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Islam and the West together again in Syria

Western interests sometimes intersect with those of armed groups which operate under an Islamic banner.

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In Bosnia in the 1990s, "Islamic militants" and "Western humanitarians" fought on the same side.

Foreign Islamic fighters formed some of the best units in the ragtag Bosnian army. Like Western leftists in the Spanish Civil War, they had answered calls for assistance from beleaguered comrades in another country.

Alongside UN peacekeepers, with cover from NATO's air forces, and supported by legions of human rights activists, the foreign fighters, the Bosnian army and their Croatian allies did their best to hold off the Serbs.

The outcome in Bosnia was ambiguous, in large measure because of the unwillingness of the West to fully commit its forces to the fight against ethnic fascism. This unwillingness stood in stark contrast not only to Westerners of an earlier generation who went off to Spain to fight and drive ambulances, but also to the Muslim fighters from faraway places who gave their lives in the cause of a free Bosnia.

This same alliance between a militant Western humanitarianism and Islamic fighters reappeared in Libya. Gaddafi and his murderous regime were their common enemy.

Many may choose to see such unexpected couplings as merely alliances of convenience, that really Western humanitarians and radical Islamists have diametrically opposed goals.

This is to ignore a significant dimension of the appeal of militant Islam, one that Faisal Devji has sought to draw attention to in his provocative and illuminating book, *The Terrorist in Search of Humanity*.

Many Muslims see themselves as victims of the same kind of humanitarian crimes that so concern Western human rights activists. Muslims have been the victims of dictatorships and their secret police and death squads; they have been subjected to massacres and extra-judicial proceedings; they are not treated with respect and dignity; and they are persecuted for their beliefs.

These are precisely the kind of causes that gave birth to the global human rights movement.

In circumstances of oppression and injustice, Muslims appear as victims of crimes against humanity. The militants are merely those who choose not to be victims and take up arms. Many of us see no little justice in the militants' cause as they fight against foreign occupation and murderous dictators, even if we do not always agree with their methods or ultimate aims.

An unlikely alliance

This alliance between Muslim militant and Western humanitarian, which is not as strange as it seems, has reappeared in Syria. As the Western powers work alongside the Arab League to impose sanctions and pass UN resolutions, Muslim militants have issued a call to arms.

The Muslim Brotherhood of Jordan announced a *jihad* against the Assad regime, as has al-Qaeda. A new Anbar Awakening is underway as Iraqis now funnel arms to Syrian insurgents. Foreign militants may have been responsible for the recent bombings in Aleppo and Damascus.

Meanwhile, militant Western humanitarians wish they too could have a *jihad* in Syria as they did in Libya. All are agreed that a regime willing to kill its own people in such numbers and to sow dangerous sectarian division in the cause of its own survival must go. Basic human values should define the future for Syria.

Some analysts see in Syria the danger of a regional sectarian war that was so narrowly averted in the worst years in Iraq. They may well be right. Western leaders and militaries fear the consequences of attacking yet another Muslim country, while their citizens have tired of years of war amid broken economies.

Yet the potential alliance of militant and humanitarian offers an opportunity an exhausted West, blinded by its own righteousness, may fail to see, much less grasp. It is an opportunity of global proportions that only enlightened and confident statesmanship could hope to realise.

The War on Terror has been fought to a costly, hurting stalemate. The West failed to achieve its

aims in Iraq and it will fail in Afghanistan. Yet, it has utterly decimated the ranks of Islamic militants around the world and daily demonstrates its power to carry on doing so.

Osama bin Laden failed to achieve his goal of igniting a worldwide Muslim uprising. His self-defeating methods horrified Muslims and Westerners alike, while his dream of a Salafi utopia turned Muslim against Muslim and did not offer an attractive political goal to the masses.

Syria offers the opportunity to find again the shared ground between Islam and the West, with democracy, dignity and respect for human rights as the common goal.

The West should reach out to the Muslim Brotherhoods of Jordan and elsewhere on the basis that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend". On this same basis, militant Islam should make common cause with Western humanitarians.

Such a surprising move on the part of the West would earn the respect and appreciation of Muslims around the world, reducing the anti-Western feeling that leads to terror. At the same time, it would allow militant Islam to reshape its political objectives in ways that are compatible with democracy and human rights and the near universal support these principles command.

It is these goals, after all, for which the Syrian people are fighting.

In this kind of way, Islamic militants can turn themselves into "freedom fighters" rather than "terrorists" in the eyes of the world. To do so, they must commit to fight as ordinary insurgents in the Free Syrian Army. In so doing, they would articulate themselves to a cause which has near-universal support and to political goals shared by peoples everywhere.

Perhaps they might even inspire some Western humanitarians to join them in the field in Syria as foreign volunteers.