NEUTRALIZING JIHADIST ISLAMISM

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There are many misconceptions of Muslims by outsiders. A minority of Muslims sympathizes with the radical faction of Islam, often referred to as Islamism, or jihadist Islamism, and they are destroying the essence of the predominantly compassionate religion of Islam. While both share Islam, the great majority of Muslims are not Islamists. Something must be done to quell the violent tendencies of the radical minority.

Introduction

Both during Muhammad's life and after his death, the Arabs confidently expanded their empire due to the belief in both their superior religion and their superior power. Because of the spread of the Arabic language, the Arabs were able to develop "a kind of cultural self-consciousness" (Hourani 199). The unifying factors of a common language and a common religion aided in their expansion efforts, which lasted many centuries. But by the time the Ottomans failed in their attempt to assume control over Vienna in 1683, Islam's spread had already begun to wane. The Arabs had started to feel threatened by the advances of Western imperialism. The alienation they felt is one of several issues that have led to the current problems in which we see indiscriminate violence being perpetrated by Islamists.

Alienation

Some Arab Muslims view themselves as victims, and by doing so, have understandably seen the "enemy" at different times as the Jews, the Christians, the communists, or the Western imperialists (Lewis 107). Perhaps the enemy providing the most immediate threat is the enemy within—those members of their own society who are deemed to have strayed from traditional

Islamic beliefs.

One internal Muslim conflict that has been going on for centuries is that between the Sunni and Shiite Muslim factions, and much blood has been shed as a result. Their primary disagreement pertains to the rightful descendant of Muhammad. The Shiites believe that only blood relatives of Muhammad should have been his successors, while the Sunnis accept the ascension and the legitimacy of the (non blood relative) caliphs who followed the Prophet.

Besides internal conflicts, outside influences, especially those of a militaristic nature, have created additional tensions among Arabs. When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1991, not a single Arab nation stepped in to physically protect Kuwait. It took the American forces and their allies to go in and remove the Iraqi invaders. The observance of foreign military involvement in their region must have been emasculating for the Arab nations, and probably instilled an even greater sense of alienation and victimization.

Rapid social change from the 1970s onward has intensified cultural alienation. Those most likely to join radical factions have usually been disillusioned following exposure to modernity. "Fundamentalism is an anti-modern product of modernity" (Demant 90). The feeling of alienation is what is most likely to attract some to the misinterpreted and fanatical fundamentalist belief system where bloodshed is acknowledged as a legitimate means to thwart change and preserve tradition.

Ideology

Certain viewpoints are distinctively problematic, and keep the Arabs from maximizing their technological and cultural potential.

Reluctance to Learn from Others   Until Napoleon conquered Egypt, the Arabs had lived a "self-confined, traditional … life, … and unmindful of the progress of the world outside.

Change did not interest them" (Hitti 745). Their contact with the French forced them to see the advances that the outside world had made. Since Muslims thought they had the ideal religion, their theocratic ideology made them reluctant to learn from outsiders for countless decades following the Industrial Revolution. They often equated modernization with Westernization. Their reluctance to learn from others resulted in their falling behind in many areas where they once had been superior (e.g., science). They eventually began to modernize, but initially only in the area of warfare.

Gender Inequality   Old traditions of male dominance have led to the still-existing beliefs that not only should a man should be in charge of his household, but that men should be in charge of all matters of society. It is still much the same today regarding the repression of women, and Saudi Arabia seems to be the most limiting of the Middle Eastern countries. For example, they are the only country in the world to prohibit women from driving vehicles. Also, education for girls is forbidden in some Arab societies. Radicals have been known to burn down or blow up schools that allow girls as students, and have done so to over 170 schools in the Swat Valley region of Pakistan (Zada A2).

Misuse of Religion   Religion is too often misused to justify unreligious violent actions.

Critical, scholarly study of the Koran is typically not welcome by the majority of Muslims. Historicizing the Koran by questioning its divine authority is considered an attack on Islam (Warraq 111). But scholarly study of the Koran could benefit both Muslims and non-Muslims by providing more tolerant and compassionate interpretations.

"In the new jihadism, death has ceased to be a potential, or even probable, price to be paid. Death has become an indispensable means to a desired end, if not an actual end in itself" (Kassir 83). Verses 39 and 40 of Sura XXII of the Koran are often referred to by jihadists to

justify violence. There are two fundamental principles reflected in those two verses: that Muslims are to fight *only* in self defense, and that when they fight they are to do so for *all* believers of God. The misuse of these two verses by jihadists is often used to justify their senseless murders (Shah-Kazemi 14).

Solutions

Unfortunately there is no easy solution for effectively managing relations with jihadist Islamists. There are several improvements that need to be made if Arab Muslims as a whole are to regain unified strength, maintain peaceful self-determination, and calm the radical minority.

Plurality

"The sexual segregation that all young Arabs experience builds pressure and frustration for which they have no outlet" (Lamb 145). Integration of genders would relax this tension. All Arabs should have equality. Women must be free for Muslim society to be free (Lewis 71). Laws that exclude, rather than include, are stifling the productive potential of all of Arabia. They can't catch up with the rest of the world if only half of their population is allowed to have full freedoms.

Global Integration

Muslims should see themselves as a part of the global community, regardless of where they actually live. Asaf Hussain, an immigrant who moved to Great Britain, said that he sees himself as a British Pakistani, and not a British Muslim, and believes that being British should be the common binding element for Muslims who call Britain home (Emling G4). His nationalist attitude is helpful for Arab Muslims who still feel alienated from the global economy by allowing them to confidently bond with the world on terms broader than those of religious identity.

Diplomatic Dialogue

Diplomacy should be included as one area of effort by which to positively influence others. Military action from Westerners should only be used as a last resort, because acting too soon only breeds resentment that may linger for decades, or even generations. Edward Djerejian of Rice University said that it is important to "… adopt a comprehensive, diplomatic, strategic approach in a direct dialogue at the highest levels … (and) the absence of (such an approach) serves only to polarize situations and promote miscalculations" (Gelb 15). Critics of Mr. Djerejian's viewpoint worry that waiting too long will only give radicals more time during which to create deadly weapons. However, optimism supports the notion that there is greater likelihood that a peaceful approach will produce a peaceful result, assuming it is done diligently and with mutual respect.

Modernization

There is a difference between modernization and Westernization. Arab Muslims don't have to assume all characteristics of Western life to improve their own lifestyles with modern technology. Incorporating some advancements from Western life will not only help them in the management of their own lives but will also be symbolic of respect and tolerance for the accomplishments of Westerners.

Media Depictions

Accuracy It is obviously preferable that the media should take an unbiased stance when reporting the news. But, they should not marginalize accuracy by being overly neutral in position. For example, upon the death of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, he was referred to in the media as the former "spiritual leader" of Hamas. There is nothing *spiritual* about his preaching of hatred and killing of Jews (Mann A58).

Praise   The media should praise those actions of Arab Muslims that are consistent with human dignity, and they should acknowledge those cultures that have made advances towards living peacefully in a global world. A leader like Muammar Qaddafi of Libya deserves recognition for wisely choosing to adopt a more peaceful disposition towards the world. But rather than only giving praise, the media, especially the Arab media, should combine a message of praise for positive actions with condemnation for fanatical (viz., violent) actions.

Secularization

The problem with a theocratic state is in the potential abuse of power as it forces *its* way on the people. There should be an "institutional separation between Islam and the state, which is necessary for Shariʿa religious law to have its proper positive and enlightening role in the lives of Muslim and Islamic societies" (An-Naʿim 4). A secular form of government would make the role of the state more consistent with those that value principles of human rights. Turkey is a possible model, and Iraq, as now evolving, could also be a possible model for success.

Summary

The outside world can only go so far in making a difference in quelling jihadist Islamism. There needs to be a spiritual (not religious) and cultural awakening for Islamists. The process needs to start internally with dialog from the moderate Muslims since they have the best starting point from which to initiate progress. Moderate Muslims should speak loudly against violent acts, and should speak equally loudly when praising positive acts. Add to their efforts those of consistent worldwide diplomacy, and we have perhaps the best platform from which to reduce the violence that plagues the Middle East and other parts of the world. The actions of a misguided minority should not be allowed to negatively direct the future of all Arabs.

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