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# PROVIDENCE

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## REINHOLD NIEBUHR & THE PROBLEM OF PARADOX

By MARC LiVECCHÉ

## THE GREAT WAR & THE DAWN OF THE AMERICAN CENTURY

By JOSEPH LOCONTE

## WILL CHRISTIANITY SURVIVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST? A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

By KENT R. HILL

ALSO: ROBERT NICHOLSON LOOKS EAST TOWARD THE SYRIAN CRISIS • MARK TOOLEY CONSIDERS CHRISTIANS & EMPIRE • LUBO ONDRASEK PAYS TRIBUTE TO JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN • MICHAEL NOVAK IS COMMEMORATED • WAYNE SCHROEDER CALLS CHRISTIANS TO PEACE WORK • THORIN OAKENSHIELD MAKES A DEATHBED CONFESSION • DOUGLAS BURTON REPORTS ON MOSUL • AMITAI ETZIONI PRESCRIBES MORAL TRIAGE • HERMAN MELVILLE REMEMBERS THE BATTLE OF SHILOH • & ALAN DOWD REFLECTS ON AMERICA'S LONG DEFENSE OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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## WILL CHRISTIANITY SURVIVE IN THE MIDDLE EAST? A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE



Portrait of Reinhold Niebuhr by Hannah Strauss, original commission, 2017. A pensive Reinhold Niebuhr considers the scene before him, surrounded by iconic images from the Second World War. While referencing historical events, horrific locations, and the machinery of warfare, these images also suggest the focal points of Niebuhr's internal conflicts as he wrestled with his own theological and ethical conceptual dilemmas. Immediately behind Niebuhr is an amphibious assault, with warfighters disembarking a landing craft and wading toward a shoreline already engaged with the fire, smoke, and din of battle. Above him, bombers swarm in deadly formation. Below are rendered scenes depicting the hated guard towers and dreaded gate of Auschwitz-Birkenau and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan. Taken together, these scenes begin to describe the reach, the moral and political complexity, and the devastation of human conflict.

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By Mstyslav Chernov, Nov. 16, 2016. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Iraqi Special Operations Forces in Mosul, Iraq.

# THE BATTLE FOR MOSUL & THE END OF HISTORY

DOUGLAS BURTON

**I**n the city of Mosul, gasping through its fifth month of urban warfare, two histories of the world are crossing.

Biblical scholars know this densely-populated Sunni capital of Iraq as the location of Nineveh, hub of the Assyrian Empire and the place where the Hebrew prophet Jonah hesitated to preach holy words to a people he hated. So many Hebrew prophets are entombed in Mesopotamia it is called the Second Holy Land, outside Palestine. The city's surrounding plain is the sacred homeland of the Assyrians, Christian speakers of Aramaic, the language of Jesus. Nineveh's ancient wheat fields were first planted 10,000 years ago, and today beneath its red dirt trillions of petro-dollars wait

patiently for the winner of this war to claim the spoils. Terrorists, whose fighters speak more than 100 different languages, are killing themselves to hold Mosul—for them the city represents the culmination of history—against soldiers and advisors from 60 nations who are likewise risking everything to take it back.

For some, the whole world began in Nineveh, and in a sense the whole world is fighting for it now. Important foundations of the West began in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers: agriculture, religion, urban culture, the domestication

of animals, the invention of the wheel, and large organized military forces. The Bible tells us, and many scholars agree, that civilization began here. Genesis, a book revered by all three Semitic religions, informs us that the first family, the first sin, and the first murder took place in Mesopotamia. The 1,300-year struggle between Shia and Sunni Muslims today may be seen as one of myriad latter-day instantiations of the fratricide that began with Adam's two sons, Cain and Abel.

The Assyrian Kingdom based in Nineveh was the first kingdom in the world to be organized

year-round for warfare, and by means of annual drives of conquest, Assyria became one of the most famous and awe-inspiring empires of the ancient world. The Assyrians were later conquered by the Persians, whose Zoroastrian religion still holds a presence in the syncretistic religious beliefs of the Yazidi peoples of Nineveh Province.

The Persian rulers of Nineveh were replaced by Alexander the Great's generals, who were succeeded by the centurions of Roman legions. During the early Middle Ages, Christianity was the dominant religion of the region until the Arab conquest of the seventh century. The Persian kings battled with the Turkish throne in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but the Ottomans prevailed and came to regard Mosul as the jewel of its southern provinces. The Ottomans did not want to give up control of Mosul to the West. It has been rumored that even now Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan dreams of reclaiming the Mosul area for a new Ottoman Empire, headed by himself.

From the viewpoint of Islamic State (ISIS, or Daesh), Mosul may be considered the venue of the apocalyptic last battle in Dabiq, a town in northern Syria. The prophecy of this battle foreseen by the Prophet is recorded in the Hadith (Sahih Muslim Book 041, Hadith Number 6924). According to Ali Sada, an Iraqi citizen and editor of *Daesh Daily*, a war digest, "Since Dabiq passed into the hands of the Turkish-Arab coalition months ago, some ISIS websites are arguing that the Battle for Mosul is the equivalent of the battle for Dabiq." The significance of this prophesied battle is captured in the prominence afforded it by ISIS, which

named both their magazine and their signature website after it.

For many jihadis then, Mosul is the last battle in history. But one may also argue that from a Western, Hegelian point of view, Iraq's experiment with social democracy is also the end of history. Defense of the Iraqi

against Iran during the long war between Saddam's Iraq and the Ayatollah's Iran from 1980 to 1988.

Abadi is the face of Iraq's painful, halting experiment with democracy. He is an outspoken proponent of a republic that honors the legal rights of all



experiment with democracy as a defense of Western civilization is the unspoken premise of the 60-state anti-ISIS coalition.

Iraq today understands itself to be a federal, parliamentary representative, democratic republic, even though its current constitution defines its government as an Islamic, federal, parliamentary, democratic republic. Some critics call it a puppet state of neighboring Iran, but that would be unfair to the Iraqi parliamentarians and the current prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, who have made it clear to the world that they are proud of their independence and will fight for it. Many of them fought

citizens—at least in principle—equally. For more than two years, he has contended with scores of civilian-led demonstrations in public squares all the while guiding a mixed army of Shia and Sunni soldiers as well as huge, Iranian-supported Popular Mobilization forces including Turkmen, Yazidis, Christians, and Shabbaks. And he governs from a city in which there are between six and ten terrorist bombings every day.

True, the Republic of Iraq is no paragon of democracy, rule of law, fair play, and equal representation, but its goal is to become a social democracy in a manner similar to the

governments that support its fight against the terrorists. Relatively speaking, if the end of history is a pluralistic, cosmopolitan social democracy in a world culture in which the freedom of each individual is maximized, its champion is Baghdad or Erbil, not Mosul or Raqqa.

From the perspective of the unfolding of world history, the battle for Mosul represents the culmination of a tectonic clash between modernity and the pre-modern Middle East, between states evincing a reverence for myth and religion (Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran) and states flaunting secularism (the Western world). It can be seen as a clash between the undeveloped and the developed world, the pre-rational and rational, the tribal and the global. Jihadism has called the West's bluff by proposing an anti-Western paradigm thought long dead: a revived Muslim Empire headed by a theocratic emperor and dedicated to the obliteration of democracy, free thought, and free action. This war has eerie evocations of ancient wars being reworked because something was left unfinished.

What is happening in Iraq and Syria is not a world war, but it is a war drawing proxies from most of the world. The 60-state coalition allied with the government of Iraq is facing off against an equally diverse coalition of jihadist fighters set to put an end to modernity in the name of the Caliphate. There may be no atheists in fox holes, but even the Marxists have their proxies in the fight: the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) and their Syrian counterparts, the YPG, have scores of volunteer Marxist-inspired fighters from Europe. There is even a unit of all-female YPG fighters battling pockets of

Islamic State on the south side of the Sinjar Mountains.

ISIS terrorists include jihadis from North and Central Africa, Uighurs from China, and radicalized Europeans by the thousands. From Germany alone 800 young men have made their way to Syria to fight with ISIS. Suicide bombers even hail from Japan. In Syria and Iraq, more than 70 languages are spoken on the battlefield. Coalition air strikes on Jan. 9 destroyed "the Australian ISIS headquarters" on the west bank of Mosul, *Daesh Daily* reported. Let that fact sink in: Islamists from Australia?

The optimism of Francis Fukuyama, author of the 1991 best-selling book *The End of History and the Last Man*, has to be reconsidered. When the book first appeared, the Soviet Union was history, and the judgement of most political thinkers was that no ideology could compete with the culture of Western-style social democracy. But that was two years before the first Al-Qaeda attack on the Twin Towers in New York, ten years before 9/11, 24 years before the Caliphate

was proclaimed in Mosul, and 25 years before the ISIS attacks on Europe. That was before mass murder by rolling trucks became a problem.

Fukuyama's teacher, Samuel Huntington, once director of Harvard's center for International Affairs, thought that what was aborning on the world stage was a clash of civilizations. This was prescient. But for decades western leaders and analysts underestimated and understudied the new religious movement we know as Islamism. Perhaps many assumed that the age of religious wars had essentially ended at the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648.

Winning the war of ideas is the challenge that the George W. Bush and Obama administrations never engaged effectively enough. Barak Obama spoke of ISIS as the "JV" Team in the year it grew and conquered swathes of Iraq with furious speed. The Islamic State achieved in 2015 a goal that Al-Qaeda had projected in 2005 but which few observers expected to happen: the creation of a defined territory ruled by a Caliph.



Mosul by American Colony (Jerusalem) Photo Department, 1932. Source: Library of Congress.



By Spc. Craig Jensen, Feb. 5, 2017. Source: U.S. Army. Cpt. Andrew Roberts directs newly arrived paratroopers, part of the coalition to defeat ISIS, where to go near Mosul, Iraq.

In fact, in its first year, the Caliphate claimed substantial territory in three nations: Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Islamic terrorism as a whole grew by leaps and bounds on Obama's watch.

Islamism is still in a position to ascend and is hoping to get a larger share of the loyalties of 1.6 billion Muslims in 80 countries. Yes, superior arms of the coalition against ISIS will likely dislodge the terrorists from Mosul by the end of April if not sooner and from Raqqa before the end of 2017.

But most observers agree that the terrorists will fade back into counter-insurgency mode. "ISIS terrorists will simply change their skins," says Ali Sada of *Daesh Daily*. "They will shave their beards and pretend that they were always innocent civilians. Even after the costly battles to recover Iraqi cities in Anbar Province in 2016, some of the terrorists bribed their way out of prisons and are coming

to Baghdad to end their lives as suicide bombers."

For now the anxious residents of West Mosul are hoping to survive until their liberation by Iraqi Counter-Terrorism forces. As for the Iraqi survivors living in East Mosul, progress for them would be the cessation of sudden counterattacks by sleeper cells, mortar barrages, and drone attacks launched by the terrorists in the Western half of the city. For the combatants fighting for their lives and the panicked civilians running for theirs, this very modern, very ancient war still comes down to a knife fight in a pitch-black alley.

With the new administration in Washington, the rhetorical Kabuki dance over whether to use the phrase "radical Islam" as opposed to the phrase "violent extremism" is over. National security advisors to the new president as well as lawmakers, pastors, and thought

leaders of all sorts speak candidly about the war of ideas being fought between exponents of totalitarian Islamism and the various forms of social democracy that invoke freedom as the highest ideal.

Ideas do matter, policymakers concede. But which side has the ideas that will prevail in the long run? Which side has a fighting faith? The German philosopher Hegel, writing in the 1800s, asserted that there would be an end to history and taught that it was a foregone conclusion that freedom would win out in the end. Nonetheless, it was in his day, as it is our own, still a matter of faith, core identity, and grit—and by no means a foregone conclusion. P

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DOMINION /də'mɪnyən (IS NOT)  
DOMINATION /dəmən'nāSH(ə)n/

“Let us make mankind in our image; and let them have dominion over all the earth...” Called to share the Divine likeness, human beings were made to exercise rule in the form of dominion: delegated, providential care—responsibility—for the conditions of history, in history. Such care is characterized by other-centered acts of self-donation. This contrasts sharply with domination. Since the Fall in the Garden of Eden, human beings have been afflicted by the *libido dominandi*—we have been ruled by the lust to rule. Domination is characterized by self-centered acts of other-donation that feed our hunger for power, advantage, and glory through the forced submission of the powerless to our will.

The political-theological patrimony of the Christian intellectual tradition, including just war casuistry, helps guide human beings back to the just exercise of our governing vocation. In our private and public lives, including through the work of government, human dominion is approximate, limited, and imperfect. Following after God’s work of creating, sustaining, and liberating all of creation, human beings exercise power with the aim of peace, characterized by the presence of justice and order as oriented toward genuine human flourishing.

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