

Governance in the Middle East and the Challenges of Political Islam

Dr. Alexander Dawoody

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Abstract

This article examines issues of governance in the Middle East in response to extremism and political Islam. It looks at the social, economic and political causes of the rise of political Islam and the variations in such a movement in manipulating regional and global interests/conflicts toward advancing their own agenda. The article also assesses public policy and administrative challenges in the Middle East and the connection between these challenges and/or lack of sound governance in contributing to the evolution of failed states, non-democratic regimes, and the manifestation of revolts and terrorism in the region.

Keywords: Terrorism, Political Islam, Sound Governance, Violence, Religion

Introduction

The evolution of governmental systems after the creation of the modern Middle East post WWI had witnessed many challenges, both internal and external. Western relations with these systems of governments were not based on their transparency, openness, accountability, efficiency, legitimacy, representation, or public service. Rather, they were based on Western interests in the region and often sacrificed the principles of public service for stability and security. Because of that, police state became the most pronounced aspects of these governments, equipped with corruption, nepotism, censorship, political oppression, deterioration of infrastructure, lack of service, outdated regulations and heavily ineffective bureaucratic system, poor planning and economic investments, increased poverty and unemployment, and heavy reliance on state machinery. With the world increasingly interconnected, especially after the proliferation of the Internet and social network, a phenomenon known as Information and Communication Technology (ICT), citizens in the Middle East were able to connect with others in the world, especially the expatriates living abroad, and started to shed-off the information blackout imposed by their governmental systems. By learning about how other communities and societies lived in the world and other models of governments that were more representative, transparent, accountable, and effective, these citizens started asking for change. Two groups emerged as a result of such transformation:

1. A group that wants a change in governance to be more democratic and better engaged in building a prosperous civil society. This group is unorganized, spontaneous, and raw that later its peaceful revolutions in public squares became known to the media as the Arab Spring. Unfortunately and because of the newness and unorganized nature of the group it

is easily manipulated by traditional opposition political parties that siphoned the group's sacrifices to accomplish political gains for these opposition parties.

2. Another group wants a change in governance that can return to the sixth century Islamic Caliphate and the constitutionalization of the Sharia Law. Since such a concept is not shared by majority of citizens in the Middle East as most (including Muslims) regarded religion as personal affairs and not to be the foundation of governance, such a group resorts to violence in the form of terrorist acts in order to enforce its agenda.

This article examines the illness in Middle Eastern systems of governance that led to either peaceful revolutions or violent terrorist acts. The article also looks at Western involvements in the Middle East and the impact of such involvements both on governance in the Middle East as well as the reactions to their policies.

Today, more than ever, our people and the region of the Middle East as a whole are experiencing great challenges and threats not only to public affairs but to their existential identity and common sense in living peacefully without violence. Challenges have always confronting public affairs in the Middle East, especially after WWI and the formation of the current nation states at the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire (Fromkin, 2009). Today, however, these challenges are secondary to the clear and gathering danger posed by terror in destroying every normalcy in life and restructuring human dynamics based on complete and unwavering submission to fear. Such terror has now morphed from the periodic bombs and terrorist acts to state formation, from a condition depending on a state-sponsoring of terror to a terrorist state that has nothing in common with any other forms of governance in today's society (Dalacoura, 2011).

Previous challenges to issues of governance and public administration in the Middle East stemmed from the inorganic creation of most Middle Eastern nation-states by colonial powers post WWI (Sorenson, 2013). Although such inorganic creation worked at other parts of the world, such as in India, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and others, in the Middle East, however, it became a source of problem. We may even suggest that such problems and the resulting failed movements to address them had given birth to the type of devolution that we are witnessing today in the formation of failed states and the organizations of terror (Lynch, 2013).

Three movements emerged since the creation of the modern Middle East and attempted to deal with problems inherited by the inorganic nature of the region's creation, yet failed were nationalism, socialism and political religious trends. Nationalism emerged by a new class of individuals that were educated abroad and exposed to Western bourgeoisie national ideologies. This class, later, was injected by military officers from poorer classes that seized political powers through military coups (Dawoody, 2014).

Overall, the nationalist movement formed political organization espousing patriarchal nationalistic ideologies in order to lead the populous toward depended-independent local market. Puritanism, however, became the hallmark of such movement as it institutionalized the cult of "Great Leader" through paranoid Hobbesian tendencies in order to govern by necessity that informed and free popular choice (Ibid).

Although the movement generated large support base, it eventually grew isolated and became unpopular because of its inability to resolve social problems through civic institutions, competent public administration, sound economic development, and individual freedoms (Ibid).

A second movement grew parallel with the nationalistic movement, espousing socialist ideology and challenging the first movement for control of public policy and political power. Although the Cold War gave some momentum to such a movement, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the movement's meaningless espousing of theoretical texts that were foreign to the social and cultural fabric of the region resulted in its bankruptcy. The movement today is nothing but a nostalgia and recital of outdated political dogma (Ibid).

The third alternative arrived in political religious trends, mainly in Political Islam which had developed at the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate. The purpose of the third movement was a return to the Islamic Caliphate and Sharia-based governance as salvation for the ills in Middle Eastern inorganic state and governmental structures. The third movement and due to opposition by the other two movements and because it lacked popular support (especially at its first stages of development), had shifted between grassroots campaign and violence. Gradually, the movement's violent manifestations took precedence, resulting in groups and organizations that vary only in their range of tactical application of violence (Lewis, 2004).

Governance in the Middle East today, with the exception of very few, is experiencing a cocktail of authoritarian to marginal pseudo-democratic systems. Decades of manipulating governmental apparatus in order to siphon public resources for the benefits of the ruling oligarchies' grip on power created a system of dysfunction that exhibits corruption, ineffectiveness, nepotism, lack of transparency, lack of accountability, censorship, and oppressive police state (Dawoody, 2013).

Within this trajectory public administration is trying to catch up by mimicking other models in the world while losing originality, innovation, and effectiveness that is particular to the region. Such incapacitation is disabling the effective role of public administration and rendering it as a separate entity that is tightly connected to the political branch and its whims than becoming a true guardian for the public interest.

Ironically, this was not always the case in the region that we call the Middle East today. Some 3500 years ago it was in this very region that the arts and science of administration were discovered, specifically by the scribes of Mesopotamia. Administration became a viable tool for the foundation of the first state in history, known as Akkad. Administration was also the main responsible element for the creation of writing, an instrument that early Mesopotamian scribes needed in order to record offerings to the temples (Van De Mieroop, 1999).

Historic public administration in the ancient Middle East continued flourishing giving birth to many powerful empires, such as the Persian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Umayyad, and Abbasid empires. Because of such sophistication in administrative affairs, universities, libraries, hospitals, cities, irrigation systems, and military industries were created. Although governance was marred by socio-political conflicts and often manipulated administration for the benefits of the ruling oligarchies at the expense of vast sectors within the population, the arts and sciences of administration were responsible for transforming the region into a center of important

achievements in philosophy, science, music, poetry, and arts for more than five centuries (Leick, 2003).

Regrettably, however, and particularly after the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 and the destruction of most administrative systems of the Abbasid state, the Middle East as a region sunk into an abyss and the downward devolution continues to date (Kennedy, 2006). Today, the region is involving communities of consumers, incapable of producing and heavily relying on outside goods. Oil, this double-edge sword, has produced massive wealth for the few and a heavily depended non-producing system at the expense of a population that lacks in every basic need (Ross, 2013).

The region's experiment with democracy, whether top-down as the one imported by outsiders such as in Iraq or through internal strives such as the Arab spring had failed as well. This is due to various factors, mainly our tribal and cultural tradition that emphasize collectivism at the expense of individualism, the absence of civic institutions on grassroots levels, the opposition of the clientele, and challenges posed by the three failed political movements (Maalouf and Beck, 2014).

With the growth of a young generation that is increasingly feeling marginalized and disempowered, the lack of economic opportunities, and the near-fading of hope in a better life, extremism is now emerging in the Middle East in an unprecedented way by offering itself as a new path capable of delivering of what the other three political movements or public administration had failed to deliver.

The extremist trend is manipulating lack of hope among the young generation by constructing an apparatus that disguises itself within a cocoon of existential sentiments and an illusional referentiality intended for as escape from reality and advancing a particular political agenda. Confronted by such a metamorphosis, outdated forms of governance are trying to clink into power by any means, including begging foreign military interventions so that the pariah state can continue.

This brings us to the equation: What should we in order to make a difference by addressing these challenges? What should we, as individual scholars, practitioners and students of public service do in order help our societies confront these threats?

Public administrators in advance and stable countries devote their work to resolving challenges generated by routine bureaucratic function. For us, however, such a thing is considered to be a luxury or chasing a mirage of make-belief reality. Not only we have to address the dysfunction of bureaucracy but also address threats of existential nature that is endangering the very core of our existence as people. We need to act as both guardians and advocates of the public spirit and assume the historic task of carrying out such mission effectively, timely, and tirelessly. We cannot allow the overwhelming challenges deter us from such a mission and must rise to the occasion by truly inspiring, leading and making a difference even if the rewards are difficult to realize both now or in the foreseeable future.

To do so, we need to think outside the box, be innovative and organic, and arrive to solutions based on our collective and unique perspectives while learning both from our past, present and other

models. No longer can we only apply Western models and inject them to our societies, especially when such models were either rejected or did not with our cultural and societal values.

Artificial suppression of volatility in the voices calling for change can be misleading since it will push policymakers toward ignoring the observation of low-probability risks. Public administrators ought to avoid constraining change by allowing it take place without control or predictions and treat each societal need autonomously while interconnected with one another within a dynamic self-organizing function. For this dynamic to work, public administration must be flexible, unrestricted, non-hierarchical, and possesses a greater adaptability in the face of change. This means public administration in the Middle East must be:

1. Transparent
2. Operating out of mutual causality
3. Focusing on the present moment where adaptability proceeds and predictions or long-term planning may drastically alter in the “fog” of operation.
4. Pattern seeking by way of creative disequilibrium that enables an ongoing shifting into new structures.
5. Paradoxically preparing for unexpected consequences and uncertain outcomes
6. Evolving by benefiting from the “butterfly effect”
7. Self-transcending in the sense of emerging out of the interactions of autonomous agents

In a world of uncertainty, we can no longer rely on a naïve confidence that long-term planning can be accurately traced to predicted results. Instead, the emphasis needs to shift to a much greater flexibility which prepares any current structure to respond adaptively to unprecedented changes (Dawoody, 2012).

No longer are we able to assume that our experiments and observations tell us anything concrete about reality. Whatever reality is out there, it has fuzzy indeterminacy, in which entities separated by space and possess no mechanism for communicating with one another can exhibit correlations in their behavior (Overman, 1996).

This nonlocal way of nature is characterized by a continuous flux shaped by the dynamic interplay of yin and yang and determined by a flow of opposite energies through which all trends eventually reverse themselves (Capra, 2004).

With such an understanding, governance and public administration in the Middle East must be “network-alized” to capture multi-dimensional players, forces, and events. At the same time, governance and public administration ought to adjust and adapt according to the unpredictable changes in the environment in order to correspond with uncertainty. After all, it is not the strongest, the larger or the most powerful that survives but those who are capable of adaptation.

The louts flower grows in the swamp, adapting to its surroundings by producing something that transcends the murky conditions and changing both itself and its environment. We can learn from the lotus flower and rise above the murky waters of our swamp by producing something beautiful and transcending.

Causes of Upheaval in the Middle East

If we look of the rise of terrorist groups associated with political Islam in and outside the Middle East we will be alarmed by their resilience, rapid growth, and continuous operations and employment of horrific measures in order to get their message across to the media. The same Information and Communication Technology (ICT) medium that became a tool for revolution (such as during the Arab Spring in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria) is now becoming a tool to spread the message of terror and atrocities committed by political Islam, of groups such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Boko Haram, and Al-Qaeda in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Kenya, Somalia, Nigeria, Chad, Algeria, Pakistan and Afghanistan of beheading and execution by burning victims alive, or terrorist acts in Europe such as in Paris, France with the killing of cartoonists at Charlie Hebdo magazine or in Copenhagen, Denmark.

To begin with, we need to differentiate between revolution and terrorism in the Middle East. Although both may share some common causality, the legitimacy issue, however, differ. Revolution by popular segments in demand of sound governance, better lives, and better future is justifiable and legitimate as a medium and forum for popular expression and for the manifestation of the public spirit. With the absence of democratic channels and viable opposition political movements, revolutions in form of mass protests, demonstrations, labor strikes and peaceful gatherings (such as the Arab Spring) are both necessary and required in order to keep governance as a legitimate source of public representation. If tyrannical governmental apparatus responded to these mass protests with violence (as was the case in Syria in 2011), then people have the right to fight oppression and defend their homes, families and popular demands in front an oppressive government. This is also emphasized by the American Constitution when legitimizing the arming of popular militia when government no longer democratically represents the will of the public.

In case of terrorism, however, there is no justification for terrorism under any circumstances. The main reason for this is that because terrorism does not represent the free will of the people, it is always based on violence to impose a narrow ideology on the majority, and it aims to end all forms of free expression, rights, and accountability. In essence, terrorism ends the legitimacy of the state and replaces it with the savage Hobbesan notion of a lawless society where only the strong survives at the expense of security, freedom, and rights. Hence, we are here to understand the causes of terrorism in the Middle East in hope of arriving to logical solutions that can treat such a cancer and ends its reformation over and over again. Table 1 illustrates the difference between popular revolutions and terrorism in the Middle East.

Table 1. Differences between popular revolutions and terrorism in the Middle East

N	Popular Revolutions	Terrorism
1	Spontaneous	Deliberate and intentional
2	Lacks ideology	Ideologically driven
3	Inclusive	Exclusive
4	Peaceful	Violent
5	Lacks hierarchy and organization	Extremely hierarchal and organized
6	Open and transparent	Closed and secretive

7	Legitimate and justified	Illegitimate and devoid of justification
8	Yearns for a better future	Yearns to return society to the past
9	Employs public forums	Employs terror
10	Advocates for individual rights and freedoms	Against individual rights and freedoms
11	Based on exposing the truth	Based on proliferating lies and deceptions
12	Pro-women and minority	Misogynist, anti-women and anti-minority
13	Believes in coexistence	Believes in confrontations
14	Seeks peace and feeds on non-militarization	Seeks wars and feeds on militarization
15	Wide	Narrow
16	Does not require (large) funding	Requires large funding

There are, however, some common traits between popular revolutions and terrorism in the Middle East. Table 2 illustrates these common traits.

Table 2. Common traits between popular revolutions and terrorism in the Middle East

N	Traits
1	Middle Eastern governments as direct enemy
2	Use of ICT
3	Voluntary
4	Resentment of the West
5	Attracting the disfranchised among the youth
6	Has global support/advisories
7	Mobile and adaptive

Now, let us look at the causes for terrorism in the Middle East. Some of these causes are also responsible for popular revolutions, especially political, economic and social paradigms.

Cause 1: Political and Economic Paradigm

Since its inception after WWI, the modern Middle East and the new countries that were brought to existence at the aftermath of the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 (Fromkin, 2009) were governed by isolated oligarchies, military juntas and tribal chieftains that cared mostly about solidifying their position in power and enriching their lots than to care for the plights of ordinary citizens (Khoury and Kostiner, 1991). Governmental apparatus, as thus, became tools of oppression creating massive, dysfunctional bureaucracies feeding on corruption, police state, censorship of information, nepotism, and lack of accountability, and transparency than to serve the public interest. In such an atmosphere all forms of opposition were silenced and freedom of expression, gathering and organization were met with political torture, imprisonment and summary executions (Lesch and Haas, 2012). Internal and external enemies were created in order to justify the continuous imposition of Marshal Laws, suspending individual rights and prolonging governance by decree and in complete absence of participatory process. Ideological indoctrination was imposed in each aspect of daily life in order to normalize this abnormal trend. Such ideologies

shifted from nationalism to socialism to political Islam (Dawoody, 2014). The state and religion were interchangeable in order to persuade the citizen that an opposition of the status quo was an opposition to religious teachings and thus, God's will in enforcing complete obedience to the ruler (caregiver).

With the proliferation of mass media and the use of the Internet and ICT, ordinary citizens were able to have access to news and other source of information outside the official governmental-controlled and censored information networks (Howard and Hussain, 2013). Not only that, ordinary citizens now were able to submit their own stories and news to the outside world by bypassing the official networks.

No longer governmental apparatus can imprison or torture a political dissident and be able to silence the news. Now, a picture can make it with a very fast speed to international news organizations and people around the world can learn first-hand on what is taking place in the farthest and remotest areas in the Middle East. Such a dynamic became a catalyst for the cyber revolution in the Middle East and provided a voice for the long absent opposition movement in the region.

Not only the disfranchised, the poor, and the unemployed used ICT as a medium for global self-expression and demanding better living conditions, but also revolutionaries hoping for better and more accountable and effective governance made use of the medium. Yet again, the evil twin of these just movements had also capitalized on such a trend: terrorism had joined the fray, manipulating ICT to spread its own messages of hate and terror. Each day the Internet, followed by traditional media networks that select the broadcasted news, became saturated with popular uprisings in the streets of Cairo, Egypt and Sana, Yemen as well as the beheadings of hostages by ISIS in Syria (Hassan, 2015; Lappin, 2010).

Terrorism went further to employ outrage, shock elements and the extreme in order to capture the headlines in most leading international media outlets by simply posting a short video of a heinous beheading of hostages. The saturation later snowballed, as acts of terror continued shifting from one location to another (including mass murder in the streets of Paris) and from one heinous crime to another (slavery, forced migration, destruction of property, beheading, burning victims alive, stoning, severing arms and legs, and dumping victims from tall buildings). The more outrageous the act the most media coverage it got and the responsible terror group received more name recognition that it used for recruiting and financial support.

Cause 2: Absence of Viable Form of Expression

The absence of critical thinking, debates, and intellectual curiosity in the Middle East and the domination of repetitive, mundane and non-thinking forms of schooling (perpetuated by the Madrasa system) which produced human-parakeets that know only how to recite religious texts instead of engaging in critical thinking, or governmental propaganda machines that produced a class of unthinking-dependents is another cause for disfranchised segments of the society to seek alternative mediums in order to express their grievance. This is especially true when most brain power had migrated from the Middle East to the West due to economic, social and political reasons.

The absence of viable political opposition that can lead public movement and demand political reforms created a vacuum was readily filled by political Islam and its extremist wings. Mosques were employed as connective nexus to maintain an ongoing network supported logistically, ideologically and politically in order to feed an anti-establishment development (Bokhari and Senzai, 2013). This is due to centuries long of political oppression and tyrannical forms of governance. The absence of credible civic institutions that can be the advocate for public needs and act as guardian for public interests also contributed to the void and legitimized the need for an “alternative.”

Cause 3: Wars and Foreign Involvements

France and Great Britain are responsible for the creation of the modern Middle East (Sorenson, 2013). The inorganic nature of this colonial creation provided an environment for injustice to be institutionalized and for marginalization and alienation of the public to become the norms.

The psychology of the Middle Eastern man became a schism between yearning to learn from what the West had to offer and resenting the West for the mess it had created and forced upon a historically-traumatized people to begin with. With the discovery of oil and the decaying of old colonial powers, the United States stepped into the arena, seeking to advance its economic and political interests, especially in the oil-rich areas in the region, at the expense of the withered masses.

Human rights were side steps as a price for national interests. Security and order became the mantra at the expense of democratization and individual freedoms (Migdal, 2014). As a result, the United States supported tyrannical, reactionary and non-progressive regimes in the Middle East and on occasions directly interfering either militarily or through overt intelligence operations in order to support these regimes (such as the CIA’s orchestration of the 1953 coup in Iran against a democratically-elected government, the US military intervention to support the oil sheikhs of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and the military aid in excess of two billion dollar per year to Egypt).

Even America’s later adversaries in the region within the Middle Eastern regimes (such Saddam Hussein and his Baath regime in Iraq), he and his tyrannical regime enjoyed unwavering U.S military, financial and political support when his actions were beneficial to U.S interests, especially during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-88 (Hahn, 2005). When Saddam gassed his Kurdish minorities in 1988 and killed more than 5000 civilians with mustard gas, the United States treated the issue as an internal matter. Only later when Saddam became U.S. enemy number 1 (for occupying Kuwait’s oil fields and thus threatening U.S. economic interests) that the Kurdish massacre suddenly surfaced to the American conscious and Saddam was denounced for committing genocide (Charountaki, 2010).

The two Gulf Wars led by the United States against the Baath regime in Iraq in 1991 and 2003, and the devastating United Nations imposed sanction on Iraq from 1991-2003 had resulted in more than three million deaths by Iraqi citizens, destruction of the infrastructure, malnutrition, epidemic and disease, poverty, unemployment, and institutionalized sectarian violence (Ismael and Ismael, 2015). Today Iraq is a model for a failed state ridden by daily terrorist bombs, kidnapping, beheading, corruption, and a dysfunctional governmental system (Al-Ali, 2014). Components of

Iraq's ethnic and religious communities are fighting one another for control of power and resources: Sunnis against Shiites, Muslims against Christians, and Arabs against Kurds (Rayburn, 2014). When governance is incapacitated and resolves conflict, and at best is part of the problem by fueling ethnic and sectarian violence when favoring one group over the other, the environment becomes ripe for terrorist groups, such as ISIS to capitalize on government weakness and manipulate the poisonous situation for its advantage.

Other areas that witnessed foreign wars in the region are no better and have similar results: Somalia, Afghanistan, and Libya. The long historic conflict between Palestinians and Israelis also contributes to the negative outcome, resulting in terrorist groups such as Hezbollah of Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza to be emboldened and strong.

After the Arab Spring on 2013 and the collapse of reactionary and tyrannical regimes in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, the environment was right for the emergence of true democratic and representative governments that can right centuries of wrong doings. Unfortunately and due to the absence of viable civic institutions, democratic opposition movements, and democratic traditions, these countries fell prey to political Islam, and the group of Muslim Brotherhood was able to ride the popular dissent for its own political advantage (Bradley, 2012). However, once the incompetence of this power-hungry group became apparent to the public they soon were ejected from power and governance once again either returned to the rule by the old guard (as in Tunisia), the military (as in Egypt), or dissented into chaos (as in Libya and Yemen). Terrorist groups saw in the examples of Libya and Yemen a perfect swamp for growth, while engaged the old guard that returned to power in Egypt and Tunisia in almost a daily confrontation (mostly in Egypt since the Brotherhood had suffered the most lost).

In Syria, however, the Arab Spring took a different turn from the paths that had emerged in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Although the popular uprising against the Assad regime remained peaceful for the first six months, the movement lacked international backing as it was the case elsewhere (Hokayem, 2013). The peaceful movement soon turned to armed struggle by defected Syrian soldiers that called themselves "The Free Syrian Army" when offenses by the Assad regime escalated, including the use of chemical weapons against civilian population (U.S. Government, 2014). Jihadist groups seized the vacuum created by the West's reluctance to support the Free Syrian Army in order to pour into Syria and utilize the situation for their advantage (Erlich and Chomsky, 2014).

With Iran, Iraq, Russia and Hezbollah of Lebanon backing up Assad both militarily and financially, the rich Arab oil countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait backed those are fighting against Assad (Hokayem, 2013). As the violence escalated and nearly 120,000 Syrian were killed and another two million became refugees, Syria became a no-man land. The capital city of Damascus and a narrow strip around it remained under Assad's regime while the rest of the country was divided by fighting Jihadists: Groups such as Al Nusra, ISIS and other emerged espousing the most reactionary and violent doctrine (U.S. Government, 2014). Foreigners, including international relief agency workers and journalists were kidnapped to become the subjects of these Jihadists' hate and resentment of anything that was decent and normal.

In 2014 the Syrian civil war spilled into Iraq, capitalizing on the weakness of the wooden Iraqi army and the despised sectarian policies of its corrupt and incompetent government (Cockburn, 2015). Supported by the local Sunni population who had suffered since 2003 under the Shiite-dominated government in Iraq, the Jihadist groups in Syria (namely ISIS) were able to build alliances with Saddam's former military officers and easily capture the provinces of Mosul, Salahhdin and Anbar (Hassan, 2015). Soon after, ISIS announced the rebirth of the Islamic caliphate and begun its terror campaign against the Iraqi Yazedies and Christians, destroying their homes, cities, and villages, killing their men, and raping their women. Only when ISIS fighters turned their attention to the Kurdish region that the West (headed by the United States) decided to intervene through air campaign in order to stop ISIS' advances (Cockburn, 2015).

With ISIS' declaration of the caliphate and success on ground, support to its campaign by regional and foreign Jihadists grew. Within a short time ISIS gained more significance than Al-Qaeda and terrorists from around the world start pouring to its headquarters in Ar-Raqqah, Syria (Hokayem, 2013). According to CIA latest estimate, nearly 20,000 foreign Jihadist had joined the terrorist groups in Syria and most had joined ISIS (CBS/AP, 2015; U.S. Government, 2014). Other terrorist groups in the region, such as Al-Shabab in Somalia, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Mali and Kenya, and the Islamic Dawn in Libya declared allegiance to ISIS, mimicking its signature terrorist behavior in capturing civilians, dressing them in orange, beheading them, and then broadcasting the taped videos of such barbaric acts on the Internet.

Cause 4: Failed States

Bad governments create bad policies that results in political crisis, stagnation, and some form of lawlessness and disorder. However, and for the most parts these crisis are manageable and can be placed under control (although through repressive and undemocratic measures). However, no government almost certainly results in chaos, disorder and complete breakdown of societal order whereby the Hobbesean savage state of nature takes precedence and terrorist groups see a ripe environment for growth.

The Middle East, unfortunately and for a variety of reasons (that include wars, economic disparities, foreign intervention, tyranny, tribalism, lack of education, and poverty) is saturated with failed states that became the perfect swamp for the growth and spread of terrorism. Examples of these failed states are:

- a. Libya: Caused by four centuries of Qaddafi's tyrannical regime, NATO's military intervention at the aftermath of the Arab Spring in 2013 and then pulling fast out of the country without helping Libyans build a strong governments than can provide peace and order (Engelbrekt and Mohlin, 2013). Today, the government in Libya is nothing but a runaway shadow of few individuals who are hiding in hotels while the country is torn between Jihadist terrorist groups supported by Qatar and Turkey who use these groups in order to force their own Islamist-driven political agenda on the entire region.
- b. Iraq: Caused by the U.S occupation of Iraq in 2003, the dismantling of the state and its administrative apparatus, the institutionalization of quota and sectarianism in the new Iraqi Constitution, and the alienation, as a result, of its Sunni community. The disempowered Sunnis saw in Islamist terrorist groups a perfect vehicle to force their demand and return

to power. Iraq today is torn between ethnic and sectarian violence with third of its land taken by terrorist organizations (Ismael and Ismael, 2015). The central government is powerless, decapitated by corruption, political opportunism, incompetence and militia (Al-Ali, 2014). Ordinary Iraqi citizens are trapped between a government that represent the narrow views of Shiite militia and terrorist groups that represent a backward ideology that wants, through fear and terror, return Iraq to the 7th century.

- c. Syria: As stated earlier, Syria is now geographically divided based on regions. The capital city of Damascus and the Alawites strip near the Mediterranean Sea is under the Assad regime control. Dara and most of southern Syria is under the Free Syrian Army control. Most of the western region is under Al-Qaeda and Al-Nusra control. Aleppo, northern Syria, Ar-Raqqah and part of the eastern region is under ISIS control. Northeastern Syria is under Kurdish control (mainly PPK fighters who identify Turkey as their arch enemy). With nearly 120,000 Syrian civilians are killed, two million are refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey, and nearly 20,000 foreign Jihadist making their way to Syria (through the Turkish borders, often with knowledge and permission of the Turkish authorities), Syria today is a failed state and considered the most dangerous place on earth. It is the hub that breeds terrorism and a magnet to continually attract future recruits. Paybacks for those who join the Jihadist groups include money, power, and women.
- d. Somalia: It has been a failed state since the collapse of Mohammad Siad Barre's government in 1991 due to tribal and military conflicts and the agony of civil war that lasted until 2006 (Lewis, 2003). It was during this civil war that the world became aware of the famine caused by draught that was devastating the Somalia population. Warlords were high jacking international aid packages in order to solidify their power and control over the population (Fergusson, 2013). The U.S. military attempt in guarding these relief efforts resulted in the disastrous downing of U.S Black Hawk helicopter in 1993, and the killing and parading of the bodies of its pilots in the capital city Mogadishu (Clarke and Herbst, 1997). In 2012 a weak government was formed to restate the state's control and authority over a land that became disintegrated into three states: Somalia, Somali Land and Putland, and a population terrorized by pirates known as Al-Shabab (Hansen, 2013), an off-shoot of Al-Qaeda who recently affirmed its allegiance to ISIS.
- e. Yemen: Long ruled by its strong military man Ali Abdullah Salih, this country that was forcibly united in 1990 after eight years of civil war between its northern and southern parts (Brehony, 2013), became the fourth country in the Middle East to witness the Arab Spring in 2011 after Tunisia, Egypt and Libya (Lynch, 2013). The demonstration continued to be peaceful despite military crackdown by Salih's regime. Eventually and after mediation by Saudi Arabia, Salih agreed to step down in 2012 to his Vice President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi (Rabi, 2015). The government of Hadi, however, collapsed by a Shiite tribal group known as Al-Houthies (Salmoni and Loidolt, 2010). Today, Yemen is one the strongholds of Al-Qaeda, and with Al-Houthy in power, the failed state is in full effect, pairing the way for organized terrorist groups (namely Al-Qaeda, since Yemen was the birthplace of its founder, Osama bin Laden) to force havoc on regional and world security, including maritime travels at the straits of Aden in the Red Sea.

- f. Lebanon: Although the best of all other failed states in the region, Lebanon, nevertheless, is a failed state and a hub for the largest legitimized terrorist organization in the Middle East: The Hezbollah. Not only Hezbollah paralyzes the Lebanese state, it is the Lebanese state (Worrall and Clubb, 2015). No one is elected and placed in power, including the country's ceremonial Christian President, the Sunni Prime Minister, or the Shiite head of Parliament without Hezbollah approval. Hezbollah has its own military, institutions, members of cabinet and members of Parliament and it dictates the country's domestic and foreign policy. Because of such paralysis, Lebanon is a de facto failed state (Levitt, 2013). Today, Hezbollah is fully engaged (including sending armed men) to defend the Assad regime in Syria, making Lebanon and Lebanese-Syrian borders an open arena for conflicts and violence. Lebanon's proximity to Syria had always made it target for Syria's state-sponsored terrorism, including the assassination of its leaders, such as the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri in 2005 by Syrian intelligence and Hezbollah operatives.
- g. Afghanistan: The CIA used the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 as a recruiting round of Islamist Jihadists to fight the Soviet in the name of God and freedom. Once the Soviet, however, had left Afghanistan in 1989, the CIA packed its bags and left, leaving the Jihadists fight among themselves over the control of the country (Coll, 2004). The fight and civil war continued until 1996 when an Afghani terrorist group named Taliban, trained and armed by Pakistan, took control of power in Afghanistan and established one of the most reactionary, misogynist, and repressive regimes in modern history (Tanner, 2009). The Taliban hosted Osama Ben Laden and his Al-Qaeda network. After September 11, 2001 and when they refused surrendering Ben Laden to the United States, the Taliban were driven out of power by U.S. military and Afghanistan came under U.S military control (Tucker-Jones, 2014). This situation continues to date.

Although the United States allowed elections to be held for president and for an independent Afghani government to be formed, the U.S-protected Afghani government lacks any real existence outside the capital city of Kabul. Hence, the President of Afghanistan is best known as the Mayor of Kabul. Most countryside are now back under Taliban control. This situation is making Afghanistan yet another failed state and a safe haven for terrorist groups such as Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

Cause 5: Tribalism, Misogyny, Sectarian Violence, and Minority Issues

An important cause for terrorism in the Middle East is the continuous domination of tribalism (Kamrava, 1998). When individualism is crushed or undermined and decisions are made by tribal chieftains willingly and without question, tribal interests become more important than individual rights. If the state cannot fully satisfy such interests (when government, for example, is dominated by other tribes and thus has to respond to the dominating tribes' interests), the disaffected parties invite terrorist groups in order to advance its needs. This is, for example, is what is taking place in Mosul, Ramadi and Fallujah in Iraq today. When the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad had systemically excluded Sunni tribes from sharing power, these tribes invited terrorists such as ISIS to force its demands. Only when these tribes realize that such an alliance with the terrorist groups may cause them their own autonomy these tribes may turn against their terrorist allies and expel them, as it was the case in 2006 when Sunni tribes in Ramadi and Fallujah joined U.S.

General David Petraeus' Awakening groups and expelled Al-Qaeda from their areas (Mansoor, 2014).

Another issue that can be linked to tribalism is the downgrading of women and persistence to disempowering her. This misogynist tendencies fits well with terrorist ideology and indoctrination, and by paralyzing half of the society while keeping the other half under tribal yoke, terrorism can find a fertile ground for its growth in the Middle East (Ali, 2008).

Coupled with tribalism and anti-women behavior is the growing societal rituals of enforcing sectarian divides, especially among the Sunnis and Shiites. The division between the Sunnis and Shiites in Islam is not recent and dates back to the early years of Islam, particularly after the Prophet Muhammad's death when the caliphate passed to his friend and father-in-law instead of his cousin, Ali. Muslims, however, kept the division and for the bulk of history restricted to religious rituals (Hazleton, 2010). Recently, however, terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, as well as Shiite militia are using such divide for political reasons in order for one sect to have complete control of power at the expense of others.

Finally, the last element in these paradigms that feeds terrorism is the continuous denial of ethnic and religious communities' rights by the majority groups. As such, these minority groups become easy targets for terrorist groups to solidify the majority group's irrational yearning for absolute control of power (Hassan, 2015). Because of this we witness, for example, anti-Yazidies tendencies and silence by the larger group when ISIS expelled this ethnic/religious minority group from its historic homeland in Sinjar, Iraq, killed its men and raped its women (Cockburn, 2015). The same is true with other minority groups.

Cause 6: Alienation, Identity Crisis and Clash of Civilizations

Because of the clash between modernity and Bedouinism, few individuals feel alienated (Yasmeen and Markovic, 2014). When they read about early Islam and the perpetuated righteous society as the Salfai movement is prescribing (Kabbani, 2014), and when few of these individual are incapable of materializing such nostalgia in today's society, they increasingly become isolated and exhibit anti-social behavior (Cesari, 2006; Saunders, 2012). Such trends exacerbate when religious clergies in their daily and weekly sermons bedevil today's modern society and pay tribute to the past. Accordingly and especially among the young and economically-deprived individuals who live in Western societies, such alienation creates an identity crisis. Then, when such individuals are introduced to Jihadist ideologies, they find themselves eager to join one of the various terrorist networks. Added to these individuals are others who exhibit instable emotional states, psychopaths, and sadists who hate society and want to inflict the most harm on ordinary people as treatment for defects in their ill personalities.

Cause 7: Political Islam and Dogma

President George W. Bush targeted political Islam by identifying it as Islamo-Fascism. However, the term was misused by the Neocons to brand Islam itself as the source of violence. Bush's detour to Iraq further emboldened the very Islamo-Fascism that he was trying to defeat.

President Obama embraced the so-called moderate elements in political Islam, such as the Muslim Brotherhood. He was hoping such faction can confront Jihadist ideology by offering itself as the mainstream Islamist group while isolating Jihadists as outliers. The Obama Administration placed its hope on the Muslim Brotherhood to replace deposed tyrants at the aftermath of the Arab Spring.

Unfortunately, the Muslim Brotherhood turned to be just as violent and as other extremist groups. In essence, the Muslim Brotherhood is the historical originator and genesis of such groups and it had given birth to them. They are no different today than 80 years ago when they were first formed at the aftermath of the collapse of the Ottoman Caliphate. We can witness their recent atrocities in places such as Gaza, Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria.

There is no moderation in political Islam. All forms of political Islam are based on violence. Since political power is the ultimate goal of such movement, violence becomes the means to achieve its ends. Moderation, if existed, is only manifested for a short period of time before the true violence face of the movement appears. Moderation is applied only as a tactical measure, not as a strategy.

Is Islam itself a religion of violence?

Most of Islamic teachings are peaceful. Yet, there are references in both the Quran (Islam's holy book) and the Hadith (the collection of Prophet Muhammad's statements) that condone violence.

Branding Islam as a whole as a religion of violence is simplistic and avoids the complexity of the issue. Islam, like any other religion, is neither a religion of peace nor violence. Targeting innocent Muslims who have nothing to do with ISIS or other terrorist groups is a form of Islamophobia and goes against the accepted norms for tolerance, human dignity, and human rights. Not every Muslim is a terrorist. Certainly, the terrorists that claim Islam as their religion have nothing in common with the core of Islamic teachings. They may find bits and pieces here and there in Islamic traditions that can rationalize their behavior and purpose, but that is contrary to the central teachings of Islam.

Considering ISIS, Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups as the manifestation of Islam is the same of considering Jim Jones, the person who led a mass suicide of 909 men, women and children in Jonestown, Guyana in 1978, or David Koresh, a person who led a mass suicide of 75 men, women and children in Waco, Texas in 1993 as manifestations of Christianity.

Islam's teachings are complex mix of contradicting elements ranging from piety to doing good deeds toward others, to violence. A quick review of other religions, such as Christianity and Judaism will also reveal such tendencies.

Therefore, Islam is not unique in its mixed bag of goods in containing teachings of both peace and violence. In the Old Testament, for example, God ordered the Israelites (in Deuteronomy 20:17) to kill the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and the Jenusitrs and not to leave anything, including their animals, alive and breathing. In the New Testament (Matthew 10:34) Jesus says "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to

bring peace, but a sword." Therefore, there are contradictions in all religions. It is up to the individual, whether Muslim, Christian, Jew, Buddhist, or follower of any other religion to choose whether to be violent or peaceful.

It is true that nowadays most terrorism in the world claim connection to Islam. However, this does not automatically link Islam with terrorism. Yet, it is becoming fashionable, especially for right-wing politicians in Europe and the United States to brand Islam itself as the religion of violence. For an outsider, however, it is difficult to separate the two, especially when group after group of terrorists claim Islam as their inspiration. If we look at groups such as the Taliban in Pakistan and Afghanistan, the mullahs and their regime of terror in Iran, the Shiites militias and Sunni extremists in Iraq, the terrorist groups in Syria (such as Al Nusrat and ISIS, with the latter extending recently to Iraq), the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Hamas in Gaza, the terrorist militias in Libya, Boko Haram in Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, and Niger, Al Qaeda in Yemen, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Kenya, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Al Shaban in Somalia, we will learn that all subscribe to Islam.

So, how did these groups emerge in such large numbers, and why? Ironically, the origin of these groups is the making of the United States (and the CIA in particular). The CIA created political Islam during the 1970s and continued supporting it during the 1980s in order to fight Communism and the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Later, however, the American Islamist Frankenstein monster turned against it once the Soviet Union was no more.

Nevertheless, the United States benefited from fighting its Islamist Frankenstein. In doing so it was able justify the continuous spending in support of the military industrial complex, especially when the justification for such spending was suspended due to the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Political Islam and the Islamist Frankenstein provided the United States with the new bogeyman in order to keep building military equipment and keep funding corporations such Halliburton, Raytheon, and Lockheed Martin.

Political Islam and the Islamist Frankenstein themselves had also benefited from U.S. military confrontation by morphing from an insignificant and obscure political movement in the Middle East to a formidable force challenging the political establishment and gaining power in places such as Iran, Libya, Yemen, Sudan, and Turkey. It had also taken charge of Egypt in 2013 at the aftermath of the Arab Spring before it was ousted by the Egyptian military.

Is Islam an intolerant religion?

Regarding tolerance toward women and other religious and ethnic minority in Islam, there are various teachings and practices in Islam that both affirm and contradict such notion. Islamic history, for example, witnessed periods of tolerance that Jewish and Christian communities flourished under Islam while being persecuted by others. Yet, there were periods that witnessed the opposite.

The same can be said in regard to women. Women had achieved progress in the Middle East and continue to do so, but it differs from one country to another. Islamic history witnessed incidents where few individual women were highly regarded and achieved prominent leadership positions. Yet, at other periods women were the subjects of injustice, oppression and persecution. Overall,

oppression toward women is derivative from reactionary tribal customs that gradually and throughout the years had crept into Islam.

Is Islamic Law (the Sharia) Suited for Modern-Day Public Affairs?

Sharia Law involves a set of complex regulations, ranging from legalizing polygamy by allowing one man having four wives at the same time (if he chooses and treat all equally), to the beheading of condemned offenders, severing the hands of thieves, prohibiting alcohol and criminalize its use, considering female testimony in court weighing half of that of a man, to justifying the beating of a disobeying wife. Some aspects of Sharia Law may be suited for today's society, such as the concept of charity. However, criminal law in the Sharia and the treatment of women are not well-suited for modern-day society. No man has the right to commit any violent act against his wife under any circumstances.

Women's testimony in court ought to be equal to that of a man. Not only that but also her place in society must equal that of the man. Regarding the concepts of beheading of offenders and the mutilation of body parts, such practices might have served well the mobile Bedouin community some two thousand years ago.

Today, however, and with the evolution of correction in criminal justice, such practices are considered to be barbaric, especially when the aim is to correct wrong behavior than punishing the offender based on the concept of an eye for an eye.

Is the Islamic Caliphate an Ideal Form of Governance in Today's Society?

The entire history of the Caliphate in Islam (with the exception of few short periods) have been a series of assassinations, possession of haram (concubines), slaves, eunuchs, massacre of other nations, corruption, and a lavish life style in elaborate castles for the Caliph and his wives and concubines at the expense of the massive poor. Three (out of four) Caliphs that immediately had succeeded the Prophet Muhammad were assassinated and their periods were governed by wars and social unrest. This then spilled-over to the subsequent dynasties that followed with the added caveats of including harams and slaves. Therefore, reviving the Caliphate and its nightmare is a misguided nostalgia for a misperceived glorious past. There is nothing glorious about murder, assassinations, wars, massacres, and slavery.

Conclusion

As we had discussed earlier in the article, there are a number of reasons for the spread of terrorism in the Middle East (particularly terrorism associated with political Islam, such as Al-Qaeda, ISIS, Al-Nusra, Boko Haram, Muslim Brotherhood, and Hamas on the Sunni-Muslim front and Hezbollah of Lebanon, the Shiite militia in Iraq, the Hothies in Yemen, and the Islamic Republic of Iran on the Shiite front). In summary, the primary reasons are sectarianism, lack of sound governance and economic opportunity, alienation and identity crisis, wars and trauma, the manipulation of regional and international conflicts, and the manipulation of violence-oriented teachings in Islam. While the rest of the world is eager to move forward through creativity and innovations in the arts and sciences, thereby affirming their humanity and respect to basic decency

and rules of law, terrorism in the Middle East insists on returning humanity to the past, to the dark ages while lacking any positive contribution to mankind, and voiding of everything except in innovations in killings and mass murder. This cancer must be eradicated and rooted out completely so it would never creep back again to the community of man. Based on the understanding of the causal elements for terrorism in the Middle East, we need immediate, intermediate and long-term approach toward resolving this issue.

Immediate Approach

A military offensive to forcibly remove agents of terror, killing them, destroying their training camps and draining their financial resources ought to be the immediate response. This measure, however, is only a treatment of the symptoms. The treatment of the underlying causes of terrorism must arrive through other steps that will follow the immediate step.

Today, and in response to atrocities committed by ISIS, the United States is once again returning militarily to the Middle East. It is only a matter of time before the air campaign in Iraq and Syria leads to ground troop's deployment and the gradual sinking in yet another quagmire as it was the case with the disastrous Iraq War.

ISIS and its likes are barbarian criminals and they should be defeated. War alone, however, is incapable of defeating them. It is their twisted ideology that has to be defeated. In the past Communism was defeated because of democratic ideal and exposing the lies of Communism to people under its yoke. Ideas defeated Communism, not militarization or the Cold War. Hence, it is ideas that will defeat ISIS and its likes, not wars. Wars may bandage the symptoms and buy politicians few votes, but cannot treat the underlying causes of the problem. Even if there was a best case scenario that resulted in the defeat of ISIS through military campaign, would this be the last terrorist group that the Middle East or the world has to deal with? What if another terrorist group had emerged, what then? Does U.S. have to return again to the region and engage in yet another military campaign? Yesterday was Saddam's regime in Iraq as the target of U.S. war. Then, it was the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Then, it was Al Qaeda in Yemen, Iraq and Sudan. Then, it was Qaddafi in Libya. Now, it is ISIS in both Iraq and Syria. What is next? Yet again, if we briefly look at the consequences of U.S. military engagement in the Middle East we will discover the following startling results:

- Saddam (the person) was killed in Iraq but his Fascist Baath ideology and thugs still are causing havoc in Iraq. Iraq itself is a shamble of a country and a model for a failed state.
- Bin Laden (the person) was killed in Pakistan but his doomsday ideology and followers still are terrorizing the world and growing stronger in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya and Sudan.
- Taliban leaders were killed or imprisoned, yet their forces are reemerging in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The United States even had entered into negotiation with them to release one of its captive soldiers in exchange for five of their commanders.
- Qaddafi (the person) was killed in Libya but he has been replaced by thousands of terrorists who had turned Libya into a no-man land governed by chaos, terror and mayhem.

On the surface, the rationale for justifying current U.S. military engagement against ISIS may sound reasonable, as it was the rationale for justifying previous U.S. engagements in the Middle

East. All these justifications were based on the argument that it is better to fight the terrorists in the Middle East itself instead of fighting them on the homeland. However, the way the United States went about doing it did not achieve the intended outcome of getting rid of terrorism and its causes. On the contrary, America had created more problems than before it had intervened. This indicates that the United States needs to think about other means for its intervention in the Middle East that can result in positive outcomes in eliminating the causes of terrorism, and this can only be done through engaging with people in the region in order to defeat the ideology of terror, ignorance and intolerance by replacing it with the ideology of enlightenment, peace, inclusion, and respect for human dignity. In another word: enabling people in the Middle East respect and practice their faith but divorce it from politics. Political Islam must end, regardless of its orientation whether moderate or extremist.

All forms of political Islam are bad and must be eliminated by Muslims themselves and in cooperation with people around the world. Doing so is the only safeguard and means for defeating ISIS and its likes. This is the first component in treating the causes of terrorism in the Middle East. The other components are gradual reforms in public service to move governance to a sounder function, the building of a strong and prosperous middle class through effective series of economic development, investments, reforms, and regulations, and, encouraging and supporting Muslims to purge violence from their teachings.

Wars are bandages to temporarily treat a symptom. They are never a solution. Without treating the cause, the symptoms keep appearing. If not ISIS and Al Qaeda it would be something else. Therefore, the United States (and the world as a whole) must engage the Middle East to create an environment that will foster reforms both in governance and religion. Only in doing so the world is able to finally bury ISIS and its likes once and for all.

Intermediate Approach

The second step must be taken in order to resolve the issue of terrorism in the Middle East is by addressing the political, economic, and social inequalities that gives rise to terrorism. This requires reforms in governance, creating the foundations for sound governance, providing jobs and economic opportunities, upholding the rule of law, protecting individual rights, minority rights, women rights and all other forms of human rights, ending tribalism, ending the failed states, ending ethnic and sectarian divides, and promoting a culture of respect, free exchange of thoughts and ideas, critical thinking and separating between religion and the state.

Long-Term Strategy

Finally, religion itself (particularly Islam since the Enlightenment era had reformed Christianity and moved it from a religion of wars and crusades to a religion of peace and tolerance). Reforming Islam is the central part in destroying the ideological foundation for terrorism in the Middle East. Without reforming Islam terrorism will always finds some form of justification to its twisted ideology in the unchallenged and unreformed religious texts. This is easier said than done, especially when such attempts have been prevented for thousands of years not only by extremists but also by what is called moderate Islam, such as the Al-Azhar University. Many fear societal rejection, even by members of their immediate family, and even death if dared to attempt such a

task. However, and in order to save Islam itself (as it was the case before by enlightened thinkers to save Christianity), this task must be done.

How to Resolve Issues of Violence in Islam?

In order to eliminate the Islamist Frankenstein (political Islam) with all its wings, whether moderate or extremists, Muslims ought to cleanse their religion from the teachings of violence that throughout the years had crept in Islamic traditions without any serious challenge from within. It took the reformist movement and the Enlightenment era in Europe to cleanse Christianity from its crusaders mentality and shifting more toward civic society and ethical conducts.

Islam, with the exception of few movements in its history that were violently suppressed and branded as heretic, Islam had never experienced such a cleansing and it needs to do so in order to rescue its peaceful core from the added pollution of preaching and condoning violence. Muslims throughout the world must not allow their religion to be hijacked by few extremists, and the traditions or teachings that call for violence must be purged from Islam in order to prevent the misuse of religion by those who want to do so for their own political gains.

Because of the persistency of contradictions with Islam through the years and the lack of serious challenge to question violent-oriented hadiths wrongly attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, violence somehow became accepted in the Middle East as part of its culture and religious practices, especially if such behavior was committed by insiders. However, outcry and condemnations quickly pile up if the same practice was committed by an outsider. Therefore we see large condemnation for the Iraq War, Israel's military responses to Hamas in Gaza, or even toward the United States in holding it responsible for the idiotic film insulting the Prophet Muhammad in 2012, which resulted in massive demonstrations throughout the Middle East and the murder of United States Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens. However, such an outcry is missing when the matter involves someone from within regardless of the atrocity. This is why we do not see a single demonstration in the Middle East against ISIS and its campaign of terror, including the beheading of the innocents, the pillage of Christian communities, and the killings and raping of the Yazidis. We also do not see any outcry toward the atrocities committed by the Assad regime in Syria, or before when Saddam gazed his own people in Iraq.

So, why such traditions and teachings of violence included in Islam? Why do Muslims allowed such deviated teachings be attributed to their Prophet without even questioning the source and its legitimacy? The answer to this rests in the factor that Islam had relied on oral traditions for many years before it was able record its two main teaching sources: the Quran and the Hadith (the Prophet Muhammad's statements). Because of such oral tradition and the lack of verifiable means to trace the source accurately, special interests were able throughout the years fabricate what they saw fit in order to advance their own purpose.

The Quran, which Muslims regard as the literal words of God, were recorded in 656 AD, 24 years after the death of Prophet Muhammad. During these 24 years people relied on the Hafiz (those who had memorized the Quran) in order to have access to the holy book. Once the Hafiz started dying due to wars or old age, the need for recording the Quran became important.

The same is true for the Hadith (the Prophet Muhammad's statements). During the Prophet's lifetime the hadiths were memorized and transmitted from one to another orally. The oral tradition continued for several decades until the hadiths became saturated with so many fabricated statements wrongly attributed to the Prophet that in 854 and 874 AD two Persian scholars decided to record what "they" (the two scholars) accepted as the legitimate statements of the Prophet. However, for more than 200 years after the death of Prophet Muhammad there was no assured mechanism to authenticate the accuracy of the included statements. Because of this we see such a collection of shocking teachings that have become the main source of problem in Islam, from committing violence toward women, to beheading and committing violence toward Jews, non-believers and anyone perceived to be the enemy of Islam. Even the story of the Prophet's final marriage to nine years old minor is stated in these collections, which in actuality is a fabrication wrongly attributed to the Prophet in order to justify a deviant social behavior that did not take place during the first years of Islam and surfaced decades after the death of the Prophet as a continuation of outdated tribal norms that Islam itself came to change.

The questioning of the authenticity of the hadiths that are collected by the two Persian scholars in 854 and 874 AD, however, is problematic despite some of these hadiths' contradictions and violation of the very core teachings of Islam. Any such an attempt is considered by Islamic clergies and religious institutions to be heresy, condemned even by death. Accordingly, the questionable hadiths continued unchallenged, consuming a large portion of Islamic rituals and traditions. It is these hadiths that give ISIS and its types their religious justification and leave ordinary Muslims in awe, not knowing if ISIS is truly following the Prophet's teachings or it is nothing but a terrorist organization. Some Muslims excuse ISIS for its barbaric acts by rationalizing them based on the notion that "this is how true Islam supposed to be."

For example, ISIS' expel of Christians from their communities in Iraq when ISIS took over Mousil in early June 2014 is justified by claiming that the Christians refused to pay the imposed tax on non-Muslims as stipulated by the hadith and thus they had to be forced evacuating and their belongings to be confederated.

Some Muslims justify ISIS's blowing of holy tombs and Shiites mosques in Iraq by claiming that these tombs were wrongfully worshiped by people, instead of worshiping God, and that the Shiite mosques were dedicated to Hussein, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, instead of being dedicated to God.

As for killing Yazidi men and selling their women by ISIS fighters, some Muslims also justified these by claiming that the Yazidis as Devil worshipers and thus they ought to be killed according to the hadith and their women sold as war gains. The beheading of the Western journalists is also justified because of the claim that they were spies and hence, enemies of Islam, and according to the hadith it is justifiable to kill the enemies of Islam.

Regarding the barbaric practice of beheading, those same Muslims excuse it as a tradition handed down to Muslims by the Patriarch Abraham when he was trying to sacrifice his son for God. Ironically, some other victims of beheading in Islam include the Prophet Muhammad's own grandson, Hussein. Such misguided Muslims wrongly attribute the legitimacy of beheading to the

Prophet himself based on a fabricated hadith that claims the Prophet had promised the people in Mecca (before he was victorious in overtaking the city) that they will be beheaded.

When comparing such a fabricated hadith with what had actually took place in Mecca once the Prophet was victorious and no one was ever harmed, one can realize that such a statement was never been issued by the Prophet. It was added later after his death in order for the blood-thirsty tribal traditions continue.

Some Muslims, for example claim that instead of condemning ISIS they ought to blame Western intelligence for creating ISIS, falling as such in the never-ending trap of conspiracy theory in always placing blame on outsiders for the ills of the region. True, many of the problems in the Middle East are caused by colonial powers and foreign interests. However, not all problems in the Middle East and the Islamic countries are caused by the West. Most of these problems are inherited within the region's own traditions and dynamics and people in the Middle East ought to look inward in order to find the causes for their problems and fix them.

Many Muslim also blame the problem of ISIS on the Shiite-Sunni divide, and particularly identify Iran and its hegemonial policies in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, Gaza, and Yemen as the source of problem. So, on the surface ISIS appears to these Muslims as a natural consequence to Iran's policies by responding to Sunni grievances who were the target of such policies. The policies of the Iraqi Shiite government, a satellite of Iranian influence in the region, and its marginalization of the Iraqi Sunnis during the past eight years, for example, had invited ISIS to the Sunni dominated areas in Iraq in order to put an end to the persecution of the Sunnis. The same is true in Syria. The policies of the Syrian government, which is another satellite of Iranian Influence in the region, and its persecution of the Syrian Sunnis, had also invited ISIS in order to put a stop to such a conduct. Therefore, resolving Sunni grievances in Iraq and Syria and involving them in governance, and ending Iranian interferences in other countries' affairs in the region will undercut the popular support for ISIS.

Others, Muslims and non- Muslim alike, blame U.S. inaction in Syria and its lack of support of the Syrian Free Army to topple the Assad regime during the past three years as a reason for the creation of a vacuum in Syria that soon was filled by ISIS and other extremist groups. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta also share such an opinion.

Since Islam has been hijacked by terrorists to justify political ends, Muslims need to rescue their religion by cleansing it from inhuman tendencies, even if such tendencies were wrongfully attributed to God or Prophet Muhammad. Islam needs critical thinking and free exchange of ideas in order to save its soul.

Insistence on censorship and silencing opinions that question elements in Islamic teachings will only hurt the religion itself and allows bigotry to take hold outside the Islamic countries and for terrorism to flourish within the Muslim communities.

Islam must be purged from the polluted doctrines of violence, misogyny and hatred. Critical thinking and freedom of speech and religion must be encouraged and protected, and the

politicization of Islam must end in all its forms. No more Islamist Frankenstein. With such reforms the cause of Islamist-related terrorism will end.

We have a moral obligation to be involved and take a stand against evil in order to end its continuous formation. ISIS is an evil. However, the only way to fight evil is through enlightenment. There are those who will say that this is a Middle Eastern problem and has nothing to do with us. Others will say let us focus on our own problems by building the middle class and the economy here and we should not rush to aid the Middle East whenever it is facing a problem. To those I repeat what Dante has said in his book, *Divine Comedy*, “the darkest places in Hell are reserved for those who maintain their neutrality in times of moral crisis.”

ISIS may be the Middle East’s problem today. But it could be Europe or the United States problem tomorrow. If we do not support the innocents in the Middle East today from criminals such as ISIS, Al Qaeda, Assad, the mullahs of Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, and the secretion militia, who will support us tomorrow when we face a threat? For this, I conclude with a remarkable poem by Martin Niemöller, a prominent Protestant pastor who wrote the following during WWI in response to the atrocities committed by another evil-Nazi Germany:

“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Socialist.
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me”.

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