

# ISIS, Boko Haram and Batman

By Thomas L. Friedman NYT OCT. 4, 2014

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***WHAT'S the right strategy for dealing with a world increasingly divided between zones of order and disorder?***

For starters, you'd better ***understand the forces of disorder***, like Boko Haram or the Islamic State. These are ***gangs of young men who are telling us in every way possible that our rules no longer apply***. Reason cannot touch them, because rationalism never drove them. Their barbarism comes from a dark place, where ***radical Islam gives a sense of community to humiliated, drifting young men, who have never held a job or a girl's hand. That's a toxic mix.***

It's why [Orit Perlov](#), an Israeli expert on Arab social networks, keeps telling me that since I can't visit the Islamic State, which is known as ISIS, and interview its leaders, the next best thing would be to ***see "Batman: The Dark Knight."*** In particular, she drew my attention to this dialogue between Bruce Wayne and Alfred Pennyworth:

**Bruce Wayne:** "I knew the mob wouldn't go down without a fight, but this is different. They crossed the line."

**Alfred Pennyworth:** "You crossed the line first, sir. You squeezed them. You hammered them to the point of desperation. And, in their desperation, they turned to a man they didn't fully understand."

**Bruce Wayne:** "Criminals aren't complicated, Alfred. Just have to figure out what he's after."

**Alfred Pennyworth:** "With respect, Master Wayne, perhaps this is a man that *you* don't fully understand, either. A long time ago, I was in Burma. My friends and I were working for the local government. They were trying to buy the loyalty of tribal leaders by bribing them with precious stones. But their caravans were being raided in a forest north of Rangoon by a bandit. So we went looking for the stones. But, in six months, we never met anybody who traded with him. One day, I saw a child playing with a ruby the size of a tangerine. The bandit had been throwing them away."

**Bruce Wayne:** "So why steal them?"

**Alfred Pennyworth:** “Well, because he thought it was good sport. Because some men aren’t looking for anything logical, like money. *They can’t be bought, bullied, reasoned, or negotiated with. Some men just want to watch the world burn. ...*”

**Bruce Wayne:** “The bandit, in the forest in Burma, did you catch him?”

**Alfred Pennyworth:** “Yes.”

**Bruce Wayne:** “How?”

**Alfred Pennyworth:** “We burned the forest down.”

*We can’t just burn down Syria or Iraq or Nigeria.*

*But there is a strategy for dealing with the world of disorder* that I’d summarize with *this progression*:

***Where there is disorder*** — think Libya, Iraq, Syria, Mali, Chad, Somalia — *collaborate with every source of local, regional and international order* to contain the virus until the barbarism burns itself out. These groups can’t govern, so ultimately locals will seek alternatives.

***Where there is top-down order*** — think Egypt or Saudi Arabia — try to *make it more decent and inclusive*.

***Where there is order plus decency*** — think Jordan, Morocco, Kurdistan, the United Arab Emirates — try to *make it more consensual and effective*, again to make it *more sustainable*.

***Where there is order plus democracy*** — think Tunisia — *do all you can to preserve and strengthen it with financial and security assistance, so it can become a model for emulation by the states and peoples around it*.

***And be humble***. We don’t have the wisdom, resources or staying power to do anything more than contain these organisms, until the natural antibodies from within emerge.

In the Arab world, it *may take longer for those natural antibodies to coalesce*, and that is worrying, argues **Francis Fukuyama**, the Stanford political scientist whose new, widely discussed book, [“Political Order and Political Decay,”](#) is a historical study of how decent states emerge. ***What they all have in common is a strong and effective state bureaucracy that can deliver governance, the rule of law and regular rotations in power.***

Because our founding fathers were escaping from tyranny, they were focused “on how power can be constrained,” Fukuyama explained to me in an interview. “But

*before power can be constrained, it has to be produced. ... Government is not just about constraints. It's about providing security, infrastructure, health and rule of law. And anyone who can deliver all of that" — including China — "wins the game whether they are democratic or not. ... ISIS got so big because of the failure of governance in Syria and Iraq to deliver the most basic services. ISIS is not strong. Everything around it was just so weak," riddled with corruption and sectarianism.*

There is *so much state failure in the Arab world*, argues Fukuyama, *because of the persistence there of kinship/tribal loyalties* — “meaning that you can only trust that narrow group of people in your tribe.” You can’t build a strong, impersonal, merit-based state when the only ties that bind are shared kin, not shared values. It took China and Europe centuries to make that transition, but they did. *If the Arab world can't overcome its tribalism and sectarianism in the face of ISIS barbarism, "then there is nothing we can do," said Fukuyama. And theirs will be a future of many dark nights.*