

Extremism in Muslim Societies:

Addressing the Roots and Re-framing the Image*

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The dramatic violent events in several Arab states and some parts in Africa are portraying a distorted image of Muslims and Islam.

The answer is multi-faceted. "Extremism" - which has currently been linked to the militant *salafists* in the Middle East and North Africa - is actually an outcome of many factors.

This paper is based on the **hypothesis** that:

Religious extremism cannot be defeated by military actions and security measures alone, but could be eradicated by integrated efforts with highly coordinated policy interventions.

To examine these factors one should look into the environment: (a) the soil in which the seeds of violence are sown and grown; (b) who nourishes them?; (c) the ground on which the world media stand, frame images and portray the other – notably the Muslims.

A: What gives birth to extremism?

It is partly, (i) a reaction to injustice suffered by some Muslim minorities or sects in some countries due to the failure of the ruling elite along with lack of democracy and consciousness; and (ii) a reaction to the Western intervention in the Arab/Muslim countries. The latter is revealed by the wordings of the ISIS fighters when they come to slaughter one of the hostages.

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At domestic level, the militants believe that the governors of the Muslim countries are corrupt, secular and do not commit to Quran and *Sunnah*. The society in Muslim countries has deviated from the values and teachings of Islam. So they target both – the ruling elite as well as the society. At the foreign level the extremists believe that the West should stop intervening in Muslim countries.

The extremists – as organized in such forms as the ISIS – are fighting at two fronts or two enemies: the “infidels” (*Kuffar*) as represented by Americans and other European or Western countries at large; and those in the Muslim societies who have deviated from the true teachings of Islam. Boko Haram in Nigeria represents a good example of the latter. They kill Muslims doing prayers in mosques. Their enemy also includes those who cooperate with them – those who joined their allies or take side with the invaders. The Jordanian pilot, Al-Kassasba, is a good example.

Terrorism in the Arab world and the Middle East is partly a reaction to the Western policies towards Muslim states. The cartoons mocking Prophet Muhammad outraged the Muslim world. Al-Qaeda’s Affiliate in Yemen claimed responsibility for the attack on the French weekly *Charlie Hebdo*, early January 2015, which resulted in 11 deaths and several injuries. The 32-year-old man who killed four people at kosher grocery store in Paris in January 2015, pledged allegiance to the Islamic State and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Speaking to camera in front of an Islamic State flag and denouncing the U.S.-led aerial campaign against the group, which controls broad swaths of Iraq and Syria. “You cannot attack us and expect nothing back in return,” explained one of the Militants, Coulibaly, who was killed by the police on January 11, 2015.¹

According to the Militants French is part of the coalition bombing the militants of the Islamic state. So it has to pay the price. This gives explanation to all attacks made by these militants in different areas. All incidents are justified as a reaction to what is being done by the US and its allies in Muslim states. Al-Kassasba case is only one example.

When a German Muslim scholar was asked about terrorism and Islam he said:

Who started the First World War? Are they Muslims?

Who started the Second World War? Are they Muslims? Who killed about 20 millions of Aborigines in Australia? ... Who sent the nuclear bombs to Hiroshima and Nagasaki? ... Who killed more than 100 millions of Indians in North America? ... Who killed more than 50 millions

¹ *Foreign Policy*, January 12, 2015.

of Indians in South America? ... Who took about 180 millions of African people as slaves and 88% of them died and were thrown in the Atlantic Ocean? ...First you have to define terrorism properly ... If a non-Muslim does something bad, it is a crime. But if a Muslim does the same, it is terrorism!

The one who slaughtered the Japanese hostage in Iraq in January 2015 is British. Although El-mwazi belongs to Arab family, he grew up in Britain since he was 6 years old. The West is full of crimes and sporadic incidents of explosions. The Westerners are not “angels”. The Muslim societies, like the Western and other societies of the world today, suffer from such actions. We are all disturbed by extremism and terrorism.

However, our problem with the West lies in generalizing the bad deeds and misbehavior of the few and taking it as a ground for ‘unfair’ judgment. This wrong criterion is part of this West’s misperception of the Muslim society and misconception of Islam – building up a concrete misunderstanding of the Muslim world. So a distorted image has been shaped about Islam and the Muslims – who constitute one fifth of the world population (1.5 milliards). Hence, the core of the challenge here is to correct this image. A great effort is needed to reframe the image of Muslims in the world public opinion. Mass media is the machinery through which this could be accomplished.

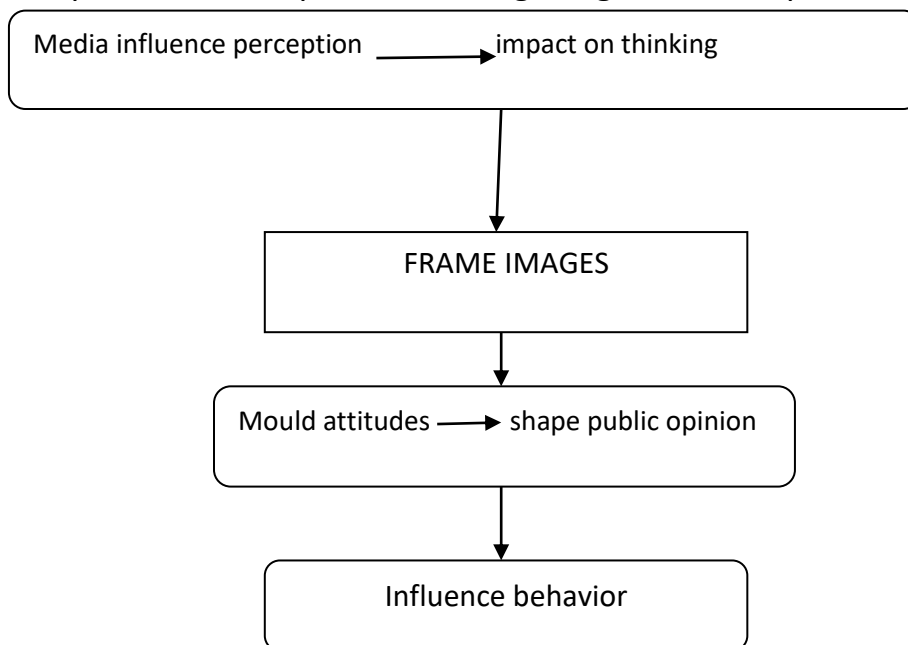
Envisaged as partly a reaction to inside policy mistakes as well as foreign intervention, it is advisable – a part from security measures - to address the problem through three integrated approaches: media, politics as well as a strategy for dialogue with the West.

B. The dilemma of the image:

Today, with high sophisticated techniques, the media have become more powerful than decades ago. They have greater role in agenda setting and greater influence on policy making, and more influential in shaping public opinion. This influential role of the media takes place through ‘framing the image’.²

² An analytical technique of framing was developed by social psychologists (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1991; Gitlin, 1980) to study and explain the role of the news media in defining issues for the public. Several studies suggested that the concept of ‘framing’ is now more or less established as a field in mass communication studies. Entman argued in an often quoted, relatively recent definition of framing, “is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described”. Lippmann describes the social and political images by labeling them as “pictures in our heads” (Mughees, 1991, p. 8). “Image” is a subtle mental integration of various attributes that the person projects and that people perceive and interpret in light of their beliefs, values and expectations (Renato Taguriri, cited in Nimmo, 1978, pp. 43-44). An “image” is everything a person has learned relevant to a situation and to the acts that occur within it... and image is a tendency composed of thoughts, feelings, and inclinations. Images change constantly with experience (p. 226). Boulding (1969) describes various factors that play an important role in the formulation of national image in international system... The national image is essentially a *historical image*—that is an image which extends through time, backward into a supposedly recorded or perhaps mythological past and forward into an imagined future. The more conscious a people is

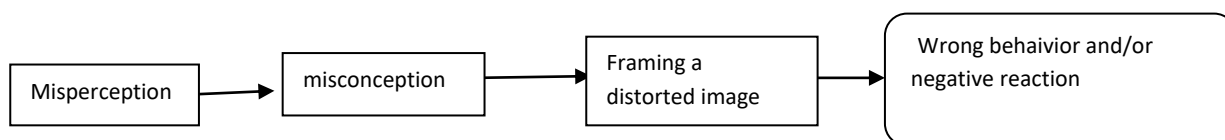
The process and impact of framing image can be depicted as follows:



It follows that

- To eradicate, or alleviate, extremism you have to change the behavior.
- To change the behavior, you have to change the culture.
- To change the culture, you have to influence thinking, perception and concepts.
- To do this you have to manipulate the media.

Also: misperception created by the media produces misconception. This is expected to frame a distorted image and lead to misunderstanding. This, in turn, will end with wrong behavior or negative reaction:



of its history, the stronger the national image is likely to be. For further details see:
Canadian Journal of Media Studies, Vol. 2(1), p. 132 – 136.

This misbehavior or negative reaction may result in some sort of resistance, violence, terrorism, or disturbing a country's foreign relations.

To study the impact of the media on shaping a distorted image, one should analyze the background (or factors) that influence Western journalists and writers. In general, media men are prisoners of their culture. This entails a glance at the Western perception of and attitude towards the Arabs and Muslims, and the image of the Arab/Muslim in the Western mind. Hence, the central question here is: how does the West envisage the Arabs and Muslims?

It differs, whether or not, the West perceives the Arabs as a nation, a race or a mere bulk or conglomeration of countries that had shared one origin and history and now live in one geographical area – divided among themselves – but claim to be a nation. The stereotype of pre-concepts the West bears about the Arabs has built up, it may be assumed, a dogma: that the Arabs are terrorists, barbaric and backward.³

Historically, the West overlooked the Arabs and Muslims alike. The West thought of Arabs as uncivilized and backward. It is more likely that the Western elites are confused or influenced by these historical misconceptions which rendered them a low opinion of the Arabs and Muslims: "Our confusion, however, is just the latest episode in a long history of confusion. Over the past fourteen centuries, Westerners have understood and misunderstood the Muslim inhabitants of the Mediterranean and the Middle East in many different ways. At different times of history, perceptions and attitudes have varied, as they have from place to place ... and somewhat it all has something to do with the way people of America feel about the Arabs today."⁴

The outcome of this historical misconception is a Western negative pre-judgment for Arabs and Muslims. Such traditional negative Western attitudes towards Arabs deluded the Western elites, intellectuals, journalists and writers. It seems that this Western confusion towards the Arabs has built up throughout the course of history and passed down to the present generation .

³ Abdu Mukhtar Musa, "The coverage of the Gulf War (1991) in the Western Media: content analysis of the US Newsweek magazine" (unpublished master thesis, Department of Political Science, University of Khartoum), 1994, p.30.

⁴ John R. Hays, "American Attitudes towards the Arabs: Perceptions and Misperceptions," in US-Arab Relations (proceedings of a conference organized by American Arab Council), Salt Lake City, USA, March 1985, p. 63.

A public opinion survey about American attitudes towards Arabs conducted by Mobil in October 1980 and December 1984 revealed that “negative attitudes towards Arabs were based on the conception of them as barbaric, warlike, treacherous, anti-Christian, undemocratic and of course unfriendly in varying degree.”⁵

It seems that the bad ideas Americans have about Arabs always cast shadows on the way the former see the latter, and subsequently, the way American media cover the events in the Arab world. This prior misconception which has accumulated through time has created what one may describe as a Western ‘dogma’ prejudice against the Arabs. This has developed some sort of anti-Arabism as well as anti-Islamism in America and have influenced some the Western policy makers and elites.

Another important variable is that we should take into account with regard to the Western approach towards the Arabs and Muslims is related to the White-man superiority over other races and nations. This implies the dominance of Western civilization in the world. The mass media is no more than one institution of that ‘superior’ civilization: “The Western mass media as one of the Western modern civilizational institutions is based the assumption of the qualitative superiority of the Western man over mankind ...The international media as a phenomenon of modern life is influenced by the Western civilization. Western mass media derive its philosophy, concepts, norms and systems from this civilization.”⁶

Edward Said in his book *Covering Islam and Orientalism* believes that “the American reporter covering the Middle East bore, in his sub-consciousness, the traces of his American identity or of the American establishment, this indeed means that the non-American or non-Western news media is, in the author’s words, ‘lacking (in their coverage of the Muslim world) in depth, balance, and perception.’ This is not only a problem, but also a serious dilemma, particularly for the news media of the Third World.”⁷

Moreover, some Arab intellectuals are of the opinion that Islam is singled out as the major danger to the West following the decline of Communism and the fragmentation of the Eastern bloc with its Warsaw Treaty: “... There is a comprehensive global mobilization against what is called Islamic fundamentalism about which news media exaggerate events

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Abdu Mukhtar Musa, *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷ Sami Kohen, “Problems of Covering the Middle East,” in: *Media Credibility and Social Responsibility* (proceedings of the 7th Media Conference, Tokyo, Japan, November 1984), World Media Association, Washington D.C., 1985, p. 270.

taking place therein.”⁸ So the fear of Islam has turned to a new peril that constitutes one of the factors that influence the Western attitude towards the Arabs and Muslims.

A Jewish newspaper (Yadout Ahranout), March 18, 1978, stated that “our mass media should always keep in mind that they constitute a part of our strategy in eliminating Islam from the battle, a policy which we have successfully achieved by the help of our friends over the last thirty years – an achievement that we should sustain by all means, including force, coercion and oppression.”⁹

Moreover, Ben Gorion, the ex-Israeli Prime Minister and one of the founders of Zionism that had colonized Jerusalem, held that “we are not jeopardized by socialism, revolution or democracies in the area, but by Islam – which has been revitalized by Islamic activists and fundamentalists.”¹⁰

Furthermore, Yugin Rusto, an aide of the late US President Johnson in 1960s, said: “America had no other option but to side with the Western countries and Zionism against Islam. If it did not do so, it would be a deviation from its own philosophy ... The goal of the West in the Middle East is to destroy Islamic civilization and the birth of Israel is part of this strategy.”¹¹

This background of the personnel behind the scene is significant for the analysis of the motives behind the trend and pattern of Western media coverage of the Muslim countries.

That was only one side of the theme. As the problem is multi-dimensional, so should be the approach. Media efforts should be supported by political measures.

C. Politics: the Quest for common grounds:

The greater challenge today is that we are not facing a pure military threat, but a powerful ideological trend. Left unchecked, these groups would redraw the map of sizeable areas in the world. They are influencing the thinking as well as the behavior. You cannot defeat them militarily. They combine between an organized warfare as well as guerrilla war. They are fearless. They like to die. They believe that if one kills or be killed, he will be rewarded with paradise. These concepts are being deep rooted in the minds of many people in the Middle East, North and West Africa. These groups – such as Al-Qaida and *Boko Haram* – are manipulating the deep emotions of religious believes which – if left to ignorant ideas with

⁸ Manar Al-Islam, No. 12, August 1991, p. 4. In: Abdu Mukhtar..., op. cit. p. 37.

⁹ Ibid, p. 5.

¹⁰ Al-Manar, ibid, p. 5.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 5.

improper understanding of the teachings of Islam, will continue to produce and sustain extremism, jeopardize social peace and threaten regional as well as international security.

At the political level comprehensive reform is needed. This includes the introduction of proper democracy that maintains justice, equality, freedoms, and preserves human rights. The proper application of Sharia also maintains these basic rights. These are to be supported by reform in the education curriculum to inculcate the moderate Islamic values such as the facts that Islam is the religion of tolerance, justice and peaceful coexistence. These are also to be supported by intensive programs of political socialization to make for advanced political culture to build up conscious political behavior.

The other side of the political approach is to build bridges with the West. However, this entails formulating a comprehensive strategy:

First, this entails self-criticism on the one hand, and renewing our discourse through which we could approach the West with a constructive dialogue, on the other.

Second, this, in turn, necessitates starting from the major points of convergence as a common ground with the Christian West. We should recall and remind Christians and Jews that our religions are revealed from one source, and that the three – Jews, Christians and Muslims – belong to one ancestor prophet – Abraham.

Third, hence, all Muslims through dialogue must involve in enlightening the international religious consciousness that religion is not a part in the political disputes and conflict of interests between the rich arrogant north and the oppressed poor south; and that the methodologies of Islam and Christianity share one spiritual attitude in facing all secular trends which aim at separating the content of faith from the human consciousness. The two religions prohibit injustice and arrogance from whatever source and they both advocate peaceful co-existence.¹²

Fourth, Muslims know a lot about the characters of Moses and Jesus and the values which they preach – as are mentioned in the Koran. To this end we should guide the West when dealing with an issue with those who represent the Jewish or Christian cultures. But most Europeans have ignored their religion and a Muslim may stimulate them if he addresses them on the basis of the ideological denominator of the religions of Book because they do not recognize Islam. So it is wise to adopt a gradual discourse in the context of the Abrahamian message for it is the common origin for all other

¹² Hassan Abdalla al-Turabi, *the Basis of Dialogue with the West*, Dirasat Efriqiyyah research journal, African International University, Khartoum, No. 12, 1995, p. 18. In: Abdu Mukhtar Musa, "The Political Barriers Between the Muslim World and the West: Means of Bridging the two", the International Journal of Muslim Unity, Volume 3. No. 2, December 2005, p. 21, the International Institute for Muslim Unity, International Islamic University, Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.

religions. A Muslim may not relate himself to Prophet Muhammad alone, and address them gently through this common religious tradition within this prophetic succession since Abraham.¹³ that the succession of all prophets is a mere renewal of the orchestrations of the same values and meanings but to different peoples and in different conditions. This is the methodology of Koran in the dialogue between Muslims and people of the Book in Surat al-Baqara where Koran outlined the defects of the religions of the Book and guided them to the basis of the Abrahamian religion which is Islam. Based on this fact, the Islamic discourse should be founded on this one prophetic chain started and spread and did not confine itself to one geographical location or time. It spread all over the Middle East, in Iraq and Palestine where Abraham brought up his sons and disciples who diffused his path (Sunnah); then to Egypt and Mecca where he left his heritage and successors too. Then Abraham, not like other prophets, was the first to extend the heavenly message. By doing so he started a clear and extensive historical dialogue. In that context he handed over the message to his sons who became prophets thereafter and followed suit. It is in this scientific context that we can approach the west which is fond 'universality'.¹⁴

Fifth, through this common religious denominator we can open their hearts to what we say. We introduce to them the story of prophet Moses who started his message in Egypt then went to other places – the same as Abraham did. Then we introduce the story of Jesus Christ as it is told in Koran to persuade the Christian who may be influenced not only by Judaism but also by Zionism and we say to him: you believe in Moses, David, Jesus as well as the Torah (the Pentateuch or the Old Testament) and the Bible. But the circumstances were not favorable enough for him to preserve his book properly because he was politically shaken up by expulsion from that area. Then he returned, then he was expelled for the second time. Thus we approach them from the angle of their own historical criticism.¹⁵

Then we talk about the development of the Abrahamian heritage which was renewed by Moses and the prophets who came thereafter as it is mentioned in the Koran and the Bible. Jesus was actually one in the chain of prophets and was followed by Muhammad as one in this prophetic succession. As Jesus came to correct the path and tackle the defects that have overwhelmed the religious heritage, Muhammad came to refine and revive it at a time where people became materialistic in explaining any phenomenon. This is because if religion is not renewed, it may die out in the people's

¹³ Ibid. p. 23.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 14.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 16.

hearts. For this reason there emerged in Europe the trend of Christian revivalism. Accordingly, there erupted the conflict between Reformism and Catholicism. "We should tell Christians that we do believe in the book of the Jesus Christ, but because of the language in which it was orchestrated, then its translation into Greek and Latin, distorted the original text."¹⁶ However, we approach them by affirming that Muhammad is one in this prophetic chain which communicated the Abrahamic traditions and lived in the similar cultural environment. Muhammad came to correct mistakes accumulated throughout the course of time and to address new problems and new issues.

D. Strategy of dialogue with the West:

If we are to design a comprehensive systematic strategy of dialogue with the West, we can adopt the following steps:¹⁷

First: Justifications for dialogue:

- a- it is a legitimate necessity: to convey the message and undertake the sacred mission (*al Amana*) because the principle here is the interaction for *dawa* (promulgation and preaching);
- b- practical necessity; imposed by the international reality which is characterized by interaction, communication and interdependence among nations, peoples, groups and movements – a situation that entails understanding the others and their reality as well as be aware of how to deal with them;
- c- a necessity for building the future of the nation: it implies understanding the goal of religion, embodying the spirit of faithful worshipping which prompts us to incorporate the gist of human experiences.

Second, for the issue of dialogue we have to look back to our history to draw lessons from past relations and contacts with the West. We can derive some experiences from the history of Islamic renaissance and the nature of our political discourse to benefit from the positive aspects particularly with respect to cultural interaction, civilizational interrelation and scientific reciprocal influence.

Moreover, we should also tackle our internal problems especially with regard to intra-Muslim disputes such as sectarianism and conflicts of *Madhahib*, inter-Muslim conflicts like those among the Muslim states, domestic political divisions as well as political instability. It is also significant here to plan for combating – or even eradicating – terrorism which constitutes the greatest obstacle in the dialogue with the West

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁷ Hassan Abdalla al-Turabi, "*Hiwar al-Eslam wal Qarb*" (Dialogue between Islam and the West), *Dirasat Efriqiyya*, Khartoum, No. 10. 1993, p. 23.

because the Western media portray a negative picture about Muslims today be generalizing this limited terrorist actions as if they are a prevalent phenomenon or common behaviour of all – or the majority – of Muslims.

These internal defects are negative points or weakness which should be addressed to formulate a proper discourse in order to approach the other from a solid ground and involve into constructive dialogue with the West.

We have to be aware of the rapid changes that have taken place in the world particularly those in the West. Now the Western world "is going into a new phase of dilemma. In the past it was engaged by such issues as the economic theories and policies, beset by partisan and class conflict and involved in how to design world policies."⁴³ However, today all that have come to an end, or about to. It is now beset by such issues as sex, crime, gay and entertainment in which it is lost. There are many sectors in the west now live in that vacuum which make them feel in a dire need of faith and feel significance of life. Therefore, "we have to plan for a comprehensive dialogue in which all our Muslim society is involved in addressing all classes of western societies."¹⁸

By so doing we will have a firm ground for dialogue and interaction with all European societies and approach them from various angles: cultural, security, diplomatic, political, and economic. Dialogue should penetrate all relations which we have to employ within a strategic context that serves our ends and constitute an integrated model to entice people by its example and action – not words. This entails that we should be powerful with a strong reasoning and logical argument so that the other would respect us and be encouraged to engage in dialogue with us.

Political reform combined with a strategy of dialogue with the West will help reframing the image of Islam.

Conclusion:

Today all of us – the Muslims, the West and the rest of the world – suffer from extremism. We are (all) victims of terrorism. So let us come together to work out a joint strategy to face this common threat. Let us come together to counter this common danger. These extremists who undermine security are few. But their peril lies in their influence over the minds of the young and the ignorant. They stir up deep feelings of the ordinary people of being endangered in their beliefs; of being victims of foreign intervention and of being subject to internal injustice, along with the spread of corruption and deviation from true Islam.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

So, let us think of addressing these factors on the domestic level to refute their justifications. They have the logic to convince the youth to carry weapons and recruit more adherents as far as these factors are still existent.

This paper recommends intense and high-level coordination by Muslim countries based on comprehensive and long-term strategy to be drafted by outstanding experts and scholars. The strategy is to be based on policy-oriented research to be conducted jointly by major research centers in the Muslim world; and to suggest short, medium and long-run programs to uproot the seeds of extremism.

The Strategy should basically include media plan to be worked out by experts in the field of mass media as well as scholars in political sociology, political communication, sociologists, educationalists as well as religious scholars and preachers (*Dua'at*).

Lastly, we have to think of such question as: who does finance these militants? From where do they get this sophisticated armory and high-tech devices?