United States has the right and obligation to suppress—with certain versions of Islam, such as Wahhabism, which is a belief system that we may find troubling but does not imply or require violent acts against non-Muslims. To be sure, every religion has doctrinal hooks upon which radicals can seize to justify aggression against the other. But the rhetoric of al-Qaida does not make Islam a religion of violence any more than the rhetoric of the Inquisition or the Crusades made Christianity a religion of violence.

Iraq was a secular, authoritarian state under Saddam Hussein, dominated by a Sunni minority who oppressed a Shiite majority. Despite those religious labels, the real fault lines in Iraq were and are tribal. American troops are in the midst of a civil war between newly empowered Shiites and newly disempowered Sunnis. Sunni extremists identify with al-Qaida and are committing violent acts against American soldiers not because of Islam but because they resent the American role in their displacement and the disastrous occupation, which has not protected them from tribal bloodletting.

While heavy-handed attempts at religious re-education will not solve what is basically not a religious problem, they will aggravate the anger over what the Muslim world sees as an American pattern of ignorance, disrespect, and hostility toward Islam. From President George W. Bush’s invocation of a “crusade” against terrorism to Lt. Gen. William Boykin’s statement that “my God was bigger” to the sexual taunting at Abu Ghraib to the desecration of the Koran at Guantánamo Bay, Muslims see a common thread of attack on their beliefs, as well as their dignity, which is intimately bound up with their faith.

Gen. Stone said he reads the Koran every day. But a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. That a Christian military officer holding Muslims in captivity aims to “knock the

edge off their . . . misunderstanding of the Koran” will strike Muslims throughout the world as the height of religious hubris and play into the hands of the most extreme radicals.

SEE THE LIGHT OR ELSE

Stone supervises some 25,000 men in detention in Iraq. Although the administration indicated that “foreign fighters” were killing U.S. troops, only about 280 of those 25,000 are non-Iraqis. About 840 are juveniles, and Stone seems to be focusing the religious retraining on the 11-, 12-, and 13-year-olds. (He called the 15-, 16-, and 17-year-olds the “harder nuts.”) Those who say they have accepted moderate Islam receive a polygraph test. If these kids pass the test, that goes a long way toward facilitating their release. With respect to the “irreconcilables,” those whose views cannot be moderated, he proposes to put them away in permanent detention facilities.

What is wrong with this picture? First, it should be obvious that it is not the job of the U.S. government to tell people what version of Islam to embrace on pain of permanent incarceration. As long as people are not committing or fomenting acts of violence, it is not our role to pressure them into changing their faith. When did it become acceptable to set religious conversion of any kind as the price that frightened people must pay for their freedom?

Second, the U.S. government should not allow, much less encourage, forcible beard-shaving in the prison yard. Wearing a beard is a critical cultural and religious signifier—indeed, a religious obligation—for many Muslims. U.S. law recognizes that forced shaving of beards worn for religious reasons in a U.S. prison is illegal. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act plainly forbids a targeted attack on anyone’s religious practices, whether in prison or in the military.

Third, the U.S. prisons in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo serve as principal breeding grounds for radical Islam. Al-Qaida didn’t exist in Iraq before our invasion. Many of the most fanatically violent terrorists today formed their views in Middle Eastern prisons. And now we are inspiring a new generation with our ill-conceived detention policies.

HIP-DEEP IN OFFENSIVENESS

We would certainly be outraged if an occupying power detained Hasidic Jews, shaved their beards, took their yarmulkes, and forced them to embrace Reform Judaism. Or if Pentecostals were seized, forbidden to speak in tongues, and indoctrinated in Unitarianism. The very absurdity of these examples highlights how inconsistent coercive religious re-education is with our deepest traditions. It is also deeply offensive to the millions of pious Muslims who mean America no harm.

To be sure, Gen. Stone has a tough job. He has half an Astrodome full of people who have been swept into detention. No doubt, some of them have been planting bombs and otherwise trying to kill our troops. He certainly lacks the resources to sort out the active insurgents from those who were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. But seeking to change people’s religious beliefs is only likely to create more resentment and more fodder for our enemies.

As another Vietnam-era maxim goes: When you’re hip-deep in alligators, it’s difficult to remember that your initial objective was to drain the swamp. Sadly, we seem intent on breeding more alligators.

Eric L. Lewis is a partner in the Washington, D.C., office of Baach Robinson & Lewis. He represents detainees held at Guantánamo Bay and in Afghanistan.