RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM & RADICALISM

The drive to prevail over religious extremism and radicalisation must start with a dialogue on what set in motion the conflict in the Middle East. Understanding the religious premise of the extremists and radicals is just as vital as knowing how their global network and violent strategy have managed to break into the borders of their targeted countries. Study indicates that many Islamic scholars agree with the assessment that the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan are slowly developing into a war of ideas that will serve as a catalyst for the globalisation of religious extremism if left unchecked.

There is an urgent need to address the existing rift between western and eastern cultures. Understanding Arab culture and the culture of Islam is the first step in bridging the religious divide that the West currently faces. The West must get to know the people of Islam and the cultural imperatives of the religion. The worst mistake anyone in a decision-making position could do is to make light work of the effort to understand Islam. For many, the distractions of globalisation, urbanization, and transnational terrorism cloud the reception of those with the greatest need to listen. The failure to understand the nature of Islam permits the radicalisation of Muslims worldwide while blinding the rest of humanity to a solution which hides in plain sight. The solution must include a closer examination of the influence Islam has on its community of faith. Before the world can build an effective strategy to neutralize the extremist ideologies that underpin the global extremist movement, it must first commit to understanding Islam as it is practiced and observed by Muslims today.

The need to understand religious civilisation as a key factor of change in the Middle East is further evidenced by the failure of international efforts to effectively engage religious leaders with any measurable consistency. Strategies for dealing with religious leaders have tended to be vague and hasty at best. Scholars of Islam take a slightly different approach to the issue. They characterise the ongoing war of ideas as a lack of western understanding regarding religion and the role of indigenous religious leaders. These misunderstandings centre on the lack of knowledge of Islam, the Quran, and the religious faith of Muslims, which is in direct contrast to the liberal interpretations taken by astute extremists with Islam and the Quran. Muslims are not convinced that the secular humanism the West is offering is the right solution for followers of Islam.

International bombings and the continued conflict in the Middle East have sent scholars, planners, and senior leaders worldwide scrambling to harness the influence of Islam on the

Muslims and leaders in their communities. It also appears evident that not many diplomatic strategists predicted and even fewer military planners were prepared for the significant role several Islamic leaders have established in the ongoing conflict. Osama bin Laden, Ayatollah Sistani, and the late Abu Musab al-Zarqawi each demonstrated their ability to impede progress or influence change within the Muslim community. Understanding this type of religious influence on all aspects of change in an Islamic society is critical to the stability of the region.

The demonstrated influence of the Grand Ayatollah Ali Husseini al-Sistani became clear when he issued a number of fatwas to direct participation in the voting process. When the Askaria Shrine was attacked, the Iraqi Shi'ite prelate, once again, stepped in with a different type of authority. He spoke of the need for Shi'ite Muslims to defend themselves with armed, religious militias if the foreign forces and the Iraqi government cannot. This magnitude of influence by religious leaders implores additional questioning. Were the foreign forces and civil planners aware of the Ayatollah's influence prior to the fatwas being issued? Were strategic planners aware of his span of control prior to arriving in theatre? Finally, what are they doing to bring the prelate aboard now? It appears lessons were learnt rather belatedly.

An improved understanding of the Islamic rule of law and how Muslims interpret the Quran is imperative to the successful bridging of the cultural gaps. Western values, including individual and religious freedoms, are not natural fits for the culture of Islam. Young boys in Iraq, for example, grow up with religion. They end up in the mosque, learning from the Imam; depending on the interpretation, they learn moderation or extremism, and in between the two, there lies an abyss As a result, more and more Muslims are answering the radicals call to arms which has led some observers to accuse the Islamic clergy of booby-trapping minds and exploiting the state of frustration suffered by the Muslim youth to perpetuate violence.

Religion and influential religious leaders continue to play a critical role in shaping global strife and reconciliation. Whether destructive or constructive, religious leaders, organisations, and institutions often influence the direction of conflict-prevention and post-conflict reconstruction efforts. Religious groups are typically deep-rooted, mature organisations with independent resources to shape conflict-prevention and reconstruction efforts from the grassroots to the international level. The broad range of activities carried out by religious actors in conflict-prone settings demonstrates both the significant threats they may pose and the great opportunities they represent. These organisations are

invaluable if effectively utilized. They are uniquely positioned to help or hinder evolving situations at the local level far better than any military organisation or secular relief effort.

The world watched the ringleader of the 7 July 2005 terrorist attack in London, his voice inflected with a West Yorkshire accent, preaching jihad in English. Al Jazeera aired the communique of 30-year-old Mohammad Sidique Khan, in which Khan explained why he helped murder over 50 of his fellow Britons on a bus and in the Underground. "Until you stop bombing, gassing, imprisonment, and torture of my people, we will not stop this fight," Khan declared. "We are at war, I am a soldier and now you too will taste the reality of this situation." The London bombings emphatically demonstrated the inroads made by certain ideologies throughout the Muslim world, especially the alienated Muslim diasporas in Europe. Attacks like these are further evidence that these creeds have evolved into a well-financed, complex, global movement.

The religion of Islam is undergoing a significant revolution due to the pervasive ideological pressures. The insurgency consists of people who draw upon a long tradition of extreme intolerance that does not distinguish politics from religion and distorts both. Extremists believe Islam is the only true religion and there is no room for interpretation. An insurgent believes that his immoral acts of violence are moral and that he is on the right path to God.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, we are currently witnessing a spiritual tug-of-war between Islamic Hirabah (terrorist) and the West-led foreign forces to win the hearts and minds of the people who are in essence the living spirit of Islam. This conflict is not limited to improvised explosive devices, traffic checkpoints, or door-to-door searches. This war is about regional stability, failing nation-states, and religious ideology, a war unrestrained by conventional conflict with a reach that extends to incidents like the recent caricaturing of the Prophet, whereupon terrorists and global extremists rallied thousands in defense of yet another perceived attack on Islam. This perceived threat perpetuates the radical extremists' cause and serves to lengthen an already protracted conflict between east and west.

Overtly, extremist terror is carried out in the name of religion; yet, the terror imposed upon the world provides neither salvation nor solutions. Clearly, there is a plethora of useful lessons to learn concerning the values, beliefs, and cultures of Islam, to include those of radical extremists. An enhanced understanding through increased debate and open dialogue about the nature of religious extremists will better assist policy makers to deal with these issues. And at the core of it, the West must implement a moral, just policy towards

the Middle East.