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Seven Different Opinions in Germany About Refugees

As the refugee crises in Germany reached its heights in September 2015, I went to help both Germans and refugees. I had been in a similar situation 31 years earlier as a refugee in Germany. I, too, had escaped war and political unrest. As I travelled throughout Germany during my three-month stay interacting with German volunteers and refugees either helping out in language classes or attending social hours or speaking in conferences, I identified seven different attitudes toward refugees. These groups, by and large, are divided between those welcoming refugees, rejecting refugees, and partnering with an attitude of neutrality.

Welcoming Attitude and Acceptance

This view includes both religious and secular groups welcoming refugees and accepting their government's "Willkommenskultur" [lit. welcome culture] policy. While two differing groups emerged among Christians – the convertors and the caregivers – seculars remained consistent in their reasoning.

The Convertors: These are Christians who looked at the influx of mainly Muslim refugees into Germany not just as a humanitarian crisis but also as a cry of humanity for spiritual salvation. "This history-making event" would determine the "destiny of Europe," this group believed. Thus, they perceived this as an opportunity to evangelize Muslims, save their souls, and convert them to Christianity. While working at a donation centre, I met a German woman who belonged to a group called "Awakening Europe". This group, which began in August 2015, believes that god has called Europe to an awakening. The woman explained why she and others like her were so enthusias-

tic to help: "Jesus has commended us to go out into the world and spread the good news. We failed to go. Germans failed to go. But god in his mercy and wrath said, if you refuse to go to them, then I will bring them to you. So, it is our obligation to evangelize them, to receive them, to help them, to show them Christ's love, to tell them about Christ, and to bring them to salvation. We cannot fail again."

Numerous churches in Germany began baptizing Muslims by the hundreds and still continue to do so, celebrating the fact that they were saving sinners from going to hell, while dismissing the concept of political conversions versus spiritual conversions.

The Caregivers: These represent the more moderate and less radical approach. "It is our obligation as Christians and followers of Jesus to care for others," they said. "When one sheep was lost from the flock of 100, Jesus left the 99 and went to search for the one lost sheep. Every refugee is important."

This group looked at refugees individually as human beings in crisis and in need of help. They helped them without any expectations: No preaching, no discussions about faith or Jesus, no conversions. They

provided simple literature in Arabic about their churches so “Muslims” who were attending the church could understand the covenants of the church and what the church believed in, so that they felt welcomed and did not feel like outsiders.

However, what both groups had in common was their perception that Germany was still a country with Christian values. They questioned whether Muslims would take over their country, and how Islam would influence Germany’s educational, political, and social norms, and consequently change their society.

Islamophobia can be detected at different levels – some more obvious than others – and they did not seem to know how to deal with it. Especially that no one of whom I met had the slightest knowledge about Islam.

They did not know how to talk to Muslims and how to deal with them. They were afraid of them; afraid of offending them or making them upset or angry. They were afraid of possible civil war should they offend Muslims. They were afraid for the wellbeing of their daughters and the future of their youth.

The Seculars: These are Germans who don’t believe in religious faith. They neither practice Christianity nor perceive Germany as a Christian country. They look at refugees as members of the global community. Race, religion, location, traditions, and cultures did not matter to them.

They gave their time and resources and wholeheartedly helped refugees under the notion of helping people fleeing war, persecution, hunger, murder, and rape. Since religion and race were not factors for them, they did not give importance to religious, cultural, or linguistic differences,

therefore they did not perceive Islam as a threat. In fact, they welcomed Muslims who might be contributing members to their society in the future. They simply perceived refugees as another human being with the same needs, fears, and hopes as they did. Nothing more, nothing less. They in fact didn’t feel inclined to criticize Islam or speak against Muslims. “They are human beings. That’s it! Religion doesn’t matter at all!”

There is also an *anti-Nazi view* among Germans who view their country’s efforts, as an anti-Nazi movement, a positive sign in the right direction to repair their historical image left over from WWII. They consider any opposition to embracing refugees as a continuation of their mistakes in the past. They perceived those who opposed their government’s welcome culture and acceptance of refugees into their country as Nazis.

The Rejectionists

This group is divided into two distinct groups: Germans and former refugees.

Germans: These include political groups such as the “Alternative for Germany” party, which vehemently opposes their government’s immigration policies, believing that these policies left their country vulnerable economically, politically, socially, and culturally. They protested against their government and formed small and large groups to publically oppose Merkel’s policies.

A part of unemployed Germans also rejected refugees. They despised their government’s policies of accepting “outsiders” and giving away a piece of the pie (their money) to others while they (Germans) were financially struggling. They

complained that they could not find jobs and were afraid that refugees would be taking their jobs away from them.

Former Refugees: Many of former refugees who had become permanent residents perceived themselves as victims of German government's "former" immigration policies, which made them wait years to become permanent residents. This group complained that it took them long years to receive residency, enter into the workforce, have a steady income, and slowly become members of the German society.

The thought of the influx of hundreds of thousands of refugees into Germany, a place they had worked so hard to finally become permanent members, was frightening. They questioned what would happen to the job market, the price of housing, and if they would be able to find inexpensive apartments since the newly arriving refugees are being placed in apartments after passing their initial exams and waiting for the review of their immigration papers.

Of course, there were exceptions, but very few. Even those who engaged with the new refugees, and to some extent assisted them, are frustrated with the German government for allowing such a large number of refugees into the country. So a lot of frustration and resentment on the part of former refugees was witnessed and expressed. For this group, it might take years to accept the new refugees. Their acceptance will be based on two facts:

1) Continuous economic security in Germany.

2) Assurance of national security since most of former refugees have fled war and political upheavals. They do not want to be subjected to further political distress.

Neutral Partners

In every society, there are those who remain neutral and do not take sides. They have their own reasons for neutrality: Either they have no political inclinations or are not interested in getting involved in the affairs of their government. They are simply content with their lives. This does not mean that they do not have political opinions. They simply are not interested in engaging in political discussions. Instead, they prefer to focus on their own lives. Some feel that politics is too complicated and no matter what they say or do, the government is the decision-maker.

Despite the position Germans take about the refugee crisis in their country, Germany remains struggling to understand the crisis. What is obvious is that a "New Germany" has been born, and it will take time for Germany to adjust to this "new German society". How all is going to play out is yet to be seen. What we know for sure is the fact that Germany has the strong will and determination as a nation to overcome this humanitarian crisis.

Yvette Hovsepien Bearce

Author of The Political Ideology of Ayotallah Khamenei

Canadians Keep Asking Questions About Saudi Arms Deal

Headline news revealed last week that London's mayor Matt Brown and top city manager Art Zuidema emailed 14 city councillors not to speak publicly about the \$15-billion arms deal involving General Dynamics Land Systems in London. Councillors were directed in January to refer interview requests to a city hall spokesperson who would give a corporate response to media inquiries about the local contractor's deal to build light armoured vehicles (LAVs) for Saudi Arabia.

Brown pledged during his 2014 mayoral campaign to create a new era of accountability and transparency at city hall but the directive co-signed by "Matt and Art" is raising questions about muddled waters at the federal, provincial and local level, as well as city councillors' individual autonomy and right to express opinions contrary to corporate policy.

Many locals in south-western Ontario cheered in February 2014 when General Dynamics scored the multi-billion dollar contract to build armoured vehicles for Saudi Arabia — creating and sustaining about 3,000 jobs in economically hard-hit London— but since then the abysmal human rights record of Saudi Arabia, long cited as a serious human rights abuser by organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, has raised a rising chorus of questions about the ethics of providing Saudi Arabia with Canadian-manufactured LAVS.

According to a new report by Amnesty International last week, the number of executions carried out worldwide reached a 25-year high last year due to a dramatic rise in the number of people being put to death in Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan. In Saudi Arabia, the only country in the world to carry out the death penalty by

beheading, at least 158 people were executed last year.

Saudi Arabia shocked the world in January by executing 47 people in a single day, including the Shiite Muslim cleric Sheikhi Nimr Al-Nimr. The recent arrest of prominent human rights defender Samar Badawi is just the latest example of Saudi Arabia's contempt for its human rights obligations and provides further proof of the authorities' on-going campaign to suppress all signs of peaceful dissent.

Saudi Arabia has brazenly flouted its international obligations and displayed a flagrant disregard for rights to freedom of expression and association. John Polanyi, a Nobel laureate in chemistry at the University of Toronto cites recent UN reports that Saudi Arabia is targeting civilians as it bombs Yemen, therefore he thinks we have a moral and legal obligation to reconsider the sale.

Prime Minister Trudeau says he does not want to renege on the deal negotiated by the previous Conservative government. His minister of foreign affairs, Stephane Dion says the federal government will engage in a "very vigorous process" to ensure the LAVS are not misused. He told reporters at the UN recently that Canada will strengthen rules on the sale of weap-

ons but critics say the rules were already in place and needed enforcement.

Project Ploughshares has established that at the time the Saudi deal was announced in February 2014, the required export permits were not issued. This is especially significant as a key element of the export permits is a human rights assessment to determine that the deal in question does not contravene Canada's export control policies. The federal government should have enforced, from the very beginning, the strict export regulations that guarantee our military equipment is not used against civilians. "Existing norms are already sufficiently clear," says Cesar Jaramillo, executive director of Project Ploughshares. "The purpose of these rules is precisely to ensure that Canadian-made goods are not misused."

Canada previously sold light armoured vehicles to Saudi Arabia, with more than 1,000 delivered in the early 1990s and 700 in 2009. By now the Saudis have used Canadian LAVs for 20 years, so tradition and familiarity are considerations when they are going to buy. Canada's LAVs are some of the best multi-role wheeled vehicles in the world, and Saudi Arabia's geography and road network is challenging, so the Saudis will get all the benefits of the vehicles' low maintenance, high performance and flexibility with fewer rollovers, stuck vehicles and other terrain issues.

With this major contract, Canada beat out competition from France and Germany. So if we had not won the contract, presumably the Saudi government would have bought similar systems from the Europeans. But selling Canadian equipment for \$10 to \$15 billion does mean Canada is helping prop up the Saudi government until 2028 — the end of this 14-year deal — which is a very long time to stickhandle

questions about Saudi Arabia's terrible human rights record.

In future, the LAVs could be used against civilians in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Yemen by the National Guard, which is separate from the rest of the military and acts as a political counterbalance. But the LAVs' end use remains uncertain. It should be transparent. Michael Byers, a UBC professor who holds the Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law says evidence from a UN panel indicates Saudi actions in Yemen are possible war crimes and crimes against humanity — and because the prohibition on targeting civilians in a widespread and systematic manner has the same legal weight as the prohibition on genocide — "The contract with Saudi Arabia is void."

Beheading, stoning and flogging are all acceptable forms of criminal punishment in Saudi Arabia. Homosexual acts are punishable by flogging, imprisonment and even death, as is drug use. Courts can impose sentences of flogging of 1,000 to 2,500 lashes, and thousands of people receive unfair trials and are subject to arbitrary detention. The country's anti-terrorism regulations can be used to criminalize almost any form of peaceful criticism of the authorities, and dozens of human rights defenders and others are serving long prison sentences for criticizing authorities or demanding political and human rights reforms. "The reality is that the human rights situation in Saudi Arabia is abysmal and anyone who risks highlighting flaws in the system is branded a criminal and tossed in a jail cell," says Said Boumedouha, Amnesty International's deputy director for the Middle East and North Africa.

At first, the Conservatives, defence ex-

perts and executives at General Dynamics effusively praised each other for their stalwart efforts to win the bid for Ontario's manufacturing industry. "This is an Olympic win for Canada and for Canadian manufacturers," Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters president Jayson Myers said in a press release. "Like all victories, it's been the result of a team effort in which the government has played a crucial role. All Canadians should be proud of this rec-

ord achievement."

Unfortunately the previous federal government failed to carefully review this proposed arms export, and failed to grant a permit that would have ensured that serious human rights violations in Saudi Arabia were seriously taken into account. We should not have to wait for the next federal or municipal election in order to raise the issue.

Erika Simpson

Associate Professor in political science at Western University, Canada

Evolution of Turmoil in the Middle East: Western Role

Given the current Middle Eastern scenario, one may reasonably hold the argument that the on-going turmoil in Middle East owes its burden equally to the Machiavellian Anglo-American policies in the region and the harrowing failure of the Muslim governments/leaderships in the Middle East to rationally respond to those challenges. Are there any dimensions beyond religion?

The Anglo-American Alliance

UK's former premier Tony Blair, the advocate of Junior Bush's unwarranted invasion of Iraq once said, "We have tried intervention and putting down troops in Iraq; we've tried intervention without putting in troops in Libya; and we've tried no intervention at all but demanding regime change in Syria. It's not clear to me that, even if our policy did not work, subsequent policies would have worked better."

Former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice confessed to as much in June 2005 at a speech at the American University in Cairo when she said: "For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East, and we achieved neither." The result is that the political dynamic across the Middle East became a competition "between repressive dictatorships and illiberal opposition groups."

The Obama administration seems at long last to understand that the fight against religious extremism in the Middle East will be a long, twilight struggle. For now, it will not involve American boots on the ground. But it will be a difficult campaign

to manage with so many crosscutting rivalries among the regional allies.

Middle East & Backlash of Western Policies

History provides a sobering lesson about western involvement in the Middle East. The lesson of the past decades of US involvement is that the Americans do not have the ability to solve the underlying problems that make the region so combustible, no matter how much in the way of troops, money and intellectual effort they throw at it. Yet the shift of emphasis from "fixing" to managed withdrawal and "offshore balancing" comes with its own perils.

By allying with the Gulf regimes, mostly notable with Saudi Arabia, the West contributed to the creation of a Wahhabi-funded Islamist-conservative ideology that spread around the region. By doing that the West subsequently created its leanings towards generating a notorious personality in the name of Osama Bin Laden- a CIA nurtured and trained person who fought against Russians in Afghanistan. This was "Reagan's Jihad" of the 1980s. "Glowing praise of the murderous exploits of today's supporters of arch-

terrorist [Osama] bin Laden and his Taliban collaborators, and their holy war against the ‘evil empire’, was issued by US President Ronald Reagan on March 8, 1985.” US-run Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe beamed Islamic fundamentalist tirades across Central Asia, while paradoxically denouncing the “Islamic revolution” that toppled the pro-US Shah of Iran in 1979.

Ironically during the post Cold War period, George W. Bush’s doctrine of the axis of evil accompanied with Washington’s sponsored project of transformational democracy via regime change provided a spicy recipe for political turmoil in the region of West Asia.

The Devil’s Advocacy of Interventionism

The evidence shows that US military interventions create more jihadists – for example, as documented by journalists in Yemen – or new, yet worse groups such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which morphed into ISIS.

Yet radical Islamists existed for decades before 9/11, posing little or no threat to the distant United States. In fact, during the Cold War, the United States fuelled Islamist jihadism to battle communism – for example, aiding the Mujahedeen fighters in Afghanistan, which later morphed into the original Al-Qaeda group.

Iraq did not specifically harbour Al-Qaeda, but it had provided training camps and other support to terrorist groups fighting the government of Turkey and Iran, as well as hard-line Palestinian groups. In fact, according to the Council on Foreign Relations in 2005 “the question of Iraq’s link to terrorism grew more

urgent with Saddam’s suspected determination to develop weapons of mass destruction (WMD), which Bush administration officials feared he might share with terrorists who could launch devastating attacks against the United States.” Nonetheless, the official reason that the US cited for launching the invasion was exemplified.

Creation of ISIS

Unwittingly, the desire to spread democracy in the Middle East led to the formation of ISIS. Two decisive complications emerged following the US invasion of Iraq: The first one is that insurgency against US occupation of Iraq was legitimized. The second one is that the resultant Shiite dominated “democracy” provided ISIS with a recruitment pool of alienated Sunnis. Furthermore, the heavy weaponry abandoned by the fleeing Iraqi army, much of which was provided by the US, helped ISIS to transform into a pseudo army able to consolidate its power and increase its gains. Finally, the democratic revolution and resultant civil war in Syria to overthrow the brutal regime of Bashar Al-Assad has established ISIS as the main rebel group leading to the radicalisation of the once moderate opposition in that conflict.

American policy has sought to straddle the motivations of all parties and is therefore on the verge of losing the ability to shape events. The US is now opposed to, or at odds in some way or another with, all parties in the region: With Egypt on human rights; with Saudi Arabia over Yemen; with each of the Syrian parties over different, yet conflicting objectives.

Washington Plan to Oust Assad

The US proclaims the determination to remove Assad but has been unwilling or unable to generate effective leverage – political or military – to achieve that aim. Nor has the US put forward an alternative political structure to replace Assad should his departure somehow be realized. In Washington there are many figures, who point out that there is a flaw in the logic of an official policy that calls for the overthrow of Assad but shares with him numerous mortal enemies, chiefly ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra. In other words, there is no plan.

Western Engineered Policy of Centrifugalism

While contributing to the creation of Islamism, the West has stoked the Sunni-Shia divide. CIA hands were behind most Middle Eastern leaders, including Ali Hassan Salameh, the Palestinian ‘Red Prince’, and Saddam Hussein, who was even a CIA asset as revealed by Rashid Khalidi. Genocides were overlooked; such as the ones against the Kurds while the Kurds were embraced by the West to guarantee leverage – destabilization factor – in their relationship with the dictator regimes. The West, via its ally Israel, helped sponsor Hamas, while also propping up the government of the Palestinian Authority through training security forces.

West-Israel Honeymoon

The West was also intimately involved in the creation of Israel and remained ob-

essed regarding its security. Europe and the US wanted an outpost in the Middle East and Israel was a perfect candidate. The creation of the Palestinian refugee problem unsettled other regimes in the Middle East, and also forced many Muslim majority countries to eschew human rights in order to “combat Israel”. Israel, many experts conclude, has opposed democracy in the Middle East and supported dictators. Opposition to Israel, although often rhetorical, helped create Arab nationalism under Gamal Abdel Nasser and necessitated dictatorship in Egypt and gave rise to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Also the “axis of resistance” run by Bashar Al-Assad was created to oppose Israel. The UN has blamed Israel for lack of reform and overall stagnation in the region.

Some commentators have argued that the West’s traditional support for Sunni regimes is the problem, resulting in what Eldar Mamedov calls “Shiaphobia”. He argues “The West should live up to its own self-proclaimed reputation as the protector of religious liberty and pluralism worldwide.” The Economist concluded on the Shia-Sunni divide: “many of the West’s potential or de facto allies are scarcely more savoury. Some of the most capable anti-IS forces are the Shia militias that once fought American soldiers and waged a vicious sectarian war against Sunnis.”

A UN report on Arab integration noted “the Western parties perceive the Arab region as vital to their achievement of three main goals, namely, maintaining oil flow at reasonable costs; preserving the security and military supremacy of Israel; and fighting terrorism.”

Nationalism and Turmoil Beyond Religion

The region of West Asia (known as the Middle East) and North Africa has been home for tension and conflict since the end of the 19th century. The tensions were accentuated by the division of North Africa between European powers during the period of colonial expansion and the Sykes-Picot Agreement between the British and the French in 1916 during the First World War.

Showing no regard to the demographic distribution of ethnicities, religions, languages and other cultural dimensions, borders of nation-states were drawn and mandatory colonial imperialism was established until the mid of the 20th century. While the western role in the region was fluctuating between supportive and subversive of dictatorships, stability and security remained constant measures when meddling in the region.

Entangled by these complex processes of independence after the Second World War, newly emergent nation-states were neither capable nor willing to establish well-functioning political, economic and social systems. Democratization processes, procedural and cultural, were postponed. There were actually many other pressing matters to attend to other than democratization. The Egyptian writer and winner of Nobel Prize for Literature, Naguib Mahfouz, notes correctly that in Egypt “most people are concerned with getting bread to eat. Only some of the educated understand how democracy works.”

Nationalism came up to define individual subjects, who lived within the borders of

nation-states as, for instance, Syrian, Iraqi, and Egyptian etc. Two paradoxes developed concerning nationalist sentiments in the region: The first one is that the concept of nationalism was interchangeably used to refer to Pan-Arabism, which excluded significant segments of these societies such as for instance, the Berber in North African countries and the Kurds in Syria and Iraq.

The newly drawn borders not only created frontiers among majorities, but also among religious minorities. The Druze divided between Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel (formerly Palestine), the Kurds between Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran and the Armenians between rather more national states are a few cases in point.

Even the official names of the newly authoritarian nation-states were controversial: *Arab* Republic of Egypt, Syrian *Arab* Republic, The *Arab* Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Libyan *Arab* Republic etc. Nation-states failed to recognize the diversity within their borders, as colonial powers did before them.

In the words of Libya's former leader Muammar Al-Gaddafi: “The times of Arab nationalism and unity are gone forever. These ideas, which mobilized the masses, are only a worthless currency.”

The second one is that nation-states offered very little to serve the cultural sphere in the region but much to serve doctrinal forms of thought. While nation-states were, and unfortunately still are, lacking vision, participation and serious contributions to their citizens, rapid demographic inflation in the region crippled the already struggling economic and political institutions. In 2014, the region was home for approximately two per cent of the global population.

Focusing on nationalist notions, while

unable to respond to real life contradictions paved the way for Islamist ideologies to blossom. In other words, deficient and inadequate response to peoples' needs increased rigid frameworks of ideological perception, in which Islamism counterposed to nationalism were racing to reach power. Nationalist criticism of Islamist ideologies was, we might risk saying, itself ideological and vice versa. Ironically, the distinctions between nationalism and Islamism have blurred recently, so one might detect nationalist Islamists and Islamist nationalists.

Identity Crisis

The region of the Mashreq, an Arabic word means the place of the sunrise, is considered the cradle of ancient human civilizations and the birthplace of the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Yet, its recent contributions to human development can be, with confidence, considered minimal in comparison to the western ones since the Age of Enlightenment. This is a time-dimension of identity crisis.

The region of west Asia and North Africa experienced the period of Cold War at its best. While some regimes tended to ally themselves, although sometimes sporadically, with the US, some others tended to ally themselves with the Soviet Union. Postcolonial period of oil extraction remarkably characterized the geopolitical calculations in the region. Securing the flow of oil and gas without interruption and at acceptable prices to the United States and its allies is still a main policy pillar of foreign intervention in the region. The Mashreq, in other words, suffers from several political conflicts and is sig-

nificantly dominated by foreign powers. Not only is the region linguistically, ethnically and religiously fractionalized, but also ideologically: Nationalism, Baathism, socialism, communism, liberalism and Islamism. This is a philosophical dimension of identity crisis.

A crisis arises if there is a conflict when defining multiple layers of identity that should concur between the understanding of the self and actual reality. For instance being proud of an Egyptian or Syrian national collides with a harsh reality that neither the Egyptian nor the Syrian national passports rank decently compared with other travel documents of almost the whole world. This is a psychological dimension of identity crisis.

Individuals in the region of West Asia and North Africa still face several problematics to determine, especially to answer two crucial questions: who they are as a collective or individual and where they are in the world today. Serious contemplation about these issues has the potential to achieve two crucial results: The decrease of rigid ideological forms of thought and the increase of self-consciousness.

Ideologies With Islamic Flavour

During the 1970s, Islamist movements, rigid ideological movements with an Islamic flavour, were augmented by the recapitulated military defeats of nationalist regimes before Israel. These movements emerged to defy the western secular model of governance and modernization on one hand, and to go back to Islamic references – "governing by what Allah has revealed in the Quran" – on the other. While this is another psychological dimension of identity crisis, it is a moderni-

zation process itself. The success of the Islamic revolution in Iran in 1979 under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini represented a political and ideological support to other Islamist movements in the region, such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, Egypt, Jordan and other countries, and later to more radical groups such as Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Following the collapse and disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the US increased its military capacities in the Arabian Peninsula during the 1990-91 Gulf War. This has led to the increase of anti-Americanism sentiments in the region, which was a perfect condition for radical Islamists, including Al-Qaeda affiliates, to gain ground among the weary populations.

To sum up, there are several reasons behind the persistence of turmoil in the region of West Asia and North Africa. Some of which are based on external interventionism, some others lie in the heart of the region. New narratives and collective memory creation should be intensively and extensively operationalized in order to reach a stable level of pacification among all conflicting actors.

Chemistry of Complex Dynamics

Nothing seems so much intriguing and complex as the interplay between political and social dynamics of this volatile Middle Eastern region – hemmed in by “intra and interstate polarisations”; fragmented by regional animosities and antagonisms among different political actors, exploited by the cult of political instrumentalisation of Islam, and accompanied by the multifaceted quest for pow-

er. The region demands exemplary efforts and seeks great promises beyond false dawn towards the goals of pacification and reconciliation of disputes.

The Hezbollah's Clout

Given the present Middle Eastern picturesque, it seems that Hezbollah seems to play a pivotal role in regional politics. Hezbollah's rise in the 1980s was precipitated by the heavy involvement of Amal—Lebanon's dominant Shiite political faction at the time—in the Lebanese civil war, which left a gap open for leading the country's resistance against Israel. Hezbollah emerged as a political movement when a group of South Lebanese Shiite clerics travelled to Iran for support during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

The group was formally established in 1985 but most observers believe key-founding figures cut their teeth in the deadly twin attacks on the American and French military barracks in Beirut in 1983. Although denying any involvement, Iran was likely the driving force for those attacks.

Relations with Syria have in turn been instrumental as the main access route for Iranian money and munitions. However, it is wrong to say Hezbollah is solely an instrument for Iran. It is also a political party with genuine support from large and poor segments of the Lebanese Shiite community and responds to their economic and political grievances.

Gradually moved by the impending circumstances, Hezbollah entered into domestic politics, giving its marginalized constituency a political voice, as well as providing jobs, welfare and security. The peak of the movement came in the 2006

war, when it was able to stand off Israel for 33 days and gained a reputation as a professional militia. In the aftermath, Hezbollah aimed to transform its military victory and the concomitant popular support into political influence. Soon it became the dominant part of Lebanese (pro-Syrian) opposition.

Hezbollah, although listed as a terrorist organisation by most countries in the international community, remains central to the future stability of Lebanon. But Hezbollah will only be successful in this role if it can extricate itself from the long and debilitating campaign in Syria. For Lebanon's and its own survival, Hezbollah cannot allow Syria to become its Vietnam. Hezbollah is peculiar entity as both a state- and non-state actor. It is balancing non-state activities such as providing armed forces, social services, and private telecommunications to its Shiite community within its role as a dominant part of the Lebanese government. Its armed forces are also heavily involved in the Syrian war, while Lebanon's formal policy is dissociation with the same conflict. In other words, it is a state within a state.

Forces of Schism in PLO's Camp

Seen ironically, nothing has caused so great damage to the cause of Palestinian freedom than the internal rifts and cleavages in the Palestinian camp – the growing vertical and horizontal polarization in The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The on-going ideological fissures between the Gaza dominated Hamas (took control of Gaza in 2007) and the West Bank dominated Fateh, have intrinsically undermined the Palestinian concept of unity. Israel has taken great advantages of

this political divide in the PLO's camp, thereby procrastinating the peace resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The present deal of reconciliation between Hamas and Fateh seems a mammoth challenge. There seemed effectively two Palestinian cabinets, one in Gaza and one in Ramallah. Both claimed to be the legitimate government. Each denounced the other as a coup against the legitimate government. However, Sufian Abu Zaida, a member of the Fatah Revolutionary Council, was reluctant to draw any conclusions.

"There is no agreed-upon description of the current events among Palestinian factions. These events are characterized by Palestinian organizations standing behind the confrontations and not in the forefront, such as in the first intifada in 1987 and the second intifada in 2000," he told Al-Monitor.

It seems remarkable that after more than 20 days since the outbreak of the violence, the Palestinian factions have failed to agree on a common name for the events. There has been no agreement on its nature or objectives, and no one knows how long it will last. Although the youth participating in it are largely affiliated with Fatah or Hamas, they might not be receiving any instructions from them. A unified political leadership might require factions to make concessions to one another, which would diminish their popularity before their organizational bases. Abdul Alim Dana, a leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), told Al-Monitor, "Forming a unified leadership is linked to the Palestinian factions' agreement on a common national program to confront the occupation, and there are ideas among some factions about the formation of this leadership,

but most of those participating in the intifada are not affiliated with political movements.” Sari Arabi, a Palestinian writer who regularly writes about Hamas, says:

“One can talk about four basic factions: Hamas, Fatah, Islamic Jihad and the PFLP, and when talking about their popular presence, one can see an enormous difference in terms of organizational and popular support. Since 2007, Hamas has suffered deep systematic marginalization, which paralyzed its ability to organize. Fatah, for its part, suffered for its affiliation with the PA and building a network of interests related to it. Consequently, this has resulted in an organizational slack, although its youth are participating in the confrontations through the student movement or based on personal motives.”

The Syrian Refugee crisis

The worst humanitarian crisis the world faces today after the Jewish exodus from Europe during the Second World War is the Syrians’ migration issue or the refugee crisis. Throughout the years since the 2011 Arab Spring protests, Syria has been ravaged by civil war and violence, resulting in half a million of its citizens killed. While the military of President Bashar Al-Assad battles a number of anti-government forces, the so-called Islamic State (also known as ISIS) has emerged and thrived in the subsequent chaos. Seeking to escape the violence from all sides in this conflict, millions of Syrians have fled their homes and their country, seeking refuge in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Europe. But the recent terrorist attacks across Europe have led to many countries threatening to close their bor-

ders. The Syrian refugee crisis seems to be an acid test regarding the future of the EURO-Med dialogue. Ironically, no Muslim majority state in the region has offered shelter to the refugees other than the European states.

The Cult of Political Instrumentalisation of Islam

While political actors in the region are fully engaged in a vicious vie to control ideological power, Islam, considered close to the hearts of the majority of the inhabitants of this region, becomes a vital force for legitimization and dominance. Due to different interpretations of Islam, different views, ideological in nature, on possible cooperation and coordination forms among conflicting political actors arise. While politics dominates religion in the Middle East at large, different, yet conflicting interests of actors play a significant role in heightening the contours of religious interpretations, hitherto altering power configurations and increasing sectarianism.

In the professed form, all states across the region of West Asia and North Africa, or Muslim majority countries for that matter, are democratic republics and monarchies. Yet in reality, they are dictatorships. The leading political constellations in these states maintained democratic props such as parliaments, regular elections, and political parties, while standing above these props installing their compliant supporters in key positions.

Alliances between political rulers and religious clerics have become the norm since the creation of nation-states in the 19th 20th centuries. In nondemocratic states, such alliances help the rulers to

achieve one or some of the following: Promoting congenial beliefs that serve the ruler, justifying violence, yet regulating it, legitimating the rulers' repressiveness, naturalizing the status quo, mobilising, yet persuading the public, denigrating any dissenting ideas, excluding and outbidding oppositional forces and obscuring social reality through mystification and mythology.

Against this background, a wide variety of deformations have emerged. Alliances between secular polities and conservative religious clerics resulted in a discriminatory Wahhabi conservative regime in Saudi Arabia since 1930s; a discriminatory Shiite conservative regime in Iran since 1979, a religiously-coloured Baathist regime in Syria since 1960s; a discriminatory Baathist regime in Iraq under Saddam Hussein since 1970s and later under American provisions since 2003 and a cynical Pan-Arabist regime in Egypt since 1950s etc.

In Saudi Arabia, opposing the repressive measures of the Saudi rulers, Senior Council of Ulama claims, is impermissible in Islam. Saudi grand mufti Abdulaziz Al-Sheikh stressed that the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud is keen to "save the interests of the nation and protect the Muslim communities from all evils". In other words, the king, anyone of them, becomes Saudi Arabia's Jesus the Saviour.

In Egypt, those who oppose the military rule lose Allah's blessings. "Egypt is a country that God Almighty mentioned in the Quran unlike any other," Ali Gomaa, the former grand mufti of Egypt said in a sermon. "We are an army that the Messenger of God [the prophet Muhammad] has blessed, and made its soldiers the best on the planet, and gave it his blessing."

Former Egyptian minister of religious endowment Al-Hamadi Abu Al-Nawar said in 2014 that the popularity of President Al-Sisi has reached heavens. "Allah,

**Syed Qamar Afzal Rizvi, independent 'IR' researcher-cum-writer based in Pakistan
 Hakim Khatib, editor-in-chief of the Mashreq Politics and Culture Journal**

In Syria, for instance, those who elect the sole dictator Bashar Al-Assad, Syrian Mufti Ahmad Badreddin Hassoun claims, go to paradise. In 2014, he said voting for Assad is an "enactment of prophet Muhammad's commandment". In 2013, he reiterated the sanctity of supporting Assad, calling it a "religious obligation" for all Muslims, inside and outside of Syria. Hassoun even issued a fatwa compelling Muslims to aid Assad against rebels, claiming that the prophet declared the "army of the Levant" to be worthy of his followers' support.

Archangel Gabriel and other angels love Al-Sisi", and that's why the whole world loved him when he spoke at the United Nation General Assembly in the same year. Similar claims were also circulated about the president under Mohammad Morsi, Mubarak, Sadat, and Nasser etc.

Conclusion

While having a voyage through the history of Middle Eastern turmoil, we may logically tend to form the observations that the present crises in the Middle East seem

to have their deep roots in the epochal socio-political rivalries-caused by both local and foreign powers. The end result is that there is a high degree of human rights violations and poor quality of life

richly reflected by the Syrian exodus crisis. The challenge of healing and preventing the sufferings of the people of this region cannot be possible as long as there is dichotomy in our attitude and policies.

Egypt's Regime Boosts Calls for Security Sector Reform

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi's brutal regime in rare gestures towards his opponents has twice this year recognized the potential street power of his country's militant, street battle-hardened soccer fans. In doing so, the regime has implicitly acknowledged that security forces rather than the fans were responsible for past violence and provided ammunition for calls for wholesale reform of law enforcement.

The Sisi regime's latest gesture came this week when for the first time in five years allowed thousands of members of the Ultras White Knights (UWK), hard-line supporters of storied Cairo club Al Zamalek FC who played a key role in the 2011 toppling of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and protests against subsequent governments, to attend an African Champions League match against Algeria's Mou-loudia Olympique de Bejaia better known as MO Bejaia.

The decision to allow UWK into the stadium followed warnings by the group and its arch rival, Ultras Ahlawy, the militant support group of Al Ahli SC, that they would defy the interior ministry's ban, implicitly risking yet another deadly clash with security forces.

UWK subsequently said that it wanted to prevent what happened in February 2015, the last time authorities agreed to allow larger numbers of fans into a stadium, when some 20 UWK supporters were killed in Cairo by security forces.

Last year's incident followed the death of 72 Ahlawy members in Port Said in 2012 in an incident that was widely seen as an attempt gone awry by the security forces and the military to teach the ultras a les-

son and cut them down to size.

Mr. Al-Sisi's first implicitly acknowledged the power of the fans in February of this year when he a day after Ahlawy's commemoration of the fourth anniversary of the Port Said incident phoned into a television program to invite the ultras to appoint ten of their members to independently investigate the incident. Ultras Ahlawy declined the invitation saying it could not be accuser and judge at the same time but kept the door to a dialogue open.

Mr. Al-Sisi's gesture was all the more remarkable given that Islamist members of the UWK and Ultras Ahlawy formed the backbone of student protests in universities and flash demonstrations in popular neighbourhoods of Cairo against the general-turned-president's overthrow in 2013 of Mohammed Morsi, Egypt's first and only democratically elected president. The protests were brutally suppressed as the regime turned universities into security force fortresses.

Scores of UWK members are being held in detention for violating Egypt's draconic anti-protest law. An Egyptian court acquitted in March a leader of the UWK, Sayed Ali Moshagheb, on charges of establishing an illegal organization, the UWK, while another court sentenced him

to a year in prison for attacking the Zamalek club house. Mr. Moshagheb has filed an appeal against the court's verdict. Fans have been banned from stadia for much of the last five years because authorities feared their ability to turn the pitch into venues of mass political protest. The regime made exceptions for international matches to avoid being blamed for a club or team's potential poor performance but largely ensured that militant fans or ultras were admitted at best only in small numbers.

The fact that the fans attended this week's match in large numbers without incident strengthens their argument that the burden of guilt for years of violent confrontations lies with the security forces rather than the supporters. UWK alongside other groups of ultras has long called for a lifting of the ban, noting that they have been attending their club's training sessions as well as competitions in other sports practiced by Zamalek without incident.

The UWK's ability to maintain its capacity to mobilize was demonstrated during the African Championship match. It persuaded the government and its minions in the Egyptian Football Association (EFA) to continue to keep stadia closed.

"It was expected that only 2,500 supporters would attend the game, but we were surprised when 8,000 people or more were in attendance. The high number of fans present was due to poor organisation at the entrance to the stadium," the head of the EFA's Competitions Committee, Amer Hussein, said after the match.

Mr. Hussein drew a distinction between international matches and domestic league games. "It's preferred to keep the crowd ban on the domestic games as I am not optimistic by the (return of this large

number of fans) Fans entered the game without tickets, Zamalek could be fined. There were no inspections for fans before entering the stadium, so there is still a threat," Mr. Hussein said.

Clubs as well as the national team suffer not only financially from the lack of ticket sales and reduced sponsorship as a result of the ban but also from the absence of the support of the fans, an important driver of performance.

"Zamalek were finally boosted by heavy fan support at home for the first time in months as they claimed a 2-0 home victory over Algeria's MO Bejaia to move close to a place in the African Champions League group stage on Saturday. Thousands of hard-core supporters, who belong to ardent fan group Ultras White Knights, took their seats in the northern stands of Cairo's Petrosport Stadium and feverishly cheered on Zamalek... Their presence appeared to spur on Zamalek's players who celebrated with the fans following the final whistle," state-owned Al Ahram newspaper and online news service reported.

The UWK's performance in the match against the Algerians takes on added significance given their troubled relationship with the controversial, larger-than-life chairman of Zamalek, Mortada Mansour. A politician and member of parliament, Mr. Mortada has accused UWK of trying to assassinate him and has unsuccessfully thought to persuade Egyptian courts to ban ultras groups as terrorist organizations.

The government and EFA's fear of the ultras and the fans' demonstrated ability to mobilize and control their ranks coupled with the recent brutal murder in Cairo of Giulio Regeni, a Cambridge University PhD student of the Egyptian labour

movement, highlights the need for wholesale reform of Egyptian law enforcement. Italy this month recalled its ambassador from Cairo amid widespread belief that the torture marks on Mr. Regeni's body had all the hallmarks of Egyptian security force practice.

Despite a few recent cases in which Mr. Al-Sisi has allowed law enforcement personnel to be put on trial for alleged abuse, there is little indication that he is willing to tackle a structural problem that in the view of Yezid Sayegh, a scholar of Arab security forces and militaries, can only be addressed in a transparent, politically more liberal environment.

"Increasing social polarisation in many Arab states over the last two decades has impeded consensus on how to restructure and reform policing. Marginalisation of up to 40% of the population, who live at or below the poverty line, has fuelled political challenges, in turn subjecting entire social segments to targeting by official security bodies. Furthermore, the determination to crush dissent affects the urban middle classes, which might otherwise be the strongest proponents of security-sector reform in this area. Both Egypt and Syria are prime examples of this," Mr. Sayegh said.

James M. Dorsey

Senior fellow at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore

Positive Action in Yemen Yields Positive Results

If any one area is a microcosm of the chaos in the Middle East, it is Yemen. Here, as across the region, Islam has been at war with itself, as the deadly rivalry between Saudi Arabia's Sunni fundamentalist ruling family, and Iran's equally uncompromising Shia-based Islamic revolution, played itself out. Nowhere was the fault-line between the Shia and the Sunni traditions of Islam more obvious – and nowhere was it more blurred, as self-seeking interests cut across it.

Who is fighting whom in Yemen? There are four main principals: The Iranian-supported Houthi rebels; the lawful president, Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi; AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula); and IS (Islamic State). To these might be added Yemen's previous long-serving president, Ali Abdullah Saleh who, forced from office, still aspires to play a leading role in his country's affairs. Joining the fray one year ago was Saudi Arabia, which intervened both militarily and diplomatically to beat back the Houthis.

The Houthis, a fundamentalist Shia group, take their name from Hussein Badreddin Al-Houthi, a revolutionary leader who launched an uprising against the government in 2004 and was killed by the Yemeni army later that year. The organization's philosophy is summarised with blinding clarity by their flag, which consists of five statements in Arabic, the first and the last in green, the middle three in red. They read:

**"God is Great,
Death to America,
Death to Israel,
Curse on the Jews,
Victory to Islam".**

The Houthis have long been supported by the élite Quds force of Iran's Revolution-

ary Guards, which has kept them supplied with weapons and other military hardware. As a result they overran large areas of the country, including the capital city, Sana'a. In addition the Houthis were in alliance with the Yemeni security forces that remained loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Saleh, although a Sunni Muslim, seemed intent on maneuvering a return to power in collaboration with the Shia-affiliated Houthis. With Saleh's help, the Houthis eventually controlled most of the Yemeni military, including its air force.

A second main player is President Hadi and the government he led from February 2012. Hadi had been deputy to President Saleh who, facing widespread protests and life-threatening attacks, finally – and very reluctantly – left office and transferred the powers of the presidency to him. Hadi took over a country in a state of chaos, and when the Houthis captured the country's capital, Sana'a, in September 2014, Hadi failed to broker a deal with them and resigned.

With the Houthis installed as the interim government, Hadi fled to Aden, and from there to Saudi Arabia. He arrived just about the time of the first Saudi air-strike against the Houthis. The Saudis, exasperated by Iran's continued support for the Houthi rebels, had decided to come to the

aid of Yemen's beleaguered president. A subsequent Arab League summit endorsed the Saudi intervention, and no less than ten Middle East states agreed to unite behind Saudi Arabia to form a fighting force dedicated to defeating the Houthi take-over in Yemen and restoring President Hadi to office.

A third major force in Yemen is the spin-off Al-Qaeda group known as AQAP (Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula). Led by Nasser Al-Wuhayshi, a Yemeni former aide to Osama Bin Laden, it was formed in January 2009. Although a totally Sunni organization, its long-term objective is to topple both the Saudi monarchy and the Yemeni government, and to establish an Islamic caliphate on jihadist lines in the Arabian Peninsula. So AQAP opposes both the Shi'ite Houthis and Sunni President Hadi.

Finally among the principals in war-torn Yemen is the recently established Yemenite affiliate of Islamic State (IS). Although IS is just as Sunni-adherent and just as fundamentalist as AQAP, it marches to a different drumbeat, and seeks to eclipse the Al-Qaeda presence. It therefore opposes not only the Shi'ite Houthis, but also the Sunni AQAP, the legitimate Sunni President Hadi, and the anti-Houthi Sunni alliance led by Saudi Arabia.

Despite the Saudi bombing campaign, the Houthis at first continued their advance into government territory, and as a result, the United States increased logistical support, intelligence and weapons to the Saudi campaign.

Now, thanks to the unremitting efforts of the UN Special Envoy for Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, a ceasefire has been agreed in Yemen to take effect on April 10, a year or so after the Saudi-led mili-

tary intervention. Arab countries, convinced that the Saudi's positive action in Yemen has borne fruit, have welcomed the UN mediator's success in achieving a ceasefire, and his proposals for following it through.

Ould Cheikh's plan is based on the Gulf Cooperation Council's initiative of 2011 which led to ex-President Saleh's resignation, and to giving the Houthis the chance to participate in the government. Ould Cheikh's plan, which is supported by the United States and Russia, among others, involves a new round of peace talks between the rival sides to take place in Kuwait beginning on April 18,

"Yemen for long has been a battleground for non-state actors," asserted a recent editorial in *Khaleej Times*, a Dubai-based newspaper covering the United Arab Emirates, "especially Al Qaeda. And now Daesh is also in it. The talks should primarily focus on converting the ceasefire into permanent peace, and rebuilding the country." The paper believes that a real *détente* is in the offing between the Saudi Arabia-led coalition and the Houthi, who have reportedly been swapping prisoners ahead of their scheduled formal talks "The warring parties must give peace a chance," it pronounces, hoping that extra-territorial forces will take a back seat and allow the people of Yemen themselves to overcome the crisis.

"We in the Arabian Gulf," writes Saad bin Teflah Al Ajmi in *The Peninsula*, Qatar's leading English daily, "must realize that Yemen had become our problem, and that we must not leave it prey to civil wars, conflicts, poverty and Iran. A Gulf "Marshall Plan" is much needed for Yemen – for the sake of the people of Yemen and, equally important, for the well-being and security of the Gulf countries."

Wise words. It is pretty clear that the right long-term solution for Yemen is political reform, followed by a sizeable financial investment funded by the Gulf States. If the peace talks scheduled for April 18 yield this result, Yemen's long

agony could soon become just an unpleasant episode in the history of one of the oldest centres of civilization in the Middle East – a peaceful, fertile country described by the ancient Greek geographer, Ptolemy, as "Happy Arabia".

Neville Teller

The author of the book "The Search for Détente" (2014)

Atheist Perspective on Fundamentalists' Terror and Anti-Muslim Rhetoric

Days after Paris terrorist attacks, in which 130 people killed; a mob of extreme rightists beat a 17-year-old Muslim boy to death in the southern French city of Lyon. Violence begets more violence. Today in the United States after the San Bernardino shootings, in which Islamist extremists killed 24 people; and in Europe after Brussels blasts, anti-Muslim rhetoric is as virulent as had never been before. Are we stuck in a vicious cycle?

Religious extremists use pre-existing societal fears and divisions to recruit others into their fold. But the kinds of terrorist attacks they carry out also exacerbate these same social divisions, and western policies have been throwing oil on the flames. Bombing the Middle East while at the same time rejecting millions of refugees – because there might be Islamist individuals among them – plays more into the hands of those trying to radicalize these people.

How do we break this cycle? As others have remarked before, nothing scares extremists as much as our unity.

Muslims around the world have publicly denounced the mass murder committed by organisations calling themselves Islamic. Muslims often argue that those who perpetrate terrorist attacks cannot be considered Muslims. An atheist myself, I think it is too easy to postulate that these extremists have nothing to do with religion. Extremism is an inherent danger of every religion.

And to be completely honest, I have to admit that this potential for extremism may well extend to each set of ideas to form an ideology. That certainly doesn't exclude atheism. Anti-religious bigotry is rife among atheists. An atheist sense of superiority is very widespread even

though it has already been used to justify terrorist acts like torching of churches and other murders. One example for the latter can be the shooting of three young Muslims in Chapel Hill in California at the beginning of this year.

Realizing that our atheist "ideology" is possibly as flawed as the religious ones we are attacking, it is important to be able to take a step back from the fray. While the separation between state and religion can "certainly" be achieved, atheists' aim cannot be to convince everyone of the rational invalidity of religions. This would be an impossible task. Atheist criticism of religions is valid, but it should be noted that atheists could sometimes have very strong emotions about religions. What atheists have to acknowledge though is that many people all over the world feel spirituality. To many believers, atheists' opinions don't sound much different from a Muslim chiding a Hindu for believing the wrong thing or a Hindu belittling a Christian for their faith and so on.

Communist regimes around the world have tried to enforce atheism in societies from top down. Although they had some success, they have never fully extirpated religion anywhere. While many atheists feel absolutely no religiosity, it is one of the recurrent and fundamental truths about humanity across all societies – on all continents and in all epochs – that a

segment of any population will avow a sense of spirituality. That includes some modern and highly educated societies, in which atheism has become the norm. Moreover, there are simple psychological reasons for why people will again and again turn to the concept of gods or a god, such as having to deal with death and grief.

When having encountered extreme violence, it is a natural and intuitive reaction for many to withdraw into their shell – their religious or ethnic community. By implication this often means differences with others are accentuated. Yet as it has often been affirmed by the more perspicacious commentators, the only way we can truly fight terrorism is by embracing each other across all segments of society.

In a situation when some label themselves Muslims and then inflict the worst kind of violence against others under that name, we should give more space to progressive Islamic thinkers to express themselves publicly. Constantly demanding of ordinary Muslim citizens to express disdain for these terrorist acts and distance themselves from the penetrators is merely

humiliating. Instead, we need to highlight the efforts others are making anyway. We need to point to the scholars stressing the peaceful and enlightened sides of Islam in their writings.

On the one hand these progressive Muslim thinkers are doing important work for the *Ummah* (the Islamic community), constituting a rallying point for Muslims to turn to when looking for broad-minded interpretations of their faith. On the other hand these intellectuals act as representatives of their faith to non-Muslims. The female figureheads are important since they go against the stereotypical picture of the oppressed Muslim woman, which is so often manipulated in the West.

In violent times like ours Muslim feminists and queer Muslim thinkers should be regarded as essential links in our society. Some excellent reformist Islamic scholars I can think of are Rafia Zakaria, Ayesha Chaudhry, Leyla Ahmed, Asifa Quraishi and Amina Wadud. We should accord these women as much limelight as possible.

Ilham Bint Sirin

Freelance journalist and blogger of the Middle Eastern Tales

Our Long Story in Syria

In collaboration with the Human of Syria Initiative, brave, yet broken people have a chance to tell us their long story. Here is Hassan's.

When I graduated high school, I was moving between Idlib and Aleppo.

I've dreamt of studying at the Faculty of Information and Programming Engineering since my childhood. I made that dream a reality but when the revolution began, I sacrificed my dream.

The story began when I first saw orphans crying and mothers grieving. My story began when I witnessed suffering that we had only seen in movies and dramas.

The great exodus of Syrians began as they tried to escape the flames with their children and their dreams.

Some of my friends and I got together and started volunteering to help displaced people in the northern provinces up to the Turkish border. We wanted to help ease the pain of those who felt the bitterness of loss, displacement and homelessness. But there weren't many volunteers because everyone is afraid of getting arrested and beaten by the regime security forces.

I put everything I could into helping these people, and now I live on the Syrian-Turkish border, away from my family without any time to take care of myself or do my own things.

I always hope to see my parents at the

border, but it's tough to cross the border and the work doesn't make it easy. My brothers aren't in a safe situation either, and they have to worry about constant shelling.

Now I'm working in a charity organization with greater resources, and I do a lot of different tasks including relief work documentation.

The documentation starts by pictures with our mobile phones to show the suffering of the people. The next step is to work on helping them and getting tangible results in cooperation with different organizations and associations.

Now I'm doing what I want—meeting the people suffering and feeling pain.

When I meet with the wounded I understand their pain because six of my brothers have been seriously injured. When I see the displaced, I remember my house to which I can never return.

I don't want to only experience peoples' pain without doing anything. So that's why I work in humanitarian aid. I provide food and medicine and help to build schools for kids whose schools had been bombed. I also work on psychological support.

Helping people to relieve their pain and see a smile on their faces brightens up this dark world and our dark nights.

Hasan Moussa, 21, from Edlib in Syria and currently lives on Syria-Turkey borders

Where Is LGBT Community in the Arab-Muslim Majority World?

A report of the Academy of Science of South Africa titled “Diversity in Human Sexuality: Implications for policy in Africa” has just been published where it affirms that homosexuality is a natural human sexual behaviour. It is NOT at all a harmful disease as some people claim. It was also indicated that assumptions such as therapy led parents to make their children heterosexual, gay couples direct their children to homosexuality, or that homosexuality is contagious are simply wrong. Rather, sexual diversity makes societies richer and it is time for tolerance to settle once and for all.

That said, tolerance often takes some time to complete its formation. While science is making continuous progress on the subject to accurately report to the public answering such questions, mentality takes some time to change as it is the case in Arab-Muslim majority societies.

Attached to religion, traditions and customs, Arab-Muslim majority societies have long demonstrated difficulties to accept anything out of the ordinary. Homosexuality is one of them. It is a taboo, about which nobody dares positively speak other than the LGBT community.

This small part of society advocates on a canvas trying to change the look of those who rebuke. LGBT community in Arab countries attempts to fight against homophobia and injustice through Facebook pages, associations, magazines, stories and all other means that might make their voices heard. But the road is still long – very long.

To fight this “curse”, heterosexual justice is never tired of taking so called

“individual perverts” and putting them in prison for infringement of moral disorder. This was the case for Lahcen and Mohsin, a Moroccan couple, who were imprisoned based on the Article 489 of the Penal Code. Another example to mention is the Moroccan magazine, Tel Quel, which has recently published an article entitled:

“Should we burn homosexuals?”

The content of that article clearly calls for brutally murdering homosexuals. Nobody lifted a finger to stand against such an outrageous call. Despite the fact that the Ministry of Health called for Morocco to decriminalise homosexuality following incessant demands of Moroccan and foreign personalities to end its discrimination toward the LGBT community, homophobia rate nevertheless remains high. This is also the case in Tunisia.

Fresh out of the shadows, Shams, the first Tunisian LGBT organisation to be legalised, has been a target of several homophobic critics. TV programs were organised trays, radio broadcasts condemned and newspaper articles were

written about it. In short, everyone was debating about it. Of course, the topic was discussed in a negative way. Rare are those who handled the issue scientifically and called for tolerance and acceptance of others. Tunisian media, unfortunately and scandalously, didn't help, but rather categorised homosexuality as a perversion disease by inviting notorious homophobes. This escalation by media outlets encouraged more hatred against LGBT community in Tunisia.

Yet, the community is active and trying to look for solutions to make their voices heard without being discriminated. A small gay pride march was organised by the World Social Forum in March 26. It was not happy news for homophobes. For them, Article 230 of the Penal Code should be implemented to eliminate this scourge. Aside from the fact that the majority of Tunisians believe homosexuality is a mental illness and they openly make jokes about it, there are many who call for murdering them, as was the case of Imam, Nabil Ben Younes, on a radio station. He said that homosexuals should be thrown off buildings or burned alive. This was a very heart-warming statement coming from a religious person.

The case of Egypt is the most severe. According to many people, homosexuality does not exist and should not exist. And to prove this, Egyptian police hunt homosexuals in social networks using famous mobile dating applications such as Grindr. Policemen pose as gays, chat with other gays, meet up with them after taking their phone numbers, and

voila! Gays are shipped directly to prison for contempt of heterosexual norms. Let's not forget mentioning the Egyptian journalist Mona Iraqi, who was pleased to have contributed to the protection of her country by helping the police to close a gay sauna after a long investigation on the subject.

The only exceptions in the Arab region are Lebanon and Jordan. The Lebanese LGBT community is quite visible. The Helem association is regarded as a reference, a model and an icon. It still hosts a pride march and is considered the spokesman of minorities. Activists wear no masks, instead, they defend their rights, face uncovered and verbally demand that Article 534 of the Penal Code to be repealed.

As for Jordan, few people know that homosexuality is legal. No law discriminates them. There is even a magazine called Mykali, which defends the interests of the LGBT community. A status every Arab gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender dreams to have in their own country. However, this dream can end at any time. Indeed, the lawyer Tariq Abu Al-Ragheb sued the US ambassador in Jordan, Alice Wells for encouraging the dissemination of a perverse culture during the commemoration of World Day against Homophobia (May 17).

Moreover, the event of May 17 has been controversial and was the subject of debate in media and in the Jordanian Parliament. Some say there have been calls for the police to stop this scourge, others are afraid that politicians might take the stage to set up an article criminalising homosexuality. Yet there is good

M. Kh. and A. D.

Journalists and administrators of the Lesbian Diary Page

news for the LGBT community of Arab-Muslim majority countries.

The Jordanian Prince Zeid Ra'ad Al-Hussein elected as the High Commissioner for Human Rights said in his first statement that homosexuals should be protected against any aberrant act and inciting discrimination. A glimmer of hope lights for the LGBT Arab community even if the battle seems to be very difficult.

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