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***“The USA Needs a New Policy for the Middle East”***  
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Writing in the Oct. 3 Washington Post, Andrew Bacevich points out that United States soldiers have been fighting in the “Greater Middle East” almost continuously since 1980. By bombing the so-called Islamic State (ISIS), we make Syria the 14th Middle East country in which we have fought in 34 years.

Is it helping? Are we making the Middle East a safer place? No. Despite our goal of social and political stability, wherever the U.S. military has gone, volatility and insecurity have followed.

The problem is not our fault. We intervened in places where groups of people with long-standing hatred for each other used their political or military power to oppress each other. We helped eliminate oppressors such as Saddam Hussein or Col. Gaddafi, but when we left, new power struggles erupted and instability continued.

The anti-ISIS bombing campaign seems headed in the same direction. The Turkish attacks on Kurdish fighters, our allies, is symptomatic of the inability of these different parties to work together. And, this new struggle, has clear potential to lead to U.S. ground combat once again.

It is time to change the USA's approach before more of our soldiers die? But to what? A truly new strategy requires us to reconceive the situation from the ground up.

Bacevich describes the problem in geographical terms, the “Greater Middle East.” But a better way to characterize this region is the “Muslim heartland.” With the exception of the former Yugoslavia, the United States has been fighting in the territory to which Islam spread during its first century. The region's inhabitants see the situation in religious terms and so should we.

Islam apparently is undergoing a “reformation,” a period similar to the Protestant breakaway from Catholicism that began in the 16th century. And just as the Christian Reformation caused great volatility in Europe, so too, this Islamic Reformation stokes ongoing instability in the Muslim world.

The Protestant Reformation often conjures up thoughts of theologians: Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox. We forget their new theologies brought on more than 120 years of fighting across Europe, starting in 1524.

The Thirty Years' War ravaged Germany, Central Europe and Sweden. The Eighty Years' War caused great suffering in the Netherlands, Belgium and coastal Germany. It took the Peace of Westphalia to end them. The English and Scottish civil wars likewise stemmed from Protestant/Catholic enmity.

turned them into radical Protestant theocracies. John of Leiden, for example, captured Munster in 1533, leading it as prophet and king until Catholic forces defeated him in 1535. His religious government included extensive polygamy.

Today, Islam is in the midst of its own theological reformation. Historically, Islamic law and religion has been governed by centuries-old schools of interpretation. Mosques have been led by mullahs who belonged to one of these schools and educated their followers in its traditions.

Modern Islamic groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaeda and ISIS promote alternative theological approaches. They reject the schools' traditional interpretations and claim to restore authentic Islam, even Muhammad's original practices. In this, they sound surprisingly similar to the Protestant rejection of Catholic tradition. Their use of violence to promote their views also parallels the European Reformation.

If Al-Qaeda's tactics have been fragmented and local in approach, like the Anabaptists', then the Muslim Brotherhood's strategy in Egypt and the Islamic State's approach in Syria and Iraq is much more like the nationalist approaches that emerged in Martin Luther's alliance with the German barons and King Henry's removal of England from the Catholic Church.

What are the policy implications? If the Islamic world is experiencing a reformation similar to that of European Christianity, there is nothing outsiders can do to stem the frictions. U.S. military involvement is like refereeing a boxing match. As soon as we step away, the combatants start punching each other again.

So, we should get out of the way. The United States and western countries should leave the Middle East. Rather than interfere with its internal religious struggles, non-Muslim nations should simply work to contain those struggles within that region. The West has done containment before, during the Cold War, so we know how to do it.

Does that leave civilians to suffer the difficulties of a war zone? Yes, it does, as it did during the Cold War. But that suffering will take place whether the West is involved or not. And if our soldiers are there, they will contribute to the suffering. So, let's get them out of the way so the Muslim groups can work out their differences as they choose. After all, the outcome of an Islamic Reformation can only be determined by its believers, not by outsiders. What they see as “Christian interference” won't help.

Note: This essay draws from Andrew J. Bacevich's essay, “Even if we defeat the Islamic State, we'll still loose the bigger war,” Washington Post, Oct. 3, 2014.

And don't forget the Anabaptist leaders who took over towns and

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