



WINNING THE WAR OF IDEAS IN THE ARAB WORLD: A VIEW FROM THE UAE

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World Foreign Ministers have just met in Paris to decide how to defeat ISIS. But military action is only a small part of the strategy that they need because ISIS is above all an ideological movement, which gains its strength by winning recruits and sympathizers across the Arab world and beyond. So how can ISIS be defeated ideologically?

Although I am the UAE Ambassador to Moscow, I also see myself – first, as a liberal, in the positive and broad sense of the word; second, as an Arab who insists on thinking as deeply as possible about the Arab world; and third, as an individual. That's how I would like you to hear me: as a liberal, a conscientious thinker and an individual, not as a government official.

Why am I speaking about this topic today and why do I intend to speak on this subject in other places? Because I, and many others like me, are horrified by the violence shown by ISIS in the name of Islam and in the name of the Arabs.

ISIS has slaughtered its critics, including many among the Sunni Arab community, which it claims to defend. It strangely and arrogantly claims a right to rule over all Muslims everywhere in the world. It has persecuted minorities which every decent Muslim individual should cherish and protect. It's not unique in that respect, because other Islamist movements have done much the same. And indeed one of the points that I shall make in this lecture is that other Islamist movements, including the Muslim Brotherhood, also need to be confronted.

Most coverage of the reaction to ISIS has been of the West and its Arab allies marshaling a coalition to defeat ISIS militarily and eradicate it from the territories it claims. But ISIS is much more dangerous as a model in the minds of my fellow Muslims. It is the shell into which any substance can be inserted. And it is this aspect of ISIS that must be fought above all. I have five proposals for how to do so.

They aren't exhaustive by any means. I am not focusing on the measures that need to be taken to stop individuals from funding ISIS; and I am not going to set out economic or political measures, such as concessions to Iraq's Sunni Arab minority or policies to reduce unemployment. That's not because I think these are unimportant; but there are others who can discuss them better than I can. I want to talk about the ideological debate within the Arab world, and how it can be turned against ISIS and other Islamists.

This is a debate primarily to be had between Arabs. And it should be done in terms that Arabs understand. Worrying whether Western society or media will like what we say distracts us from speaking to each other. When we

talk of moderate Islamists, or Islamic democracy, it is often clear that we are not talking to each other, we are talking to an imagined Washington. These are not coherent concepts – at least not yet, and they are not high up the real list of priorities.

So as a Sunni Muslim, as distinct from a Sunni Islamist, what are my concerns? I, and many of my compatriots, are deeply concerned about:

1. Our moral state
2. The violence within our Arab Muslim society
3. Our theological leadership
4. The role of laymen and people of goodwill in redirecting the path of the Arab and Muslim worlds
5. Jobs and the economy

These five themes - morality, tolerance, religious moderation, inclusivity and good government, or what I will call technology - are critical ones for undermining the appeal of militant Islamist movements like ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood.

We should:

First, point out that although they say they will make Muslims more virtuous, they do not. Their prospectus of forced morality and imposed religious norms is not just illogical, it is also bound to fail.

Second, we should highlight that their program of violence and intolerance is in contrast to the historical Caliphate. It is a reductive sketch of Islamic history.

Third, we should tackle the issues of the Muslim clergy who either back the extremists and license their violence, or do not interest themselves in their pastoral duties to Muslims in, and of, the 21st century.

Fourth, we must tackle the question of how our societies should be guided – what the right path is to a better future, with inclusive government and security for all citizens.

Last, we must show that Islamists govern badly. They govern badly not just because of inexperience but because their ideology prevents them from governing well.

“ISLAM IS THE ANSWER”: WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

Islamists are fond of saying that “Islam is the Answer.” This was a motto promulgated by the Muslim Brotherhood, and also by Shi’a militant movements in Iraq. Many of the rest of us have asked: what was the Question? Islam is our religion, and it is a deep and powerful influence over our lives. And for many of us it is the answer to our spiritual and existential needs. However, when it is reified by Islamists and used as a promotional tool for their lust for power, then we need to push back.

One way of pushing back is by asking why Islam is the Answer to specific questions, and why specifically in their hands. The Islamists’ explanation never moves beyond vague assurances that all will be good when we implement Islam. But that still does not answer the question why a purely technical or administrative or biological, or societal problem will be solved through piety. In fact, it seems that utilizing our religion in this way is a disservice to it. The focus of our religion is ethical, moral and spiritual in its essence. Deciding pension fund politics is not the realm of religion. Nor is economic development directly the realm of religion. There will be ethical matters to take into account – principles of fairness, equity, justice – but it is too much to say that there is an Islamic answer to these matters. The truth is that there are many answers to these questions.

I often find it interesting that corruption is cited as one of the vices that will be stopped by implementing Islam under the Islamists. We are told that pious people will hold positions of responsibility and that this will bring corruption to a halt. This is wishful thinking at best. Why not try some tried and tested administrative procedures that will ensure enough transparency to make corruption much more difficult to hide?

My worry is that we are asking too little of our great religion. When our holy text and our moral principles can be directed towards personal regeneration, we instead demand of it to convert the publicly pious into the morally infallible. We can more easily and quickly build administrative systems that will perform this function without regard to the moral worth of the administrator and be of greater service to our fellow citizens.

What is also worrying is to see religion's noble goals being used to justify evil and cowardly means. It is used, for example, to glorify violence, which is something that ISIS's religious propaganda does all the time. And it can be used to cover up another kind of violence – the violence of bribery, corruption and exploitation. It is also a kind of psychological violence that we do to each other when we enforce religious standards on each other to the point where we monitor each other's mental states searching eagerly for moral weakness.

TOLERANCE VS. VIOLENCE

ISIS and other movements are reading history incorrectly and selectively when they claim to be the modern successors of the early Muslims. There is no doubting the power of the claim that they make. Let me focus on ISIS for a moment. Although both ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood are Islamist movements, and fundamentally hostile to the kind of Arab society that I want to see, ISIS is more worrying for me than the Muslim Brotherhood. Why? The Muslim Brotherhood is a more cult-like organization, a fraternity of sorts with all sorts of tests and demonstrations of absolute loyalty to a religious-administrative leadership. It is a closed system that is mired in its own mythmaking and worldview. The Muslim Brotherhood is a modern hierarchy that is not reflected in the early history of Islam.

ISIS, on the other hand, is an open system. It is violent and makes an appeal to the basic elements of Islamic history. ISIS intends to replicate the spread of Islam by the sword throughout the region – in a kind of replay of 7th century history. It is a seductive approach that makes use of many commonly held references. It claims the forms of ancient Islamic history for itself in a way that many Muslims recognize, including me.

ISIS recalls the Caliphs and the battles where so many early Muslims proved themselves or sacrificed themselves to defeat the enemies of Islam. ISIS appeals to this sense of re-enactment and this is where its true danger lies. They have articulated and referenced a misleading and one-dimensional narrative that, unfortunately, has wide purchase in our region. Why? Because of institutional pressure that refuses to examine and re-examine the implications of poorly understood beliefs about our religion, our history, our present societies and the ways in which we can improve our lives.

Here, we Sunni Muslims need to ask ourselves some critical questions: Why would the form of an Islamic State and the declaration of a Caliphate so excite certain populations on social media? Do they know what they are excited about? Do they understand the difference between the form of an announced Caliphate and the substance of daily murder in the name of our dear religion? Do they realize that ISIS would likely behead them if they were under its rule?

Do they know enough history to realize that in the time of the actual Caliphate, the Caliph Yazid was said to spend his evenings in long and friendly discussions with his Christian Minister, who later became a Christian saint? Or that the Caliph al-Mansur sought advice from Hindu astronomers before choosing the time to lay the foundation stone of Baghdad?

ISIS's so-called Islamic State is a perversion of history – but it is not a completely alien proposition. The set of actions ISIS has taken, and the set of references they make, are very well known in the Arab world - at the very least. And that makes it particularly dangerous. This is where our religious authorities need to step up and devise narratives that attract a new generation of young Arab Muslims. Let me turn now to the question of those religious authorities, how they behave and how they are constituted.

THE NEED FOR NEW RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

I believe in free speech: indeed, I am exercising it here. Yet there are limits to it. Religious leaders, who claim in effect to speak for God, have great power to sway people's minds, especially the minds of those who have not been taught to think for themselves. It is unconscionable in my opinion that a cleric with such authority as Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who lives in Qatar and has great influence with the Muslim Brotherhood, can be allowed to say as he did in 2009 that Hitler "put [the Jews] in their place" and that "the next time will be at the hands of the believers." In the context of Syria, though obviously the Assad regime has done many terrible things to the Syrian people, those clerics who have encouraged viciously violent Islamist groups like ISIS have done a great disservice to the Arab world and to humanity.

But perhaps militant clerics give license to these groups because of their own insecurity. Perhaps, in turn, this insecurity is a result of their apparent inability to engage with the questions thrown up by modernity, telecommunications and globalization.

One of the key problems of the Muslim Brotherhood and ISIS narratives is that they are one-dimensional, disconnected, reductive sketches of Islam's history and that of the modern world. However, this is precisely why they appeal to existentially disenfranchised young Muslims. If our traditional religious authorities are unable to recognize that their grasp of Islam's narrative in the minds of our youth is slipping, then it is for laymen and people of goodwill to take up the baton.

Today we need to think in terms of Islamic structures and institutions that are more responsive to people's existential needs; and of how they can be of service to the people, rather than how the people can be of service to their visions of glory. We need religious leaders who show a concern for the well-being of each and every individual in their community. We need a religious leadership that thinks about the modern world, that understands political science and economics, that is well-read in the social sciences, that speaks multiple languages and that looks at young Muslims, Arab or not, as individuals to be educated and cared for, not as cannon fodder in an Islamist onslaught against modernity.

DEMOCRACY OR INCLUSIVENESS?

I don't see democracy as the answer to the Islamists – and would rather focus on inclusion instead. Here's why.

When I saw the protests in Tahrir Square in 2011, and protests against Ben Ali in Tunisia, and uprisings against Gaddafi in Libya, I and many of my friends wanted to believe. I wanted to believe, as the Western press did, that these protests were an expression of the noble aspirations of the Arab people, a flowering of the demand for freedom by the oppressed of the region, and the end of the Arab exclusion from history.

Now in 2014, we see that Tunisia is unsettled and that the question of Islamist control of government is still undecided. Libya is in great trouble with the proliferation of arms and militias threatening the unity of the state. Egypt experienced its non-coup and is at the heart of the battle between an ideological Islamist worldview and a worldview that is more inclusive in scope. Yemen does not make the headlines these days, but the economy is suffering tremendously and various low level conflicts continue to tear at the fabric of the country. Syria is the shame of the Arab world with over 200,000 dead and a merciless and brutal civil war that has morphed into the specter of radical and violent religious extremists dominating more and more territory.

What has gone wrong?

First, despite the virtues of democracy, it can be divisive – much more so when it is coupled with Islamism. It can be a puzzle to people new to democracy to understand that winning the election does not mean that the minority has no further role to play and no rights that remain. Many Islamists will welcome democratic elections on the basis that we are all Muslim societies and that therefore the most Muslim of parties will win. And win again, and again and again. The point of designing political systems that are genuinely just and stable involves the expression of wider and deeper principles such as the protection of all, winners and losers, majorities and minorities, men and women – so that the chance of renewal always remains a possibility, and so that people can still live in peace and security irrespective of their personal religious beliefs.

Islamist election winners in Egypt and Iraq were not willing to make any such concession. Yet in our society, which is still divided along regional, tribal, ethnic and religious lines, there are many minorities. Faced with the threat of suffering from arbitrary power, many are willing to fight when confronted with the prospect of democracy, as they would fight any change that may threaten their freedom. It is no coincidence that ISIS was born in Iraq, which is an electoral democracy of just this kind – one which is run by Shi'a Islamists. Those who benefit from dividing the country on religious lines, and can then appeal to their home base for votes, have no interest in treating citizens on an equal basis regardless of their religion. It is partly because of Islamist movements that democracy in the Arab world will be so difficult to implement.

It is also because of the lack of institutions that can rise above partisan politics. When every Minister who is elected, in a country like Iraq, evicts the existing staff and replaces them with his or her own partisans, the stakes in an election are raised very high. Given the social, cultural and educational realities of our part of the world, many of us recognize that an introduction of electoral democracy that precedes the development of effective, impartial institutions may exacerbate tribal and sectarian divisions. Even the voting in something as apparently innocuous as a regional poetry competition in the UAE often takes place along tribal lines. This does not mean that western style democratic processes will never happen; simply that overnight changes in civil relationships are fraught with dangers.

On the other hand, the Islamists demand that we all obey the utterances of a shadowy Spiritual Guide and his business-savvy henchman. Islam is the Answer to all questions, and I emphasize this ALL Questions - and the conveyor of those Answers is a person whose infallibility is never in doubt. What happens when such a movement is elected? How can it ever be expected to yield up power peacefully? When is the last time that any movement which saw itself as having a God-given right to rule, stood down in favour of an allegedly “godless” opposition?

So the challenge is to find a way to include all citizens and give them a voice, without risking the ripping apart of the social fabric.

GOOD GOVERNMENT, TECHNOLOGY, AND UNFETTERED INQUIRY

I'd like to address the issue of good government: how to deliver jobs and security. Let me address this first through the lens of technology.

The Arab and Islamic world has an illustrious history with technology. The Muslim world produced some remarkable technological achievements, in the areas of mathematics, astronomy, geography and medicine.

Modern-day Islamist movements are not as open-minded. They want to accept the technological product but refuse the premises upon which the technology came into existence. We are always in search of a pure and idealized past where ethics, morality and the path to the Good Life were clearly set out and where the right choices were always clear.

Introducing an environment that would allow for us to flourish technologically means that we would have to open the doors to inquiry. And the best inquiry is free inquiry. Given that our current theological masters are not ready yet to face the puzzling questions of science and modernity, they prefer to dictate against the inquiry, but to accept the product of the inquiry. And thus we have the injunction against innovation, invention, importation of foreign and alien ideas. What is the area of application of this injunction? Who decides its limits? The reality is that this injunction may be of limited scope in theory. The way it is taken up by various groups in the Muslim world is less selective.

This is a point I would like to emphasize, as it is critical for the future of the Arab world. Technology is the product of inquiry and is premised on the creation of a free space of inquiry. Without the freedom to inquire, to question, and to challenge, we have no ability to create. However, inquiry cannot be limited to those areas permitted by religious authority. Inquiry quickly escapes its master's grip – just as radicalism does. This inquiry is limited more by religious injunction and ideologists of religion than political censorship.

Does this attempt to limit our interaction with the ‘immoral’ world of inquiry mean that we will be saved from evil? No. In fact, we are doubly disadvantaged.

Firstly, it puts us in a place where we will find our lives produced and manipulated by other people's design of technology.

And secondly, we lack the ability to create it ourselves. We want the product but reject the principles that led to the creation of the product.

The spiritual guide of the Muslim Brotherhood said recently that God had produced the West to provide Muslims with technology. And thus there was no need for us to create our own. At the very least, this is an incoherent approach.

It seems that when it is a Western invention, we do not have the moral burden of the consequences of the product. We are merely its weak and weakened object.

What does make sense is that this approach will increase the tension in the Arab and Muslim worlds between those who insist on going backwards in time, and those who are in the present time. This tension is reflected in the battle between radicalism and progressive thinking; and between those who want time to stop still, and those who recognize that life is about mastering change. This is not a moral issue; it is simply the logic of contrasting existences.

As well as physical technology, let me speak briefly about political technology.

You will be pleased to know that the time I have spent in Russia has been put to good use. As I am out of the way of home politics, I enjoy the privilege of letting my mind wander.

The Russians often refer to political technologies in their public discourse. This is interpreted in the West as a euphemism for political manipulation. This may or may not be the case, but it did prompt me to think of political systems as intentional systems – by which I mean systems that are intended to produce certain outcomes.

So rather than dividing the world up into those that are democratic and those that are authoritarian, I began to see political systems more in terms of the outcomes they were likely, or, in some cases, guaranteed to produce.

So one interpretation of the demonstrations in Tahrir Square is that the protesters were demanding political change – the fall of Mubarak, democratic elections, the victory of youth over age.

Another view of the events says that people were demanding firstly, social justice, secondly, an end to corruption and thirdly, jobs.

What they got was the Muslim Brotherhood.

I was puzzled by the enthusiasm that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood demonstrated in the pursuit of political power in the 2012 Presidential elections. I simply could not understand what they wanted to do with political power in case they won. They already had tremendous social and cultural power through their compelling though reductive and vague narrative that Islam is the Answer to any problem facing individuals or the nation.

In order to better understand this matter, I looked at the election platform of Morsi and compared his platform to those of other parties. My reading of the Muslim Brotherhood's agenda was the following:

1. They wanted to correct the moral state of the Egyptian people first, and then that of others later.
2. They wanted to enforce Sharia law.
3. They wanted to root out corruption.
4. They wanted to ensure social justice – however vaguely defined.

How did they propose to achieve all of these aims? The moral state was to be corrected with personal piety, Sharia law was to be enforced by a pious Parliament, corruption was to be eradicated by the piety of government administrators, and social justice was to be the outcome of overall and generalized piety.

This is not a caricature of their approach. It is the legacy of years of insisting that Islam is the Answer, without delving into how and why piety, Sharia law, prayer, devotion and the range of religious exercises that are central to our lives as Muslims, was going to translate into administrative and economic excellence. Moral excellence, perhaps, but in a state of failed economics and disastrous public services.

In conclusion, piety and holiness are key to our lives as Muslims, but they are not systems or technologies of governance.

THE UAE MODEL

Having spoken about five themes that must be emphasized in the fight against radical Islamism, I would like to say something about my own country and its political system.

With the events of the Arab Spring and the loud calls for immediate democratization or Islamization, many of us in the UAE asked ourselves the following question: did it make sense to risk or sacrifice what we have achieved up until now, for an idealized democratic polity, or for an Islamist state, either of which could unleash destructive forces that we know are within us?

Why do I say this? For two reasons:

1. In establishing the Emirates, our leadership overcame divisions and antagonisms that were deeply rooted in tribal, nomadic culture. These features of our society are never too far from the surface. This is a feature common to all Arab societies. The fact that we overcame these obstacles of distrust and competition for limited resources and built an economic success in our region is to be commended.

Once upon a time, we in the Emirates could have been like Libya today – a war zone of militias and Islamists and smugglers and terrorists. But we in the UAE are the product of a judicious understanding of what we have within our historical tribal selves and what we could become.

Changing our system by a radical reordering of existing relationships is highly likely to lead to people falling back on traditional allegiances of family, tribe and blood to the detriment of the social cohesion we have today.

2. We also know what happened in country after country in the Arab world. Extremists are better at grabbing power than moderates who take an accommodating system for granted.

Rather than being radical and revolutionary, our approach has been to uncover our own potential, and to reveal to ourselves what is already present.

I will go further, and propose that key features of the UAE system can form the basis of positive development in other parts of the Arab world. Why? Let me return to the five themes with which I began this talk: morality, tolerance, moderation, inclusivity and technology.

Firstly, I would say that in contrast to the Islamists' relentless and often hypocritical focus on moral virtue, we recognize human weakness. Though we set high standards for ourselves, we recognize that perfection is an attribute of Allah and not people. There is a remarkable readiness to forgive errors and move on. This translates into the rise of the entrepreneurial class amongst Emirati youth, as well as a lenient approach to other people's moral conduct. We believe these matters are a choice for the individual. We do not engage in moral witch-hunts.

Secondly, I would say that the UAE's rulers are decidedly tolerant Muslims and definitely not Islamists. The Islamist assumes that he is right and that you are wrong. The President and founder of the UAE, HH Sheikh Zayed, God rest his soul, made clear his opposition to movements like IS:

“In these times, we see around us violent men who claim to talk on behalf of Islam. These people have nothing whatsoever that connects them to Islam. They are apostates and criminals.” He also rejected the Muslim Brotherhood’s agenda. He met with the Brotherhood’s leaders in the 1970s and refused their proposal to set up an office in the capital Abu Dhabi. When asked why he responded: “If you are the Muslim Brothers, then who are we?” In our approach, all are included - as long as they include others. This key feature translates into the allied notion of tolerance. If we are prone to error, and we do not exclude those who are different, this expresses itself as a deep tolerance and acceptance of other ethnicities and other faiths. We have over 190 nationalities in the UAE and over seventy churches. Mosques are full and churches are full.

Thirdly, the UAE takes action to suppress religious hatred and extremism by maintaining rigorous controls on the content of clergy’s sermons. It also hosts the International Centre of Excellence against Violent Extremism (“Hedayah”) in Abu Dhabi. The Centre is engaged in capacity-building and best-practice exchanges in countering all forms of violent extremism. In order to further promote peace in Muslim communities, the UAE announced on 19 July 2014 the establishment of the “Muslim Council of Elders,” an independent, international body of scholars from Muslim countries, promoting the core tolerant values and practices of our faith.

Fourthly, our system is both consensus and leadership driven. The UAE does have some explicitly democratic mechanisms allowing for formal voting and voicing of opinion. However, more significantly, the UAE has social mechanisms and platforms for debate, analysis, polling, idea-testing and consensus-building. These are not immediately visible to the outsider, but they are there and they exist. Going forward, there will inevitably be a need to further develop and refine these indigenous systems of signaling. And that will be done, and done by us. Consensus is allied with leadership. Historically, the leaders of the tribes of the region were men who had proven themselves with natural leadership abilities. It is the combination of communal consensus and strong, decisive leadership that we move as a society. And as a society, we face the uncertainty of the future, not as a source of anxiety and an excuse for autocracy, but rather as a challenge and with determination.

Fifthly, we are not afraid of technology. We focus on getting things done, in a manner that can be measured in the welfare of our people. This means that we focus on technological innovations like:

1. Rule of law.
2. Efficient judicial systems.
3. Administrative effectiveness, measured encouraged and rewarded by the state.
4. Schools and a broad education.
5. A functioning and adequate health system.
6. Airlines that connect us with the world.
7. Government as a platform provider.
8. An economy that is open to outside investment, and is freeing itself from dependence on oil.

These are some of the key features that explain the success of the UAE over the last forty odd years. The first step involves leadership with a vision for what is possible, and the second step is the vital work of building and reinforcing trust between key members of society. This work of trust building cannot be underestimated. We want our fellow Arabs to engage in the same step-by-step approach that we have followed always reaffirming and demonstrating goodwill to each other.

TOWARD A NEW ARAB WORLD

In my analysis, I tentatively put forward the idea that we in the Arab world are pursued by a variety of fundamentalisms, by rigid ideas and preconceived notions of what people are like, and of what the outcomes should be. And it is these dogmas that distract us from building our societies today, as well as tempt us with instantaneous

Utopias that we may want but need to work towards.

ISIS is the proof that we all needed in Sunni Islam to recognize that there are, and must be, different interpretations and that laymen of goodwill are obliged to enter the fray. Laymen need to wrestle back Islam from the embrace of violence. ISIS makes a mockery of all the values that we believe and know Islam to embrace.

There are three thoughts I want you to take away today:

1. We in the United Arab Emirates believe wholeheartedly that the Arab world has the capacity, and the knowledge to create a path of intellectual and economic productivity. And that violence is the least effective means of achieving what the silent majority wants – an Arab world that is at peace with itself and confident in its position in the community of nations.
2. Most young Arabs prefer our model to that of the Islamists. The 2014 Arab Youth Survey showed – not for the first time – that when asked what country their countries should emulate, Arab youth name the UAE above all other countries – above the US and UK, above Turkey and Iran.
3. We Muslims, and the Muslim communities of the Arab world in particular, have within us the capacity to reformulate our approach to ourselves and to the rest of the world, and thereby to share the beauty of our great religion with all.

Thank you.

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