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RELIGION IS A MOTIVATOR, NOT A MOTIVE FOR CONFLICT

by

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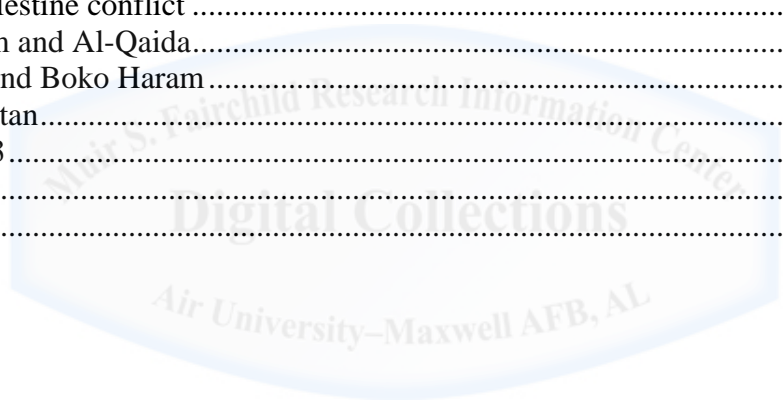
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ABSTRACT

Throughout history have several wars been classified as religious wars, wars caused by religious differences. I propose that few wars ever have this basic motive, but rather use religious motivation to promote passion into soldiers and justify seemingly unjustifiable conflicts.

The thesis is discussed through three main topics. The first defines the motive of war, and shows that power is the dominating reason. Secondly, I propose that historically motivated conflicts like the Crusades and Islamic expansion were derived from this notion of power in different ways, and do not have a purely religious motive. Thirdly, I show several of today's conflicts around the world, and how they are often mentioned in the media as religious wars, but rather have other causes as main reason.

Power, greed, economic gain, and freedom: all words that describe the real and underlying cause for conflict in the world. But religion is and will continue to be a powerful motivator. To be able to suppress the fear in your soldiers by sparking passion through religious belief is sometimes imperative for a leader to be able to be victorious in a conflict.

Introduction

Religion is often used in warfare as an excuse to fight wars, but not as an underlying reason for starting wars. Religion is historically more frequently used as a tool to promote passion in soldiers to perform in war, with military and religious leaders using their faith as a motivator to help soldiers justify their actions.

Clausewitz stated in "*On War*" that "war is the realm of danger; therefore courage is the soldier's first requirement."[1] This courage, the passion, or motivation, comes from the soldier's belief in what he is doing is right. The soldier must feel that his actions are just. The passion must be motivated by the leaders upon the soldiers, and can come from sources like justice, freedom, power, threat or religion.

Religion has over the millennia proven to be an extremely powerful motivator, or passion, in warfare. Blaise Pascal noted that "men never do evil so completely and cheerful as when they do it from religious conviction".[2] Conflicts are for this reason often recorded with a religious background, as the soldiers are convinced that their actions are religiously motivated. "Where you find people, you find war, and since most people alive today are religious in some form or another, religion is often the excuse made to slaughter others on a grand scale."[3]

Several researchers have concluded that most wars in history have political motives, and actually only a few with religious motivators.[4] I propose to prove that even the wars that normally are reckoned to have a religious motive are actually motivated by their initiators for other causes than divine faith.

I will describe the thesis in a division of three sections. First I will discuss the cause of war and conflict, and define what may be the determining factor to initiate aggression towards others, being a state or intrastate actors. Secondly I will look at some historical conflicts, the Crusades

and the Muslim Expansion. These are normally regarded as pure religious conflicts, and I will explain why I believe the motives are other than the religious motivation of the soldiers. Finally, I will look at the more recent conflicts. After World War Two, irregular warfare and terrorism have become the dominating methods of aggression. I will discuss the motives for these conflicts to show that religion plays a part in the conflict, but contrary to what the media often displays, it is not the underlying cause.

What is the motive for conflict?

"The insurgent cannot seriously embark on an insurgency unless he has a well-grounded cause with which to attract supporters among the population. A cause is his sole asset at the beginning, and it must be a powerful one if the insurgent is to overcome his weakness."[5]

Cause

What is a cause? How can we define what the reasons are for starting a conflict? When one thinks of the ancient kings there are countless stories about the personal need for power, more land or some economic gain. And if the cause is not to gain personal power, it may be to prevent others from gaining equal or greater power, as it was the case with the Peloponnesian wars almost 2500 years ago.[6] Leaders used their religion to mass their soldiers into believing in the cause of going to war and gave them the passion, the motivation, they needed to perform.

I propose that it all boils down to power. Man's lust for more power in some form or another has been the driving force for conflict all throughout history. But to make people grant a leader that power, the leader needs to make the people want to give him that power. For that reason, the leader needs to invent some incentive to direct the soldiers to the battlefield and risk their lives for this cause.

Some forms of power are easily identifiable, like the power of freedom and standing up against tyranny to preserve personal freedom from oppression, while others may be more subtle, like going to war with Iraq in 2003 where the official reason was retaliation against terrorist attacks from Muslim terrorists. The real reason was to demonstrate a political point, "that there are serious consequences for anyone trying to rock with the power of the U.S."[7]

Religion coexists with other motives in conflict

To be able to convince your followers, or to make followers respond to your desires, you need to invent a cause that the masses can believe in. With a cause, the leaders have a formidable asset that he can progressively transform into concrete strength. Galula describes this as the nature of the cause. He states there has to be a problem. It can be political, social, economic, racial, religious, or even artificial.[8] The point is that there has to be something that can strike passion in the soldiers, to make them follow and do the bidding of the leaders.

One of the best motivators for this passion has always been religion, and often an easy way of justifying wars. Even though most faiths around today usually teach that violence is wrong, they still allow it under special circumstances.[9] Some religions or cultures promote rewards for soldiers if they perform their duties in battle, even if they die in battle. By pleasing the will of the gods, the sacrifice of the soldier is often praised by the survivors, that their family members sacrificed their lives for their benefits. The Nordic Gods promised a place in Valhalla if the soldiers fought bravely and died on the battlefield. During the Crusades, Christians were promised redemption for their sins and shortening of time in purgatory if they followed the bidding of the Pope and fought against the enemies of the church. Even today there is the belief in the promise of a better life in heaven if Muslim soldiers become martyrs for their cause, their Jihad, against whichever enemy their religious leaders point out as a legitimate enemy. Their

heaven is described with "rivers of milk and wine, lakes of honey, and the services of seventy-two virgins."[10] For suicide bombers there is a belief that by becoming a martyr, the terrorist is able to intercede with God and ensure that seventy members of his family enter heaven.[11] This could be the reason that some parents of suicide bombers applaud and praise violent deaths of their relatives.

Meic Pierce states that conflicts between human societies tend to be expressed in religious terms. That is because claims of faith trump those of any other in respect of morality, loyalty, and meaning. "If I am called on to fight and to risk death, I shall want to know why. If plagued about the rightness of killing strangers, I shall want assurance. If our side appears to be facing defeat, I shall need motivation for fighting on."[12] These questions are more easily answered with a religious undertone, like the command of God, supplying a missing determination to fight. Both governments and ordinary people may see the religious language irresistible at times of war or of the threat of war, and it is a priceless tool for leaders for motivational purposes, especially if the duration of the conflict stretches out.

At the same time, it is difficult to understand the ambivalence in religious texts of today regarding war. Most religions preach a duty to refrain from violence and war, but at the same time "most religious text-collections are flooded with images of a vengeful and violent God: a God of war who destroys our enemies and punishes us if we stray".[13] By using these "sacred" texts, religious leaders may easily justify actions of violence by stating historical examples. In "God and War: an Audit", Austin et al states that there are four ways in which religious texts have been used to comment on war and the use of violence for mass killings: evangelical war, wars of conquest, just war where God permits violence for self-defense, and wars of retaliation.[14] But as with other causes, it is easy to notice that they all are politically motivated and can easily

be used to manipulate soldiers and followers to justify their actions. An evangelical war where one state decides that their neighbors should either convert to their religion or be punished, can be compared with the spread of democracy to stabilize the region and simplify trade. Wars of conquest, where God ordains the use of violence to conquer territory for increased state power, increases the power of the leaders. Just War signifies that God permits violence for self-defense. This is the belief that some wars are right and just, but has often been used as an excuse for a preemptive strike, to justify aggression. War of retaliation has a powerful psychological effect upon soldiers, with the use of a vengeful God to strike back at perpetrators. Sam Huston used the same notion when he shouted, "Remember the Alamo!"

Culture may be used to describe a cause for conflict. Samuel Huntington states that "in this new world the most persuasive, important, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities.[15] He states that religion is a principal definer of culture, the defining characteristic of civilization, and questions if the world would be more peaceful with a world devoid of culture?[16]

If one looks in the last century, only a few wars are recorded as religious, even though it contained conflicts that generated more casualties than ever before in history.[17] But looking further into back in time, there are several conflicts regarded as pure religious. The things that religion, for the most part, keeps in check often cause these conflicts; greed, pride, revenge, inhumane godless ideologies, and disdain for the well being of others.[18]

<center>**Religious wars through history?**</center>

Many wars and conflicts in human history seem to be caused by religious differences. The claims are often brought forward by people not being able to see the real underlying cause and focusing on the conviction of the fighting parties and the words used by their leaders to convince the followers to go to battle by religious justification of the war.

The Crusades

Many scholars today regard the Crusades as a true religious war, a holy war over the religious believes between the Christians and Muslims. But looking at the origins, the initial motive was more political than religious. Pope Urban II was troubled with the German kings, and was determined to unite the western Christendom. He needed a policy that would motivate the Latin Church and the Greek Church to come together under his spiritual authority.[19] When the request came from the Byzantine emperor for aid, he utilized the motivation of his followers' religious beliefs to proceed on an aggressive and violent quest. Looking at the faith of the time, the conviction of the religious leaders upon the population, made such a task relatively easy. And as history shows, with this motivation they were able to be extremely aggressive, slaughtering over 10,000 Jews on the way to the Middle East, and over 10,000 Muslims when they arrived.[20] But when it comes to the original motive for the crusade, power stands as the lone reason. The actions enabled the Pope to recapture Jerusalem, ultimately enhancing his position, and strengthening his power over the Church.

Preachers were giving sermons to advocate the calling of joining the Crusade. Gilbert of Tournai, a French scholar and friar, wrote his sermons to educate Franciscan Preachers using the Christian Cross as a sign to follow. He stated that the sign of the cross was a sign of victory, clemency, justice, and glory for the followers.[21] The cross was to be leading the followers away

from their sins. The main incentive for the majority of the crusaders was probably the notion of the crusade as penance, while others were persuaded by the promise of riches. The sermons build up the image of crusaders as morally superior people, with a special relationship with Christ, and liberating them from all sins.[22] Calling for the first Crusade, Pope Urban II stated: "If anyone who sets out should lose his life either on the way, by sea, or in battle against the infidels, his sins shall be pardoned from that moment".[23]

The sermons of the time also spoke of those who refused to become crusaders, or stood in the way of other people "taking the cross." By branding people as evil and morally destitute they singled out anyone not willing to either participate or pay tax in support. In a time where most people were illiterate and only knew of the world by whatever they were told, mostly from their preachers, it would be difficult to fight against such a massive psychological attack and not participate with the cross.

The initial intent of the Pope, though, was to make the largely unemployed French nobility, the knights-errant, do something. But the speeches of promises and threats made the peasantry join in masses. These violent soldiers were the real aggressors, destroying and killing all they could on their paths.[24]

The Islamic expansion

In contrast with the initially peaceful birth of the Christian Church, Islam was from the beginning propagated by military conquests, or *jihad*.[25] The rise of the religion began with Mohammed's conquest of Mecca, with himself at the head of his followers. But as Mohammed began his conquest, he proclaimed not to act as an aggressor. The Quran states that *jihad* means to strive or to struggle in the way of God, with four different kinds: personal, spiritual, and moral struggle; calm preaching; righteous behavior also upon unbelievers of Islam; and war against

those who oppress or persecute believers.[26]   The first three are regarded as the greater *jihad*, while the "lesser *jihad*", war, is commanded by Allah and must be carried out according to strict rules. The followers would still go on a conquest to violently spread their faith even with these proclamations.

The Islamic expansion was a series of wars to spread the new faith, to establish Muslim rule throughout the Mediterranean. It spans almost a millennium, from the lifetime of Mohammed to the Ottoman wars in Europe. The power of faith as a passion drove soldiers on this conquest, but the motive was still political: power to the leaders through expansion and governing with cultural politics. The religious policy followed military policy, where the conquered were given three choices: convert to Islam, keep the original faith and pay tax, *jizya*, or they would be killed.[27] The price of peace became submission to Islam.

As they conquered new territories, rules and regulations were set up: only Muslims could bear arms, only Muslims could be in governing positions, and Muslims had an advantage in legal disputes. Also, the religion was made to expand, not contract, as the penalty for Muslims to convert away from Islam was death.

It might be difficult to accept that the Muslim conquests are classified into either religious or political ones, as there often is no clear distinction between state and religion in Islam. In contrast with the Western concept of secular states, Islamic nations tend to be ruled by their religious leaders and in the way they see the Koran. Still, one can argue that the motive for the expansion was a continuation of the raids the Arab tribes in the region had historically been doing. But with the new faith, the preachers of Mohammed forbade war between fellow members of the *ummah*, or Muslim community,[28] so they had to expand in order to continue

their traditions. Still, the three successors of Mohammed were murdered as a result of fighting amongst fellow Muslims.[29] The prospect of power seems to be the ultimate cause.

The Reformation

Several other conflicts and full-scale wars have been reportedly religious in their foundation, but as with the ones mentioned so far, the true cause is other. The Reformation Wars were seen as wars of religion, purely because at the time religion was politics.[30] But still I will argue that the real reason was personal power and freedom from religious tyranny, as the peasants revolted against the ruling elite, which also was the religious leadership. By opposing this authority, the rebels battled Rome's interpretation of the Bible, but mainly sought freedom from religious oppression. As the conflict escalated, it became more political where state rulers sought to fight against each other to advance their position.

The Northern Crusades

In 1190, after the fall of Jerusalem, a new Crusader order was founded: the Teutonic Knights. Their initial post was to look after a hospital, and fight pagans in Hungary, but the king feared they could stage a coup and form their own state. They were thus sent to the northern European countries, Prussia and the Baltic to spread the word of God by a brutal military campaign of incorporation.

The Knights were fairly successful in their conquest of converting pagans to Christianity. But in contrast of the Middle Eastern Crusades, the northern Crusades span over 300 years, where the Knights became actual rulers of the countries they conquered and set to convert by evangelism.[31] Their motivation for launching a campaign against the barbarians must probably have been the religious conviction of converting pagans by the sword, but history clearly shows

that their true motive was colonialism.   The German Christian lords were mainly interested in extending their territories.[32]

Post WW2; conflict, insurgency, and terrorism today

The 20th century produced the most violent and destructive wars in all of history, and they all have the underlying cause of power, economy, or territory. After WW2, the conflicts changed from total war to limited warfare, but the cause stayed the same. The fall of colonialism resulted in uprisings all over the world, and even though many groups are religiously motivated, the underlying cause is always political power in some form or another. The attempt by Western democracies to impose their secular-democratic model upon the new emerging states "has rendered unstable the structures that govern ordinary people's lives and thus provoked violence."[33]

Israel-Palestine conflict

After WWII, Israel has risen as a major catalyst for conflict in the Middle East. For many historians, and the media, it seems that the reasons are fundamentally religious: Jews vs. Muslims. But the cause for the several wars between the Arab countries and the Jewish state has always been nationalism and liberation of territory.[34]

The initial immigration of Palestine by the Zionists in the late 1800s caused little problems, but the indigenous people became increasingly alarmed as colonization increased resulting in waves of violence. Hitler's rise to power resulted in increased Jewish immigration and growing conflict. After the war, the United Nations recommended the divide of 55% Palestine to a Jewish state, despite the fact that only 30% of the population were Jewish and owned less than 7 % of the land.[35] The following internal fight between Jews and Palestinians resulted quickly in

war between the new Israeli state and its neighboring countries. This first war ended in the expansion of Israel, denouncing of a Palestinian state, and a great amount of refugees in neighboring countries with the dreams of someday returning to their homeland. This nationalistic incentive from both sides has flamed the aggressiveness that is still present, and has resulted in several wars without any realistic agreement between the warring parties.

The religious aspect of the conflict is the affected belief of the Muslims, Christians, and Jews that they are the "chosen people" with the right to the Promised Land. They all share the belief of ancestral right to the Holy Land; however the conflict is more of self-preservation and expansion by all participants.

Terrorism and Al-Qaida

There have been terrorist groups fighting in the name of God for millennia. And there has been an increase in groups claiming religious motivation to justify their cause in the last decade.[36] For religiously motivated terrorists I believe that their faith is governing their actions and serves as a passion for committing atrocities. They are working for leaders who utilize religious scriptures to find justification for their aggressiveness. Bruce Hoffman claims: "Religion – conveyed by sacred text and imparted via clerical authorities claiming to speak for the divine – therefore critically serves as a means to explain contemporary events and, in turn, as legitimating force justifying violence."[37] In reality, the cause is again political. One example is Al-Qaida. The group is working for a political order in the Muslim countries, and targets the USA and its allies, calling it *jihad* and proclaiming a *fatwa* against the "infidels" to persuade the public to join the cause. The presence of American forces and forces from other western countries in Muslim countries provokes the groups, and focuses their attention to aggressive behavior against these specific groups.

Terrorists of today are often considered to be Islamic fundamentalists with a religious war, of *jihad*, against the Christians. But by definitions, *jihad* is mainly for self-protection, and for the moral and spiritual struggle to become a better human. The lesser *jihad,* war, is as mentioned, to stop oppression or persecution, not for waging an aggressive war. Still these groups call for *jihad* to summon and manipulate the soldiers by the way of religion. It all boils down to power, to be able to control the followers to do their bidding and be able to justify their actions. Their mostly conventional objectives are potentially attainable, political, social, or economic, making their ideology and intentions more comprehensible.[38]

Nigeria and Boko Haram

The civil war in Nigeria is often described as a clash between Muslims and Christians. But again, the Boko Haram is mainly fighting for territory, to be able to take political control over their area of interest and at the same time receive some of the wealth the southern part of the country is receiving for the export of oil.

The group, whose name means "Western education is forbidden", began in the mid-90s as a non-violent Islamic study group. After some minor clashes culminating in 2009 with the arrest of several members and the execution of their leader, the group reemerged in 2010 more radical and violent with a determination for vengeance of their leader. Their primary goal is to rid the poverty problems of northern Nigeria, and subsequently implement Sharia Law and establish an Islamic state. The notion of the conflict being a religious one, is false, but rather a cultural and economic struggle. The feeling of alienation from wealthier, Christian, oil producing southern Nigeria, extreme poverty, extensive government corruption, heavy-handed security measures, and the belief that relations with the West are a corrupting influence fuels the group.[39] With

direct ties to Al-Qaida and other terrorist organizations, the group poses a threat cross borders, but their goals are internal.

Afghanistan

"What was going on in the early 1990s in Afghanistan, and in the years following, should have alerted the West to a new kind of warfare, not between states, but between rival protagonists holding different views of the world."[40] After assisting the Islamic guerilla forces, the mujahedeen, to get rid of the soviet aggressors, the Western countries left Afghanistan to recuperate on its own. This resulted in violent clashes between different warlords in search for power and influence, but all were defeated by an enemy worse than any of them: the Taliban.

The initial goal of the Taliban was clearly a power struggle to take over the country. But most of the members were of the same tribal group: the Pashtun, with a large number living in Pakistan. Together they changed their political goals to not only govern the country, but also introduce their religion on the population.[41] They intended, together with their Al-Qaida allies, to resurrect the Islamic caliphate.

After 9/11, the war against terrorism began with the attack on the Taliban in Afghanistan. This was seen by many Muslims as the religious West against the East. But the real cause was to retaliate against the attackers that were being hidden by the Taliban. To get to Al-Qaida, one needed to remove the political and fanatic government in the country and replace it with new leadership. This leadership needed someone that had a more positive attitude towards the "West," to stabilize the region and adding the possibility for an economic relationship when the fighting ended.

Iraq 2003

When the United States and its five allies attacked Iraq in 2003, many saw the action as a Christian Crusade against the Muslim community.   By looking at the speeches of President George W. Bush commenting on the war against terrorism, it is evident that he uses religious language and imagery to garner support within his country and strike out against the Muslim community. His speeches refer terrorists as "evildoers" and described the war on terrorism as a crusade.[42]

In reality, the attack on Iraq was politically motivated. The Bush-administration, with Rumsfeld as Secretary of Defense, needed to prove to the world that it could and would retaliate against any state or non-state actors that attacked the United States and any renegade states that helped them. "They needed to demonstrate that the United States had the will to take the fight beyond Afghanistan as well as the guile to hit enemies when and where they did not expect it."[43] They were mostly afraid of the potential proliferation of weapons of mass destruction from president Saddam's alleged arsenal. The Bush team also hoped that toppling Saddam would scare the leadership in Syria to temper its support for Hezbollah and stay in line.[44] International support for an invasion was limited, and Rumsfeld's aids floated the idea of provoking Iraq to take action, which would provide Washington with an indisputable *casus belli* and avoid lengthy rounds of diplomacy.[45]   This notion would fit right in with the religious just war doctrine, where any action would then be of self-defense, and would consequently give both policymakers and soldiers the notion that their aggressive actions would be in the interest of justice.

Syria

Syria is an example of an uprising often considered to be religiously motivated, as the conflicting forces are from opposing religious groups. But in reality, it is politically motivated, a revolution against the ruling minority.

The conflict, or civil war, was a result of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011. There were some peaceful demonstrations across the country against the president, Mr. Assad, and the government responded with violence to stop the protesters. Unlike the demonstrations in other Arab countries, many protesters were killed in Syria by the government with the hope of reducing the uprising. Instead it radicalized the movement, where civilians took up arms, at first to defend their demonstrations, later to fight security forces.[46]

Because the conflict is believed to be mainly between two different cultural groups: the majority Sunnis, against the ruling Alawites, journalists tends to classify the war as a religious conflict. What is seldom mentioned is that the religious aspect is minimal; it is rather a conflict against oppression. The Alawites with President Assad as leader have, in spite of being far outnumbered, remained in power for four decades by suppressing the Sunnis and maintaining the country's wealth within a small elite.

Most rebels are secular, fighting for the removal of the government, but there are several radical Islamist groups fighting to win territory in the chaos of the civil war. Army defectors became organized when the conflict began, and with help from Turkey, were able to defeat government forces in the northern portion of the country. In the wake of these victories came groups with links to Al-Qaida. They seek to take political and cultural leadership in the occupied areas and introduce Sharia-law. This makes any engagement for assistance from outside forces complicated, as it is difficult to define an end-state that is not religiously motivated.

Conclusion

Religion and warfare have historically been intertwined. Going back in history as far as the written word, religion has often been claimed as the motive for war. But the reality is that religion is mostly used as a motivator, not a motive for conflict. "It is used as a morally convenient cloak for nationalism, human greed or other mundane motives, a cloak that religious leaders have frequently been more than willing to lend."[47] Some conflicts, like the Crusades and the Islamic expansion, have usually been regarded as religiously motivated, as most stories and writings from that time specifically mention the religious aspect of the conflict. But we have seen that the motive is less divine: a power struggle where the leaders seek personal or territorial rewards. In addition, with the notion that politics and religion were the same in many ways, it renders classification of the real motive more difficult.

Power, greed, economic gain, and freedom: all words that describe the real and underlying cause for conflict in the world. But religion is and will continue to be a powerful motivator. To be able to suppress the fear in your soldiers by sparking passion through religious belief is sometimes imperative for a leader to be able to be victorious in a conflict.

Religious conflict, the turning of faiths supposedly based upon peace into heavenly endorsed violence, will continue to be used to motivate for war. "It is the dark heart of humanity, the desire to kill one's fellow creatures, and do so with the sanction of the divine."[48]

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[32] Pearse, *The Gods of War*, 49

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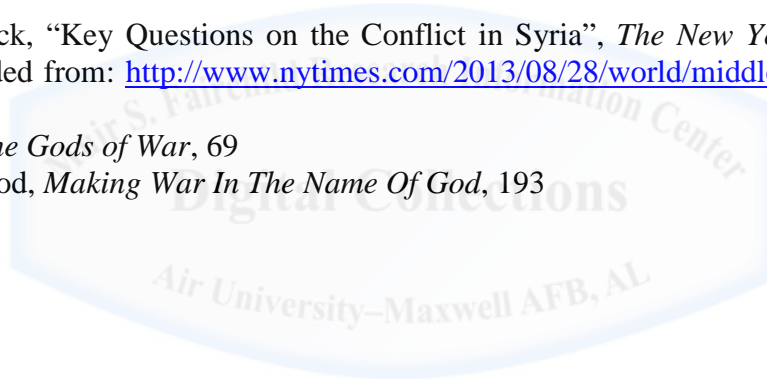[43] Gordon and Trainor, *Cobra II*, p 10

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