

Burkinis and Bombs - What's New?

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This essay was originally written as a letter to the editor of La Gazette de Montpellier. Translated from the French by Nancy Holmstrom.

As a retired American historian, specialized in French civilization, and for the past 20 a resident at the Mediterranean coastal town of Palavas-les-Flots, permit me to remind the mayors of our beach towns as well as the Prime Minister of the Republic, of a little historic fact forgotten by those who make an affair of state of modest women who wish to remain covered when they take their children bathing at the beach. This practice is nothing new. It was in almost identical dress that my grandmother and my aunts went bathing around 1900, without anyone being scandalized. (see the attached photo). On the contrary, in that period and up to the 1960s, the girl who wanted to present herself (except on nudist beaches) in a bikini risked being reprimanded by the police and given a ticket - as happened to a woman in a burkini yesterday at Cannes.

And while we're on the subject of anachronisms, my duty as historian (albeit retired) obliges me to point out another less amusing one. While for seven months the French Air Force, (following behind the Americans) has been launching bombs over Syria, killing who knows how many Syrian civilians, women, children and destroying their homes, no-one among the French political/media class seems to remember one big fact: As with the burkini, this is nothing new. Let us then recall that the Army of the Republic occupied Syria from 1920 to 1946 and that the French Air Force bombed Damascus not once but twice (ten thousand deaths in 1925, and more in 1945). in order to suppress the Syrian democrats and nationalists.

In 1945, right after the Liberation, de Gaulle tried to overthrow the Syrian Republic that the Free French had tolerated during the war. French bombers pounded the Syrian Parliament and demolished several Damascus neighborhoods, while the French Army machine-gunned thousands of demonstrators and arrested Parliamentarians and other elected officials. Finally, thanks to British intervention and the condemnation of France by the brand-new United Nations, French troops left Syria in 1946.

The so-called "scandal" of modest feminine beachwear, seen as a deliberate Islamist "provocation" and a threat to French security, continues to preoccupy the French politicians and media (and the foreign media remains astonished that such a detail of mores could rouse up a great historic nation) no-one seems to be upset about the real scandal: France (and the U.S.) are destroying Syria under the pretext of fighting "terrorism," all the while arming these very terrorists by means of lucrative arms sales to the Wahabi Saudi Arabia, the principal supporter of DAESH (ISIS).

Why sell arms to your most dangerous and implacable adversaries when you are at war against them? Why then insult the modesty and gratuitously humiliate the women of a great people known for their pride, a people that your government colonized and oppressed for a long time? Is this how you assure the security of a multi-ethnic Republic with a large Arab-Muslim population? Is this not acting the part of a pyromaniac firefighter? Is this not folly?

Back when the United States was mired down in Indochina (after taking over Vietnam from defeated France), the American historian Barbara Tuchman wrote *The March of Folly: from the Trojan War to Vietnam* in order to explain how the political and military elites of all epochs have persisted in military madness despite repeated defeat. The answer was: they “forget” (mentally suppress) the lessons of the past. So, for example, in order to mentally transform our peaceful but modest female fellow-citizens into a vanguard of terrorists exploited by occult foreign powers hostile to our secular Republic, we must first forget the image of the bathing suits worn by our own modest grandmothers (Christians and Socialists alike) visible on the sepia-toned “1900” post cards on sale at Palavas and every other beach town. More seriously, in order for a government to persisting with a clean conscience in pursuing a devious and murderous, century-old divide-and-rule foreign policy, stirring up sectarian hatred and nourishing violence in Syria and terrorism in France, it must forget its heavy imperialist past and banish it from acceptable political discourse. Just as during the U.S. occupation of Iraq, it was taboo to mention the mass water boarding of Filipino prisoners during the U.S. invasion and occupation of 1898.