

Obstacles to 'contemporary religious reform' in Syria and mechanisms to overcome them

Strategic study
Dr. Mohammed Khair Al-Wazir

المؤسسة السورية للدراسات وأبحاث الرأي العام

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Obstacles to 'contemporary religious reform' in Syria and mechanisms to overcome them

Author: Dr. Mohammed Khair Al-Wazir, Syrian researcher and thinker

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The issue of religious reform and renewal has been the subject of much debate, research, and scrutiny throughout Islamic history. However, this subject is old and new at the same time given the different issues that are addressed in this regard from an era to another as well as the different research and discussion tools that usually change according to time and place.

At the level of the recently raised issues in this regard, we can say that the issues of "extremism and terrorism" and the relationship between religion and the *secular* state are at the forefront. Other longstanding issues include the status of women, the current sectarian divide among Muslims resulting in bloody, devastating fighting and wars, among many other issues.

It should be noted that, today, in the age of mass communication, Muslims are faced with many if not all these issues combined after they had to address them one by one in the past. This is yet a new difference that can be added to the issue of religious reform and renewal and that should be taken into consideration in order to better sort out the priorities of reform and develop the appropriate methods for this purpose.

We will therefore discuss in this basic research the issue of religious reform and renewal in Islam along with its contemporary issues within three perspectives:

1. Static VS dynamic in Islam
2. The place in question, i.e., Syria.
3. Mechanisms of raising the issue. This issue is usually raised from political and social perspectives, not from a purely religious one. All the issues raised stem from political, social and economic needs, which are connected to religion in one way or another. This connection makes it imperative that the subject of religious reform and renewal be elucidated and further clarified.

I. The concept of religious reform and renewal in Islam

First and foremost, no one can claim that Islam needs to be reformed or refined as what Allah has revealed and clarified is perfectly above reform and refinement.

“Today I have perfected your religion for you, and have completed My favor upon you, and have approved Islam as a religion for you.”¹

Rather, what needs to be reformed or renewed is the Islamic discourse, not the Islamic religion, which is static. Muslims’ collective discourse and their understanding of religion have been marred by accretions and misinterpretation of the Quranic texts through history. This can be attributed to various reasons, including ignorance and, more often, to attempts to serve political or economic interests.

The issue of religious reform in Islam, therefore, should be addressed from mainly political, economic and social perspective as many of the newly raised issues are subject to personal tendencies and interests that do not have anything to do with religion.

In other words, what we need today is religious reform advocating an enlightened Islamic discourse that is consistent with reason and establishes moderate Islam without extremism or compromise.

The current Islamic discourse in fact greatly differs from the true Islamic religion. For example, religion is not hostile to women nor does it degrade her. Prophet Muhammad said: “Woman are counterpart of men”². There are many Quranic verses and verified hadith, sayings by Prophet Muhammed, calling for respect for women and their rights in Islam.

Neither does religion contradict with science. On the contrary, religion encourages the pursuit of science and knowledge as it highly commends scientists and knowledge seekers in dozens of occasions in the Quran and Sunnah. It suffices to say that the first verse that was revealed to Prophet Muhammad was: “Recite in the name of your Lord who created.”³ Allah also said: “Say, ‘Are those who know equal to those who do not know?’ Only they will remember [who are] people of understanding.”⁴

The most serious issue are blatant attempts by individuals and countries to link violence and terrorism with Islam with the aim of serving their own interests. Indeed, the Quranic text and verified Sunnah encourages only tolerance, kindness and morality.

Quran contains over 120 verses encouraging tolerance and renouncing the use of violence against Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Moreover, the same thing applies to dozens of hadith. Examples of these verses and hadith include:

“And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds.”⁵ “Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes - from being righteous

¹ Quran 5:3

² Sunan Abi Dawud 236

³ Quran 96:1

⁴ Quran 39:9

⁵ Quran 21:107

toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly.”⁶ “Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors.”⁷ “The true Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hands the other Muslims are secure.”⁸ “The most beloved of the people to Allah are the most beneficial for the people.”⁹

To sum up, Allah authorized fighting in Islam in only limited situations and under a set of strict conditions, most notably in self-defense and to defend freedom of belief, i.e., religious freedom. This is a legitimate right that was guaranteed not only by Islam, but also by all heavenly religions and worldly laws and norms, including International Law and International Humanitarian Law.¹⁰

Much of the criticism directed at Islam can be attributed to misunderstanding resulting from associating a wrongful acts with the religion of the person or group who committed that act. This criticism is also aimed at serving economic and political interests of groups or countries.

Two things must be emphasized in this regard:

- 1- Religious reform is required in every age and time. It does not mean the refinement of religion or the modification of its static texts, but the refinement of the Islamic discourse which has been marred by accretions and deviations as well as misunderstanding of the texts throughout history.
- 2- Islam renounces violence and calls for tolerance, justice, morality as well as freedom of belief and respect for women and their rights. Misdeeds and transgressions must not be associated with Islam on the pretext that they were carried out by Muslims or those who allege to be Muslims.

II. Goals of religious reform in Islam:

Religious reform seeks to achieve two primary goals:

1. The fight against extremism and fanaticism by making dynamic rules and teachings of Islam subjected to the static ones. There are many Islamic teachings that vary according to time and place. If rulings in Islam remained the same throughout the centuries, they will cause hardship and harm to the people, which is contrary to the primary purposes of Islam and Islamic teachings that are based on the mitigation and elimination of harm according to Hanafi jurist Ibn Abidin.¹¹

Hanbali jurist Ibn Aqeel says: "Politics is what really serves the wellbeing of the people and keeps them away from corruption \ evil even if Prophet Muhammad did not do so or even it was not revealed upon him."¹²

⁶ 60: 8

⁷ Quran 2:190

⁸ Book 18, Hadith 2

⁹ Silsilah Ahadeeth As-Saheehah of Shaykh Al-Albaani No. 906

¹⁰ Article 51 of the United Nations Charter

¹¹ Mohammed Amin Ibn Abidin – Collection of Letters (2/125)

¹² Alturuq Alhakmia /13

Moreover, there are many verses and hadiths indicating that Islam is a religion of ease and that it came to prevent harm to people and help them serve their wellbeing. "Allah intends for you ease and does not intend for you hardship."¹³ "He has chosen you and has not placed upon you in the religion any difficulty."¹⁴ Prophet Muhammed also said: "Religion is very easy and whoever overburdens himself in his religion will not be able to continue in that way."¹⁵

2. To confront laxity and negligence of the fundamental, static teachings of Islam (compromise). This is based on giving the mind the authority and guardianship of the unseen and of what is beyond its grasp.

Thus, the religious reform that is needed today is the one that avoids extremism by alienation of the mind and the dwarfing of its role, which is not permissible. Islamic scholar Ibn al-Qurtubi says: "Verily, the preference was done through the mind which is the pillar of commissioning and by which Allah is known and His words can be understood."

At the same time, the desired religious reform goes beyond compromise and total reliance on the human mind. Had the mind enjoyed perfection and had been alone capable of recognizing and understanding all human phenomena and problems and finding solutions for them all, God would not have sent messengers and divine scriptures to guide people to the right path. Ibn al-Qurtubi also says: "As the human mind could not resolve the worshippers of all ambiguities, Allah sent scriptures and messengers."¹⁶

III. Obstacles to religious reform and renewal

Based on the above, one can draw up a general perception of the major obstacles that stand in the way of religious reform in general and in Syria in particular. They are:

1. The mixing between the static, fundamental teachings of Islam and the interpretations of interpreters and narrators of Hadiths, among others.
2. Speaking in the name of Allah or the Prophet Muhammad, which is not permissible. Interpreters of Islamic texts must ascribe their interpretations to themselves while presenting evidence from Quran and Sunnah. Another obstacle is the sanctification of the speech of people without enough proof or conclusive evidence. Imam Malik said: "Talk by anyone can be accepted when it contains evidence and dismissed when it does not, except the words of the man in this grave."¹⁷
3. The allegation of allegiance to one Islamic sect and the repudiation of all other sects, which is prohibited. All the people who perform prayers with their faces towards Qiblah and who recite the two shahadas, also known as the two testimonials expressing the declaration of faith, can hope to be redeemed and

¹³ Quran 2:186

¹⁴ Quran 22:78

¹⁵ Sahih al-Bukhari 39

¹⁶ Aljamie Li'ahkam Alquran (10/190-191)

¹⁷ Alsakhawiu - Almaqasid Alhasana

their faith can only be by judged by Allah. Prophet Muhammed said: "Whoever prays like us and faces our Qibla and eats our slaughtered animals is a Muslim and is under Allah's and His Apostle's protection. So do not betray Allah by betraying those who are in His protection."¹⁸

4. The old division of the world between Islam and a land of war, which is no longer applicable or legitimate today. Our world today has conventions that should be binding to people from all faiths and sects.
5. It is illegitimate to describe a class of people as a clergyman. Commissioning is general and for all people, while the distinction should be made between the educated and the ignorant people.
6. There is no legitimacy to spread religion among people by the use of force because "there is no compulsion in religion."
7. Differences of religion or doctrine must not used as a pretext for the initiation of fighting. Fighting can be only justified when it is aimed at self-defense and the defense of freedom of belief.

IV. The Current issues of religious reform

There are plenty of issues in the Islamic discourse that needs to be addressed today more than ever, especially in the current discourse in Syria. This discourse requires a thorough revision according to the criteria of the static and dynamic in Islam with a view to serve the interests of the people and the homeland and the prevention of harm. According to the well-known rule, "the warding off corruptions /evils takes precedence over bringing benefits."¹⁹

This research will discuss four major issues that need to be subjected to research and revision today in accordance with the standards that have been mentioned in the introduction.

These four issues in the Syrian arena today and the years-long war are in order of importance are:

- A. Extremism and terrorism
- B. Sunni-Shiite divide and sectarian war
- C. The question of religion and the state (Secularism and Islam)
- D. The issues of women

The research will address these issues from the least important from our point of view to the most important:

A. The issues of women in religious reform and renewal

Whenever Syrians begin any internal dialogue, whether they were Muslims from different sects, or when dialogue starts between Muslims and Christians, or any external dialogue with non-Syrians, a Muslim interlocutor, whether he is a specialist in Shari'a or in any other field immediately says: "Islam did justice to women and gave them their full rights. There is no any other religion that dignified women as Islam did."

This leads us to pose the following question: then why many Syrian Muslims unlawfully deprive women of the right to inheritance or seize some of it? Another one would say: This and other abuses against women do not have anything to do with Islam." There are many examples of this, some of which are illegitimate as in the example given above, while other examples contain various statements. These statements vary from hardline to

¹⁸ Sahih al-Bukhari 391

¹⁹ Al-Ashbah Wal Nazayir, Al- Suyuti (1/87). Qawaeid Al-Ahkam, Ezz bin Abdul Salam (1/98)

moderate with regards to certain issues, such as the right of women to work, take part in social activities, financial and economic transactions, and recreational and sport activities.

In fact, there is a need to clarify and recognize the truth, namely that there is a clear difference between women in the Quranic texts, and between women in jurisprudence. The jurisprudence of the public has stripped women of many of their rights. These rights must be re-examined and given back to women in order to guarantee their freedom and dignity as was stated in Quran and the verified Hadiths.

Thus, we as Syrian "Muslims" are today in front of two major challenges in this field, theoretical and practical:

1. The theoretical challenge:

It builds on the clarification of the religious truths of the Quranic texts that equated between women and men in many areas. It also builds on the fact the public has discriminated between women and men but in a positive way, at least in some cases. This clarification should be applied to reality and tailored with it in a way that appropriately corresponds with and conforms to the Quranic text.

This task falls on the shoulders of those in charge of Sharia schools and the many Syrian Islamic bodies at home and abroad.

2. The practical challenge:

This challenge is based on the task of looking for the executive mechanisms required to give women their rights and respect for their will and freedom without excess or negligence.

This task should be assumed by jurists, media outlets, researchers and thinkers through seminars, dialogues, awareness raising, education and practical activities hand in hand with specialists in sharia law.

Synopsis:

It is necessary to point out a very important point, which was mentioned previously by the Hanafi jurist Ibn Abidin. Many Islam teachings vary according to time and place. If rulings in Islam remained the same throughout the centuries, they will cause hardship and harm to the people, which is contrary to the primary purposes of Islam and Islamic rules that are based on the mitigation and elimination of harm\evil.

In other words, the place in question, i.e., Syria, has some peculiarity in many of the Islamic provisions, including the provisions on women, which differ from other places. The circumstances that Syrians today are going through must be taken into account as well.

It is also reasonable to conclude that this also applies to people. Views of Syrian scholars on matters of women and other matters in general are more progressive than the views of their non-Syrian counterparts.

B. Question of religion and state (Secularism and Islam)

This issue has in fact created considerable controversy since the end of the Ottoman Empire about 100 years ago. There is a need to highlight the differences between the concept of the state in the Islamic point of view and

the concept of the state from the secular point of view. Secularists believe in separating religion from government in order to establish a modern state.

We must point out two things in the European experience that brought them to embrace secularism as a system of governance that is based on the separation of religion from the state. They are:

1. Ecclesiastical institution controlling everything in life by a divine mandate.
2. Clerics and priests who, in this capacity, had total control of public and private lives of the people and who imposed authority over everyone.²⁰

The authoritarian practices of the Church and the clergy led to a revolt under the title of "secularism."

This does not apply to Islam, except to Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) in Shia Islam. In other words, In Islam people does not have authority over the society and its members in the name of religion and therefore the conditions that led to the rise of secularism in Europe and in the Christian world in particular are not present in Muslim societies.²¹

It should also be recognized that the term 'Islamic state' today has been greatly distorted in the hearts of Syrians, especially Syrian Muslims, after the emergence of models such as ISIS and other extremist groups that claim that they govern according to the Islamic system and in the name of Allah. These groups sought to establish a system of governance on the lines of the ones that prevailed in Europe in the Middle Ages.

These extremist ideology made Muslims in Syria believe that dictatorship is easier for them than systems of rule in which religion is used as an instrument of tyranny, dictatorship, and oppression. This ideology is quite the opposite of what the Quran said: "And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds." (Quran 21:107)

Synopsis

Syrians are today in dire need to engage in serious, constructive dialogue at the level of the elites, specialist and opinion leaders from the various cultural components and intellectual affiliations in order to reach general consensus leading to a solution and an end to the suffering of all Syrians. This dialogue must not be based on claims of infallibility by any side, but on the culture of tolerance and mutual respect and not on the culture of alienation and exclusion.

Despite the difficulty of the task in light of the bloodshed and proxy wars raging in Syria, these difficult circumstances must motivate us as Syrians to engage in serious, inclusive dialogue away from any authority. This dialogue is crucial to reach a solution and acceptable solutions to this thorny issue away from the secular perception of religion and from the specter of the Islamic state, which is now being associated with ISIS which presented a bad model for the Islamic state.

C. Sectarian divide and the Sunni-Shiite war in Syria

²⁰ Christianity, Ahmed Shalabi pp. 256-257

²¹ Mohamed Amara, The Islamic State between Secularism and the Religious Authority, pp. 50-60

There is no the slightest doubt that one of the biggest obstacles to the victory of the Syrian revolution and the achievement of the goals for freedom, dignity and peaceful change and the establishment of state that is bases on justice and the rule of law are the sectarian and takfiri discourse. The Syrian regime, which rejects any change, has promoted and encouraged such discourse among its opponents and loyalists alike. It was also encouraged by many external forces which saw the conflict in Syria as an opportunity to achieve certain geopolitical and economic gains.

At the forefront of these external forces is the United States, which claim to support the Syrian people in their struggle to achieve their legitimate goals. This was evidenced by President Donald Trump who accused his predecessor Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton of being behind the rise of the ISIS extremist group and the spread of chaos in the Middle East.²²

The United States also prevented supplying the Syrian mainstream armed opposition with advanced anti-aircraft weapons that are required to protect innocent civilians in Syria from bombings by the Assad regime and its allies. The United States took this decision under the pretext that such weapons could fall in "the wrong hands," which are the same hands that the US created, according to Donald Trump.²³

This sectarian, takfiri discourse, which was used to serve the interests of many sides except the Syrian people, should be confronted and subjected to religious reform. Syrians today should not be deceived to believe the notion that they are fighting Shiites or Alawites because they are "infidels" and "apostates" as this is contrary to the words of Prophet Muhammad. "Whoever prays like us and faces our Qibla and eats our slaughtered animals is a Muslim and is under Allah's and His Apostle's protection. So do not betray Allah by betraying those who are in His protection."

Synopsis

There is a pressing need in Syria today to revitalize the origin of the legislation of fighting in Islam, that is when it is aimed at self-defense and the defense of freedom of belief as a right that was guaranteed by all heavenly and earthly laws. Therefore, this sectarian divide in Syria and the use of it to fuel the fighting is unacceptable and illegitimate. This divide is detrimental to all Syrians from all backgrounds.

Therefore, there is no origin in Islam for legitimizing sectarian fighting nor does Islam encourages intolerance or fanaticism. Despite the differences, all Syrians from all background can live in peaceful coexistence in a state that is based on the rule of law and respect for peculiarities of all religions, sects, and ethnic groups.

D. Extremism and terrorism

Islam has been coming under fierce attack given the attempts to associate it with terrorism. Islamophobia intensified in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the United States and has intensified with the emergence of the ISIS extremist group in Syria after 2013. This has caused Sunni Syrians at home and in the diaspora to suffer a lot as result.

²² Trump accuses Obama and Hillary Clinton of creating ISIS, Al Jazeera Net: August 8, 2016. goo.gl/fqfY2u

²³ Kerry says US will support the Syrian opposition, ruling out arming it. Kuwaiti Al-Raie newspaper. January 1, 2013. goo.gl/Dz8Egh

Advocates of this concept seek to associate terrorism and violence with Islam and Muslims, which is not true. Australian-born American media mogul Rupert Murdoch, who owns many large Western newspapers on January 9, 2015 tweeted: "Maybe most Moslems peaceful, but until they recognize and destroy their growing jihadist cancer they must be held responsible."

In this regard, Graham E. Fuller, author and political analyst as well as former vice-chair of the US National Intelligence Council, said in his book "A World Without Islam" wondered what the region would look like if there was no Islam. He says that the policies being pursued by his country and Israel, such as occupation and the seizure of land by the use of force, "will make the population of that region extremists as we see today."

It must be said that extremism and terrorism are a phenomenon that occurred in all societies and in certain historical circumstances. The European and Western world has witnessed one of the most violent extremism and religious terrorism in a certain historical period.

The question that begs the answer here is whether Islam is a religion of extremism and terrorism, and if not, and what are the real causes of extremism and terrorism in our country and what is the cure for these?

As for the first part of the question, it was answered in the beginning of the research which cited plenty of evidence that Islam rejects violence and extremism, and that Islam allowed the fighting only in self-defense and the defense of the freedom of belief. This is a right that is permitted by all heavenly and worldly conventions and laws.

This question was also answered by some of the leading thinkers and Western Christian figures.

As for the second part of the question relating to the reasons for the violence and terrorism in the Middle East in general and Syria in particular, and based on all the above, we can say that there are two factors behind the phenomenon of violent extremism in Syria:

1- External factor

This factor is one of the most serious and the most important reasons for the spread of violence and terrorism in Syria and the Middle East. These reasons were summed up by Graham E. Fuller , in his book *A World Without Islam* in which he considered that injustice and violence against Muslims as a result of Western and Israeli policies are the main reason for the spread of violence and terrorism in the region and occurred as a natural reaction to those policies.

This injustice is evident in Syria today in the inability of the international community not only to stop the bloodshed in Syria and the killings of Syrians and their children and women by the regime's war machine. It is also evident in the international community's failure to provide civilians trapped in areas besieged by the Syrian regime with food and medicine.

The international community's inaction in Syria is coupled with even more serious and egregious factor, namely the direct involvement of superpowers, such as Russia in the killing of the Syrian people. Much of the responsibility also lies with the United States through the silence and inaction it has showed towards the carnage in Syria over the past eight years.

Instead of assuming their duty in the international system to maintain security and help enforce international resolutions ensuring respect for human rights adopted by the UN, the United States and Russia have become partners to the regime in the murder of the Syrian people. The United States now control a third of Syria as an occupying power. It also focuses on the reaction of the victim, which is extremist sometimes while ignoring the crimes that led to the extremist reaction in the first place.

According to the values of international law and international humanitarian law guaranteeing human rights, the international community bears primary responsibility for the spread of violence and terrorism in Syria. The policies of the superpowers, namely Russia and the United States, which are supposed to be representatives of the international system, are also to blame for the current situation in Syria. Both countries were reluctant to support moderate political forces in Syria to reach a political settlement ensuring an end to violence and peaceful change that Syrians deserve after all these bloody years.

Had unanimously adopted international resolutions been enforced by the UN Security Council in Syria, whether the political and humanitarian resolutions, then 99 percent of what they describe as “Islamic violence and terrorism” would have been eliminated. But the United States and Russia do not want to do that as they seek to achieve their strategic interests in the region.

2- Internal factor

This factor includes the misinterpretation of the Quranic texts and the verified sayings of Prophet Muhammad as well as the reliance on unproven texts in crucial matters while dismissing the verified ones. One example is the citation of the saying “we came to slaughter you” despite the doubts that were cast on its veracity. Let alone its veracity cannot be checked, this saying was linked to a specific incident and specific people of Quraish tribe. Undoubtedly, there are verified, substantiated texts contradicting this saying, for example: “And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad], except as a mercy to the worlds.”²⁴ Another example is Prophet Muhammad’s saying: “O Allah! Forgive my nation, for they have no knowledge.”²⁵ Prophet Muhammed said this after his people beat²⁶ and bloodied his face.

Plenty of Quranic texts and hadith renounced terrorism and violent extremism, whether they were directed against Muslims or non-Muslims.

Summary:

We must admit that there is a crisis of mistrust among Syrians today, whether they were from the opposition, loyalists, rebels, secularists, nationalists, etc. This crisis prevents intra-Syrian dialogue and makes each group adhere more firmly to its opinion and ideas for fear of the other party. This crisis can only be resolved through dialogue, which can be organized and encouraged by community lobbying groups that are now known as civil society organizations to reach general parameters agreed upon by all Syrians and used to put pressure on all parties to the conflict.

²⁴ Quran 21:107

²⁵ Sahih al-Bukhari 3477

For us as Syrians, I think it is time now more than ever to admit the inevitability of reforming the discourse and the traditional view of Islam, particularly with regard to the key issues that have been raised in this research. Syrians need to admit the inevitability of change in Syria on the basis of respect freedoms, human rights, pluralism and the rejection of the return of tyranny.

Reliance of Syrian parties on external forces and the international community, which proved unable to maintain international peace and security and peace or realize what is right in Syria, will only lead to more losses from all parties. A solution can only be achieved through constructive, serious dialogue.