

A photograph of a mosque with a tall minaret and a large dome, reflected in a body of water. The mosque is constructed from light-colored stone or brick. The minaret is tall and slender, topped with a small dome. The main dome is large and features blue and white stripes. The building has several arched windows and doorways. The water in the foreground is calm, creating a clear reflection of the mosque and the sky. The sky is overcast with grey clouds. There are some trees and bushes in the foreground and middle ground.

Religion: The Missing Dimension in Mission Planning

By Chaplain (Major) Timothy K. Bedsole

Since 9/11, United States Army special-operations forces, or ARSOF, have been at the forefront of the Global War on Terrorism, or GWOT. As a result of SOF expertise in military operations ranging from counterinsurgency to nation-building, they are recognized as one of the greatest force multipliers in the U.S. military arsenal.

One of the foundations of ARSOF's expertise is their ability to incorporate cultural intelligence into their operations. Since 9/11, a growing awareness of the role of religious identity has caused our nation's leaders to focus increasingly on the importance of religious ideology. The recent "long war brief" addresses the need to counter the religious ideology of extremist Islamic groups. Doing so will require not only a deeper understanding of religion's effects upon society than is currently provided by intelligence analyses and products, but also an increased emphasis on including religious factors in mission planning.

The changing dynamics of conflict are driving a profound change in ARSOF operations. Finding the center of gravity of the conflict may require translating unfamiliar religious traditions into mission factors. Religion, in the form of nonstate actors, faith-based transnational networks, polygonal insurgency operations and transcendent ideology, challenges the power of secular organizations. The answer to overcoming those challenges is not to exclude religion from planning but rather to increase our understanding of religious factors.

ARSOF need to examine the application of religious factors to mission planning and develop a synchronized process within intelligence preparation of the battlefield, or IPB. There is a need to integrate a new religious-factors analysis, or RFA, into the IPB process so that religious factors become actionable elements of the mission plan.

Why religion matters

In the movie "Flight 93," there is a poignant scene showing the terrorists of 9/11 lifting up prayers for the success of their mission, while the passengers are asking God for strength to survive the terror. It is a moving moment that illustrates the complexity of religion: It motivates some to kill, and it gives others strength, but for both groups, religion speaks to the deeper meaning of life. Given religion's complexity and power, it is imperative that we understand the way it shapes modern warfare and the modern battlefield.

There are several reasons for religion's ability to shape the battlefield:

- Religion answers the big questions in life, death and war. It is germane to all conflict.
- Religion adds a higher intensity, severity, brutality and lethality to conflict than do other factors.
- Religion offers a stronger identity to participants in conflicts than other forms of identity, such as nationality, ethnicity, politics or language.
- Religion can motivate the masses quickly and cheaply, and it often remains outside the view of nation-state security forces.

- Religion offers an ideology — or a platform for a political ideology — that resonates stronger than other forms of propaganda.
- Religious leaders are often the last leaders left when states fail, and they offer a voice to the disempowered or oppressed.
- Religious leaders are often the first to seek peace and reconciliation after conflict.
- Religious factors are fundamental to conflict resolution and conflict management.
- Religious nongovernmental organizations supply a major portion of support to humanitarian efforts in military missions.¹

Given the nature of SOF missions, understanding religious factors is critical to predicting the human response to ARSOF operations. One definition of religion is "the human response to the perceived sacred." As a human response, it can be negative or positive. Understanding the positive and negative aspects is critical to explaining the human response. Trying to win the hearts and minds of local populations without understanding their souls deprives our efforts of one of the greatest avenues of approach. Combatting religious insurgents without understanding religious factors limits ARSOF's abilities. While we are not engaged in a religious war, we must understand religious factors if we are to gain a clear view of the battlefield.

Religion has shaped every conflict of the past, and there are indicators that its influence will only grow. For this reason alone, ARSOF Soldiers must seek to understand the impact that religious factors have on their missions, and they must learn to leverage those factors. Sometimes the impediment to understanding is not the lack of tools for analysis but rather the failure to apply them. The mission of each ARSOF unit calls for a different emphasis in religious analysis, but a good beginning step is to examine why we need to emphasize religious factors. If we do not know why religion is important to a culture, we may fail to interpret the culture's responses to our military actions. To begin an analysis of religious factors, we must first look within ourselves.

Religious implications of today's missions

In 1996, the unit to which the author was assigned as a chaplain entered Gradačac, Bosnia and Herzegovina, to begin the mission of the international peacekeeping force. As a force-protection measure, my commander sent me to meet the town's religious leaders. After returning from a meeting with the local imam, I relayed a message to our controlling unit that the imam would like to meet with someone from the military to discuss issues in the town. I will never forget the unit S2's reaction: "Chaplain, what has God got to do with this mess?" Taking a typical secular approach,² he failed to see any military importance in meeting with a local religious leader. He suffered from "secular myopia" and could not see the religious factors in the mission.³ He dismissed the action as unnecessary, completely discounting the fact that five religions — Ro-

man Catholicism, Islam, the Serbian Orthodox church, Judaism and Protestantism — shaped the conflict.⁴

Now, 10 years later, when some SOF Soldiers are asked about religion, a common response is, “We don’t do religion ... it is too dangerous to work with, so we leave it alone.” Thankfully, this view is changing with a renewed interest in cultural intelligence, but we must be careful to look at the total picture in our mission analysis. If we fail to consider the dynamics of religion in a culture, we limit our intelligence and allow religion to remain a secret code of motivating messages and symbols that will confound our analysis and hamper our understanding of the enemy’s center of gravity. Framing the GWOT in religious ideology, symbols and terms, Osama bin Laden has lifted the fight into the spiritual realm, giving him a power lacking to secular insurgents and terrorists.

Re-education process

The Western education system embraces the idea of the separation of church and state. That separation often results in a minimalist view of religious factors, and in military operations, that view can prevent an accurate area analysis.

When one considers that the Western view is shared by less than one-sixth of the world’s population and is a concept foreign to the indigenous populations in most of today’s areas of operations, the possibility of error in analysis increases.⁵ To prevent errors from occurring and to increase the understanding of religious factors in mission planning, we must develop a new understanding of the basic religious worldview. Such an understanding must link transcendent values with temporal actions.

To increase their understanding of religious factors, Soldiers must develop a view of religion that erases the separation between private religion and public actions. This does not mean that the Soldier must convert to a particular religious view, but he must seek to understand religion if he is to leverage it in mission planning. Soldiers don’t have to “do” religion, but if we don’t “get” religion, we will miss a tremendous opportunity to use the center of gravity in many conflicts.

Religion and politics

A quick study of the link between international politics and religion would help to improve our understanding of religion. Providing security is a major goal of political powers. As Barry Rubin, professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, states:

*In many areas of the world, religion should be seen as a central political pillar maintaining the power of any ruler — a major pole in determining the people’s loyalty — and as a key ingredient in determining a nation’s stability or instability. ... [R]eligion plays a key role as an important defining characteristic of politically contending communities.*⁶

For many societies, religion is the richest form of public motivation. It allows unrelated groups to coexist

peacefully and gives people a higher motive for selfless service.⁷ Presidents of the United States have understood religion’s power to reassure our nation in difficult times. Soldiers who have dealt with mass movements or riots started by a religious leader or a religious ritual understand the power of religion to shape the mission.

Normally, the American Soldier thinks in terms of providing security through strength and firepower — bringing religion into the formula requires a deeper understanding of the linkage. Osama bin Laden understands the link and has exploited it. His *fatwas*, or religious edicts, against the American presence in Saudi Arabia and his inclusion of the United States into the classification of infidels plays to a populace of the disempowered and provides them the promise of security through a religious hope. He has linked religious and political ideology with psychological finesse.

How does the SOF Soldier counter this exploitation of religion for ideological and political purposes? By understanding how religion interacts with society and exploiting the weakness of bin Laden’s ideology through unconventional countermeasures and tactical diplomacy. Khaled Abou El Fadl, in his book, *The Great Theft*, states, “[N]othing helps the puritans’ cause as much as Western ignorance, prejudice and hate.”⁸ Promoting a deeper understanding of religion and political security gives the American Soldier a countermeasure for use against those who believe we are spreading Americanization — also labeled as globalization or Westoxification — to other parts of the world. Leveraging this understanding could help us find innovative approaches for helping indigenous people retain their group identity while working with SOF. It would also help us rob a religiously motivated insurgency of its ability to use ideology to promote insecurity and to alienate the indigenous population.

An example of the effective use of religion in a military mission comes from Afghanistan, where the 1st Battalion, 19th SF Group, used money from the Commander’s Emergency Response Program to refurbish several mosques in the Konar Province. Refurbishing the mosques countered the messages of al-Qaeda and the Taliban that the Americans hated Islam. It was a psychological action that had deep resonance with the population.⁹ As the members of the local population observed the American-funded effort, they developed a trust for the units throughout the area.¹⁰

Why religion is missing

In an age when we are seeking cultural intelligence in order to understand the indigenous society and the insurgent ideology, we seem to minimize one of the most important factors of life — religion. This missing — or minimized — dimension of mission analysis could extract a high cost for the U.S. and limits our ability to predict future reactions. As Thomas Friedman says, “While we were celebrating 11/9 [the fall of the Berlin Wall], the



RESTORE FAITH Villagers of Zormat, Paktya Province, Afghanistan, gather around their newly restored mosque. The mosque was repaired by Afghan contractors using U.S. funds, which helped build trust between U.S. Soldiers and the local population. *U.S. Army photo.*

seeds of another memorable date — 9/11 — were being sown.”¹¹ Internationally, we missed the impact of religion on world politics. Strategists and futurists wrote religion off as a declining factor in social life and missed the implications of a religious resurgence.

There are several reasons for the minimalization of religion in mission planning. First, religion is a complex subject. There are no definitive templates for religion. Too often, we oversimplify the subject with a broad statement that all religions are basically the same or that they share universal beliefs. Try the simple exercise of defining religion among a group of people. Each person will have a different definition. While an analysis of religion does not fit well within most analytical studies, it does not mean the complexity is incomprehensible. Marc Gopin offers several recommendations for government and nongovernmental agencies in performing religious analysis. Summarized, these recommendations represent a good start for that analysis in military planning:

1. Study the fears and resentments of religious world-views that oppose present civil societies and develop policies that do not increase those fears.
2. Study causal chains that link religious violence to both internal and external religious traditions and

understand how mass traumas affect groups.

3. Know religious traditions affected by the mission and anticipate the impact on religious life, religious institutions and religious leaders.
4. Know when religion or religious figures have influenced social transformation in a positive sense and reinforce policy to continue the positive transformation.
5. Know the darkest expression of a religion’s or a culture’s interpersonal behavior patterns to anticipate causes and counteractive measures.
6. Study the perceived and remembered traumas of a society from the religious interpretations and involve the religious community in healing the trauma.
7. Bring all parties, no matter how violent or exclusive, into interactions. This short-circuits the martyr complex.
8. Isolate truly violent groups not by confrontation, which strengthens them, but by coopting; address the grievances of the violent groups through cooperating with religious leaders and organizations.¹²

The consideration of any one of these recommendations would aid the SOF Soldier in leveraging religion. A second reason religion is minimalized in mission



RISE AND SHINE Iraqi soldiers at An Numanyah conduct early-morning prayers before sunrise during Ramadan. *U.S. Army photo.*

planning is that it is often seen as irrelevant. The belief that religion is a cover for other motivating factors causes us to underestimate the connections between religious ideology and societal responses to military actions. This belief still misses the point that even if an insurgent is misusing religious ideology to gain a political end, he is nonetheless “thinking” religiously. Until we gain a better understanding of the religious factors, we will not defeat religiously motivated terror. Bullets will not defeat “spiritual warriors,” and the more we react in purely secular terms, the more we empower the religiously motivated insurgent. As Mark Juergensmeyer states, “When governments abandon their own moral principles in responding to terrorism, they inadvertently validate the religious activists’ most devastating critique of them: that secular politics are devoid of morality.”¹³

A third reason for the minimalization of religion in mission planning is a limited cultural understanding by Soldiers and staff members. As one senior Special Forces Soldier stated about his initial understanding of the operational environment of Fallujah, Iraq: “I didn’t know the difference between Shi’ia and Sunni when I deployed into the area ... and I didn’t know enough to ask about it. ... You don’t know to ask about what you don’t know.”

Too often, cultural briefs on religion are either limited to one practitioner of a faith or conducted by non-religiously oriented staff. Obtaining a broader view of religion’s influence on the mission should include the use of the unit chaplain. Although chaplains are not subject-matter experts in world religions, they are an internal resource that can aid the staff in exploring and bringing into focus the religious factors that might affect mission planning. Chaplains provide the staff with a religious perspective that can assist in exploring the religious impacts on mission planning, and they provide a “theological” voice throughout the mission-planning process. Their role as religious leaders and military leaders, and their education in religious schools, uniquely position them to understand religion from an “insider’s” view.

One word of caution in this area is in order, however, as some chaplains — and other religiously-oriented Soldiers — often lack the theological flexibility to advise the command on religious issues.¹⁴ Too often, individual and theological prejudices overshadow religious and cultural considerations in mission planning. Still, it is better to have some understanding of religion than to have none, and the inclusion of chaplains in the planning process enhances the understanding of religious factors.

A new approach

The current doctrinal guidance for mission analysis gives credence to religious factors. The formal doctrine of each ARSOF branch includes a mention of “religious analysis” as part of the overall mission-assessment process. None gives much detail to the process, and none attempts to align the assessment process with IPB. Looking into the chaplains’ doctrine for guidance on RFA, we find several steps that help in an overall assessment, but again, the lack of alignment with the IPB process decreases the harmony of the process. (See FM 1-05, *Religious Support*; Appendix G, “Religious Area Assessment,” or TC 1-05, *Religious Support Handbook for the Unit Ministry Team*; Table D, “Religious Area/Impact Assessment.”)¹⁵

A new approach to templating and integrating religious factors into mission planning would need to consider critical religious factors. It would need to align these factors with the rest of the IPB process, and it would require us to evaluate implicational considerations. Since religious factors are so difficult to encapsulate into a process, the approach would have to have a measure of flexibility in understanding religious conditions unique to the area of operations.

Religious factors do not exist in a vacuum, but too often, the considerations for inclusion leave them outside

*on the basis of an individual’s or group’s affiliations with specific religious traditions. ... [Therefore] there is no substitute for continual on-site analysis, fieldwork of a highly specialized and particular sort that is best conducted by experts in the religious tradition(s) in questions.*¹⁶

Given the warnings of working with the sacred, the need to understand and interpret religious factors in military planning demands that we approach the subject. Synchronizing the approach with the present IPB process would give the military planner the best approach to the integration of religious factors and allow the re-examination of assumptions throughout the total process. This would keep the process transparent and applicable to the final mission.

Integrated approach

Integrating the RFA with the IPB is no small feat. Simplifying the process using existing doctrine, terminology and information would allow ARSOF Soldiers to better use the tool. Adapting an abbreviated IPB process in applying RFA factors would also simplify the procedure. FM 34-130, *Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield*, gives the following steps for an abbreviated IPB process: work ahead; focus on the essentials; stay objective-oriented; and use minimal essentials. Adapting these steps to the RFA would give the mission planner these advantages:

“Given religion’s complexity and power, it is imperative that we understand the way it shapes modern warfare and the modern battlefield.”

mission planning. For this reason, two critical factors for RFA in mission planning are imperative: intentionality and interpretation. Intentionality is the vital commitment to continual consideration of religious factors in all stages of the IPB. Interpretation of the religious factors is the most difficult step in the planning process, since religious meaning is subjective. Translating religion through only anthropological or social-science disciplines of study leaves the process incomplete. Triangulating the interpretation of religious factors through the additional study of theology yields a more accurate picture of the affects of religion upon the military mission and allows commanders to more properly understand their enemies and potential allies on the ground. This triangulation requires careful consideration of the local applications of a religious worldview. According to Dr. Scott Appleby:

The unique dynamism of lived religion — its distinctive patterns of interaction not only with secular, nationalist, ethnic and other elements of political or personal identity but also with its own sacred past — means, among other things, that religious behavior cannot be predicted merely

1. Work ahead: Working ahead to recognize religious factors in the area of operations, or AO, would save time and give understanding of the basic implications of the mission. Building an analysis of religious factors would give the staff flexibility during contingency planning and save time in mission planning.

2. Focus on the essentials: Religion is complex, but the essentials for understanding the reaction of a religious group are similar, regardless of the AO. Thinking through the essential religious factors begins the integration process.

3. Stay objective-oriented and use the minimum essentials: If the objective is to help commanders and staffs plan a mission efficiently, then integrating the religious factors must begin early in the process. Including the effect of religious factors on the mission objective requires continual integration by the staff. In the case of religious factors, identifying the minimum essentials for planning begins with the most obvious factors and moves to the most difficult. In synchronizing these factors within the four-step IPB process, the intentionality and skill of the

commander and staff determines their usefulness to the mission. Building a model for RFA can ensure that the process stays objective-oriented while using the minimum essentials for planning.

Religious terrain assessment

The terrain of religion is vast, sometimes restrictive, but open to understanding. Navigating the terrain requires an understanding of a few basic factors before beginning the analysis process. It is the nature of religion to espouse beliefs and to endow the physical world with a transcendent reality. Where the sacred affects the physical world, it is a beginning point for terrain assessment in the IPB process. Using three areas in which religion intersects with the physical world in a visible, somewhat measurable focus would allow ARSOF Soldiers to begin navigating the religious terrain.

The first area of religious terrain is visible expression of religion. This stage of assessment asks where religion is practiced in the AO. Assessment in this area locates religious sites and seeks to understand their use, their priority to the populace and their symbolism to the community. It is the first stage in the RFA and the easiest to assess.

The second area of religious terrain is human assessment. It focuses on the religious actors in the AO. Actors can range from formal religious leaders to religiously motivated laymen. They can fill the ranks of the political leadership or religious insurgent groups, but they all operate within a religious sphere, and understanding their role gives insight to their influence. In this area, the mission planner seeks to understand who the leaders are, their rank or status, their resources, their lines of communication and their location. Religious leaders are often the only voice of stability in disrupted societies, often providing powerful leadership that should be acknowledged and included in the larger mission.

The third area of religious terrain is ideology. Identifying religious ideology includes gaining knowledge of the values, codes, practices, holy days, symbols, history, heroes and villains of the religious population. Ideological factors are the most difficult to assess in an RFA, but they yield a deeper understanding of the core elements of the culture. Understanding the way that religious ideology shapes the greater society and individuals can provide the commander with the greatest ability to shape the battlefield of the hearts and minds. This level of assessment often requires reaching out to local cultural or academic specialists to gain deeper insight.

All three levels require an effects-based assessment. This is the most difficult skill to develop in assessment of religion. Identifying religious sites is easier than understanding their meaning, but a thorough assessment is required for accurately predicting the impact of religion on the mission. Continually asking the “so what” question keeps the RFA relevant to the mission for the SOF Soldier.

In summary, the consideration of religious factors will

not guarantee mission success. It has been said that all politics are local, and so it is with religion. Those who engage in religious analysis must understand that religion is too broad a subject to predict accurately, but that does not obviate the need to study and interpret religion’s impact on the mission. A cursory glance at religion as part of cultural awareness is often the training solution, and that lack of depth is too often the reason we get it wrong in our analysis.

The renewed interest in cultural intelligence at the JFK Special Warfare Center and School is one effort to develop the ARSOF warrior. Through doctrinal development, classroom instruction and practical application, there is a renewed effort to understand religious factors in ARSOF missions. Since the inception of the school, instruction on religion and religious factors has played an important role in making Special Forces Soldiers a combat multiplier. **SW**

This paper represents an ongoing effort with the SWCS Directorate of Training and Doctrine’s SF, CA and PSYOP doctrine developers and the author to reassess the religious factors on the SOF mission and refine doctrinal guidance. A future article will provide specific applications to the SF, CA and PSYOP missions. The author invites readers’ comments and feedback. Reply to bedsolet@soc.mil.

Notes:

¹ These statements represent conclusions based on the author’s experiences in military operations, readings on the subject of religion and conflict, and other sources. One noted source is Chapter 1, “Religion and War in the Twenty-First Century,” by Dr. Pauletta Otis in *Religion and Security: The New Nexus in International Relations* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 15-21. Dr. Otis works with the U.S. Marine Cultural Training Center and is professor of strategic studies at the Joint Military Intelligence College. The author is personally indebted to her advice and expertise in the area of religion, violence and the assessment of religious factors in military operations.

² “Secular” came from the Latin word, *saeculaum*, or “world,” and signified a religious person who left the monastery to return to the world. From the Enlightenment period’s philosophical separation of God and man to the political separation of the Treaty of Westphalia and Western democracy, the Western tendency to divide the world between secular and sacred affects the military analysis.

³ Secular myopia, defined as “an inability even to see, much less understand, the role of religion in human life.” An example is the way the American intelligence community in the 1970s, following its secular-focused training, discounted the power and views of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran and misinformed the U.S. leaders, who misinformed the Shah’s regime. From, “Patterns and Contexts of Religious Freedom and Persecution,” by Paul Marshall in *The Brandywine Review of Faith and International Affairs*, published by the Council on Faith and International Affairs, Alta Vista, Va., Volume 2, No. 3, Winter 2004-2005, 27-31.

⁴ In 1996, the focus was on the clash of culture between Eastern-oriented Islam and Western-oriented Serbian Orthodox, but, in reality, five religious traditions shaped the conflict in the area of the Former Republic of Yugoslavia. The author found remnants of each religious tradition in the area.

⁵ R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20-21.



MEETING OF THE MINDS As military leaders trained in religious schools, chaplains offer a unique “insider’s” view of religion. *U.S. Army photo.*

⁷ Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), 278.

⁸ Khaled About El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (San Francisco: Harper, 2000), 286. Fadl, professor at the UCLA School of Law and an Islamic jurist, defines “puritans” as what some writers call fundamentalists, militants, extremists, radicals, fanatics, jihadists and Islamists. He explains the limitations of these terms and gives his reasoning on the use of purist because it describes the “distinguishing characteristic” of the group as absolutist and uncompromising, with an intolerant exclusivist attitude (pages 16-25.)

⁹ Psychological Operations Action: an action conducted by non-PSYOP personnel that is planned primarily to affect the behavior of a target audience (FM 3-05.30, *Psychological Operations*.)

¹⁰ George Adams, “Chaplains as Liaisons with Religious Leaders: Lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan” (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2006), 39.

¹¹ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 55.

¹² Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 207-09.

¹³ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 244. On pages 233-49 Juergensmeyer offers five possible outcomes to the GWOT: destroying violence with force; terrifying terrorists with threats of reprisal; violence wins and terrorists use violence to leverage political gain; separating religion from politics, something impossible; and using religion to heal politics. Juergens-

meyer favors this final outcome for success in a global war against terror.

¹⁴ For a more comprehensive explanation on the role of chaplains, read “Chaplains as Liaisons with Religious Leaders: Lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan,” available at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/peaceworks/pwks56.html>. Adams also gives a good assessment of chaplain competency in relating to other religions, and he explains the difficult role of the chaplain on a staff.

¹⁵ Chaplains avoid the connection to intelligence factors in an attempt to retain their noncombatant status. For this reason, chaplains use the term “assessment” and not “analysis” when looking into the religious factors in mission planning. They still offer insight into the religious thought, and a good IPB should include some religious analysis by a religiously trained staff member.

¹⁶ Appleby, 56.

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