

Dai'Shi (ISIS) Discourse in Arab Societies and the Emigration of Eastern Christians

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Abstract

Arab societies are suffering, since the events of the so-called “Arab Spring” 2011, a condition of conflict, terrorism, and instability. All the foregoing has produced a state of extremism towards the Christians of the Arab East as an essential component of Arab societies, thereby causing their exodus outside their countries, whether Iraq or Syria.

The question presents itself: Are the events of the Arab Spring responsible for the exodus of the Christians of the East? Or is the matter related to the religious discourse and the school curricula which inculcate in the minds of students and youth what makes them reach this state of violence and extremism towards the other?

The study has concluded that extremism and violence are a direct consequence of the official discourse, whether in the mosque, or school, alongside encouragement or at least a tacit acceptance by the Arab political regimes of those forms of conduct which may be utilized as a “religious card” to obtain internal political legitimacy on the one hand, while highlighting their role as a “protector” of religious and ethnic minorities on the other.

Key words: Da'ishi discourse; Arab societies; Emigration; Eastern Christians; Political violence

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INTRODUCTION

“Terrorism can only exist in a propitious climate”

Mohammad Hassanein Heykal

Unfortunately, the states of the Middle East in the shadow of what is termed the “Arab Spring” in 2011 have deteriorated from being weak and fragile states into failed states; that is they changed from being states that are incapable of effectively mustering their geopolitical and social realities into states in which minorities are in conflict with the majorities on ethnic, religious and linguistic bases. In reality, it is sufficient to consider what happened- and is happening- in Syria, Libya and Yemen, and shortly before that in Iraq and Sudan to substantiate this hypothesis or assumption.

It appears that the elements most gravely affected by this difficult and painful reality are the Christians of the East, particularly in Iraq and Syria, who have begun to be exposed to a rampant wave of violence, terrorism and displacement which the Arab east has not witnessed since long centuries ago, especially in the wake of the advent of the so called Da'ish Islamic State of Iraq and Syria in 2013 (ISIS); in effect the Christians have been victim as a result of the actions of this organization and others to all forms of terrorism such as decapitation, sale of women and children, payment of the jizya poll tax, forcible displacement and otherwise.

The questions that may present themselves, presently, are: why has the Arab World reached this unprecedented stage where the discourse of extremism and terrorism prevails “Da'ishization”? And what is the role of education- as a paradigm- in augmenting “Da'ishization” in the Arab World? Moreover, what is the “price” being paid by Christian minorities in the Arab East in consequence of the Dai'shization discourse in the Middle East?

1. PRELIMINARY ASSUMPTIONS TO UNDERSTAND THE DA'ISHI DISCOURSE

In the shadow of the condition of extremism and terrorism which is experienced by societies in the shadow of the so-called Arab Spring, political, social and philosophical theories posit hypotheses to apprehend the essence of this "savagery" (Al Shalabi, 2010) which is adopted by the extremist armed religious currents based on branding others as infidels, terrorization, uprooting of people, and killing in the name of Allah, namely:

- a) First hypothesis: the condition of extremism and terrorism is not a part of the "customs, mores and traditions of Arab society which has been characterized by coexistence, respect for the other, and religious tolerance since a long time ago"; This actually means that what is currently occurring is an "aberration" which societies historically experience in conditions of crisis, shocks, and transformations.
- b) Second hypothesis: What is transpiring in the Arab World in terms of destruction, killing, and ethnic and religious conflicts is caused directly by the "West" through its prolonged colonialism and its disfigurement of the structures and nature of Arab society and its entities, firstly, and its unlimited support of the regimes that it left behind after the stage of what is called "independence" in the middle of the previous century, coupled with its pursuit of vital and strategic interests through supporting Israel in the Arab corpus, secondly; this signifies that the West- Europe, America and Israel created "Da'ish-ISIS" and its sisters which is wreaking havoc in the nation and its states, while spreading death and causing the disfigurement of its religion, heritage and beliefs.
- c) Third hypothesis: The enhancement of "barbarism" which produced Da'ish and its sisters, principally Al Qaeda, and less importantly Al-Nusra is due to the Arab political systems themselves, such due to two factors: first, all the Arab regimes depend on religiously based legitimacy such as: Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, while others underscore the religious features of the state enshrined in their constitutions in order to acquire legitimacy such as: the Arab Gulf states, Yemen, Egypt, Iraq and others. The second reason is that the Arab regimes have adopted a strategy, especially in the shadow of the "Cold War" between the US and the Soviet Union (1950-1989) that musters the "religious current" (Al Shalabi, 2001, 2011) focusing on confronting the leftist current represented in the Communists, Nasserites and Baathists and others. Thus they espoused policies and strategies that support the "religious orientation", making it a dominant element in politics, state and society.

- d) Fourth hypothesis: which is a general hypothesis that represents two western viewpoints, especially the French viewpoint where the first current is adopted by the French thinker Gilles KEPEL who is an expert in Islamic movements, who elucidates through his various writings extremism and terrorism in the Arab and Muslim world by focusing on the "religious text" itself which instigates, in one form or another, violence and extremism referring to the writings of individuals such as: Abdullah Azzam, Ayman Zawahiri, Abu Mus'ab Zarqawi and others (Kepele & Milelli, 2008). On the other hand, the second current is represented by the French thinker François Burgat who is also an expert in Islamic movements, who explains the violence afflicting the Arab and Muslim World by referring to the social, political and economic context, which is a viewpoint of a "Marxian spirit" (François, 2002).
- e) Fifth hypothesis: This is the hypothesis adopted by the present study, which is anchored in the idea that the regimes muster rightist religious currents to countervail various leftist currents (Sadat's Egypt as a local model) (Al Shalabi, 2001), and jihad or what is also termed in confronting communism in Afghanistan an international model) (Abdel Mu'ti, n.d.), in addition to the condition of political despotism, and the festering economic oppression in Arab countries which has contributed, in one form or another, to the "creation of Da'ish" at the Arab level 100%; however, the external western powers have been able to harness those currents to achieve their short and long term strategic policies in the region.

Notwithstanding the credibility and validity of the foregoing hypotheses, they indicate the absence of a "political discourse" for the Arab states to build a "civil society" that is based on law, institutions and reason on the one hand, and the payment of the price of such absence by changing in the shadow of the Arab Spring in 2011 from weak and fragile states to failed states on the other hand.

Gradually and ineluctably, Arab societies slipped into seas of blood and ethnic killing (Arabs and non-Arabs) and also religious killing (Muslim and Christian, Shii and Sunni etc.). And all of this intensified the conditions of violence and the uprooting of Christians in the east in general, and in Iraq and Syria in particular.

2. IN OUR SCHOOLS THERE IS A DA'ISHI DISCOURSE

So as not to be lost within immense legal and legislative texts that contradict the role of the state and its role in building the society of equal opportunity, citizenship and

justice in Arab countries which constituted, as we assumed from the outset, the main incubator of extremist thought as is the case with certain Gulf states which caused their western allies to demand a revision of their curricula (Al Jarallah & A. A. Al Jarallah, 2003), particularly in the aftermath of 9/11/2001. We will shed light on some Arab states that represent moderation and extremism in their curricula such as Tunisia, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

In an official, clear and explicit acknowledgement on 3 March 2015, the Tunisian Minister of Education Néji Jalloul revealed that the situation in Tunisian schools is

grave and dire to a point where they produce recruits for Da'ish, and "Dai'shis do not graduate in mosques; and I have information that there are Da'ish elements which travelled to fight in Syria and never went to a mosque previously. (Tunisia, 2015)

The minister added concerning the secular Tunisian Nidaa movement which leads the government coalition "today the terrorism schools are our schools" (Ibid.).

What is bizarre in this declaration is that Tunisia continued for decades to boast of its educational system which it built during the stage of erecting its independent state since the middle of the previous century where education was free and compulsory, and around a third of the state budget was allocated for the educational sector. Nevertheless, the number of ISIS members was more than two thousand jihadis who travelled to enlist in the Islamic forces, particularly ISIS (Ibid.).

As regards Jordan, notwithstanding the multiple and successive royal initiatives to fortify the domestic front against any possible conflicts through launching the "Amman Message" (Al Shalabi, 2011) initiative in 2004, and a "Common Word," and "Week of Harmony," (Al Khalayleh, 2015) students continue to be informed in Jordan through the history book of the 9th Grade of the year 2014 that "slaves and concubines were one of the components of Islamic society in the past" where the textbook comments: "The Religion of Islam did not cancel slavery, but enjoined good treatment of slaves, and urged their manumission by various means" (Dalal, 2015). Moreover, the students learn in the "Islamic Education" book of the 9th Grade of 2014 that it is obligatory to fight the apostates, where according to the book, the concurrence of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) on fighting those that apostatize is an example of *ijma'a* "consensus" (Ibid.). And concerning the different "other" religiously (dhimmis) (Ibid.) they have the right to practice their religion (without offending the feelings of Muslims), and they have the right to hold public offices (other than head of state and commander of the army)." As regards those who are intellectually different, they are one of the causes of the decline of the nation, where the students learn through the Islamic Culture textbook of the 10th Grade (Ibid.) that one of the reasons for the decline of the nation is that "many of

its sons have adopted numerous alien ideas, values and customs, which are derived from the ideas and values of other nations," and have espoused an imported culture that is not compatible with our values and conduct" (Ibid.).

Mr. Thoqan Obeidat, an educational expert and former secretary general at the Ministry of Education, conducted an analytical study of Jordanian school textbooks to elucidate the "widespread inclinations and values" in school textbooks to gage the extent of their confluence with the strategy of the Ministry of Education that is based on combating negative values that may be held by students such as: prejudice, bias, lack of respect for the other, or not recognizing the latter.

Obeidat reached a significant conclusion which he conveyed as "Da'ishism in school textbooks," (Thoqan, 2015) mentioning that the "Islamic education books, the nature of the study material, and the culture of those that teach may reflect numerous positions; which might be conveyed to the students in a negative or Da'ishist manner, and among examples of this is stating that jihad is an individual obligation, and none should be derelict in performing jihad unless possessing a genuine excuse, and God guarantees to the mujahid or holy warrior paradise or safe return to his home. Lessons on jihad are given throughout the years of education, where striving in the path of Allah involves guiding the world in its entirety, and removing any obstacles impeding the spread of the Islamic call" (Ibid.).

Whilst highlighting the focus on the religious values of the past, Obeidat concluded in his analysis of the school textbooks that the Jordanian school textbooks denigrate modernity and progress where he states, "modern sciences (knowledge), according to the books have benefits for agriculture and otherwise, but have preoccupied people with disturbances and have destroyed civilizations, and spread secularism and materialism, and produced huge urban centers, and distanced people from worship, religion, family, nature, honor, love and friendship, and increased divorce, drug consumption and destroyed the environment" (Jumana, 2014).

All of these contradictions in the religious educational discourse drove the chief editor of the Jordanian Al Ghad daily newspaper Ms. Jumana Ghneimat to title an article by her dated 14 November 2014 "Close down the ISIS Branch in Jordan" where she states, "the 5th Grade student returns to his father with a shocking piece of information based on regarding as unbelievers the adherents of the other revealed religions. The father tried, strenuously, to convince his child of a view different from what he learned from his teacher who seeks to plant certain ideas in the minds of our children which may be synopsisized in terms of rejecting the other and the principle of coexistence which is deeply entrenched in Jordanian society." She continues, "Yes, our schools disseminate extremism, and also our universities, and one finds that

a child and young man returns from school or university with scary or even shocking ideas, even to their parents, and this is the price that all pay, which is resultant from the dominance of religious thought over curricula and education over decades, and which place future generations in danger zones” (Ibid.).

To deal with this situation which conflicts, it would appear, with the orientations of the upper echelons of the state, Jordanian parliamentary committees have embarked on scrutinizing the educational curricula which contribute to promoting religious extremism and cultural insularity, and which also run counter to explicit international orientations concerning religious moderation, and opposition to terrorism and religious violence under the pretext that the state religion is Islam (Anonymous, 2015).

The issue of linking educational curricula to terrorism is not a new issue in the Arab east; for after around one year from the 9/11 attacks the United States applied pressure on Saudi Arabia to change its curricula which are considered by Washington as the cause of extremism and violence which affected it. Hence, the Middle East Partnership Initiative emerged between the United States and the Middle East (Building Hope for the Coming Years) which Collin Power (Secretary of State) called for in a speech he delivered at the Heritage Foundation in Washington on 12 December 2002 (Report, 2003).

What is noticeable is that the educational discourse in Jordan is to a great extent similar to the curricula of Saudi Arabia, while differing only in amount. Hence, the US is of the view, having analyzed the educational curricula in Saudi Arabia, that the latter:

- a) Characterizes the Christians and Jews as unbelievers, and as enemies of Islam.
- b) Opposes western democracy.
- c) The student is one whom God gives courage and faith to be a warrior in the path of Allah, such as Saad Bin Abi Waqqas.
- d) Concentration on the Quranic verses and Prophetic Hadith which underline allegiance to God and opposition to all idols.
- e) Focus on texts which prohibit resembling the unbelievers (Ibid.).

Perhaps the article of the renowned journalist Thomas Friedman entitled “Either America gets Rid of Small Trucks or Saudis Get Rid of the Islamic Syllabi” expresses American annoyance with the Saudi ally. The article most prominently states that,

the 10th Grade textbook taught in all Saudi schools contains a text which states: (It is obligatory for Muslims to be brothers and to consider the unbelievers as enemies). This is a hostile view which is espoused particularly by the Saudi Wahhabi school of thought which is one of the Islamic orientations. (Ibid.)

There is also the article of Neil Mac Farquhar Entitled “Anti-Western and Extremist Views Pervade Saudi Schools” which was published in the New York Times on

19 October 2002. The article most prominently contained the following:

- a) Quranic verses admonish Muslims of the risks of establishing friendships with Christians and Jews, and the syllabi and classroom teaching demand of the Muslims to be loyal to each other and to consider the unbelievers as their enemies.
- b) The extremist view that is hostile to the West is attributable to the Saudi educational system which administers compulsory doses to the students through the Islamic education textbooks, and this view reaches outside the classroom through the religious sermons delivered in mosques, and television programs.
- c) Reviewing the Islamic education curriculum in Saudi Arabia gives the impression that it promotes and supports an extremist view of Islam even insofar as other pious Muslim believers.
- d) The Islamic school textbooks in Saudi Arabia call upon the students to hate the infidels, and to assume a hostile position towards them, and to ignore their rituals and feasts, and not to imitate them in attire, or cuisine, drink and modes of conversation (MacFARQUHAR, 2002).

The problem is that whenever ISIS presents photographs or films showing purchase and sale of Christian citizens in Mosul or Raqqa some are enraged and say: “This is completely against the true religion,” or that ISIS is implementing the orders of American intelligence and the Mossad. However, a careful reading of the conduct of this extremist religious organization indicates that it is merely a clear and explicit manifestation of the contents of school textbooks in Arab countries, whether insofar as right to have concubines, killing the apostates, and viewing unequally the citizen of another religion insofar as political and military authority whilst regarding him an unbeliever as well as other matters.

3. CHRISTIANS OF THE EAST AND THE “BILL OF ISISIZATION”

In a book published in 1991 authored by the French scholar of Iranian origin Fereydoon Hoveyda entitled “What do the Arabs Want?” (Hoveyda, 1991) there is an attempt to prove Arab confusion in their relations, decisions, and their positions towards each other on the one hand, and towards others on the other hand. Today it would be possible to formulate the question anew: “What do the Islamic religious groups want from the Christians of the Arab East?”

At the outset, I concede along with the Palestinian writer Bernard Sabella who published an important article on the Christians in the Arab East, that, “the phenomenon of migration existed prior to the formation of organizations which are at times branded jihadi, and at

others Islamic. And particularly the migration of Christian Palestinians (Sabella, 2015). However, perhaps with the advent of the terrorist and most violent organization ISIS which manifests clearly extremist and inhuman thought toward the "other" "the rate of displacement of Christians increased, particularly after the seizing of northern Iraq, and particularly Mosul, and some areas in northern and northwest Syria.

The condition of sectarian and religious polarization which the Arab region is witnessing has produced a "bloody wheel" that not only involves the killing of hundreds daily, but also another wave of hatred that is based on excluding the other, considering him an infidel and an apostate, and other matters which create a culture of "hatred," and accordingly the hatred discourse produces crimes; and "hate crimes according to the Webster dictionary which is adopted by most countries, are crimes of aggression and disfigurement, committed against an individual or group due to color (black/white), or faith (religious belief), or gender (male/female), or sexual inclination (homosexual or heterosexual proclivities)" (Jubran, 2015).

And reverting to the condition of Christians in the Arab East, it is possible to aver that the Christians represent 5% of the population compared to the figure of 20% at the beginning of the 20th century (Briefing Note, 2014), and they are distributed across a number of countries such as:

- a) Lebanon with the highest ratio of Christians in the East, namely 37% of the population presently, after it was 55% at the beginning of the previous century (Ujaqa, 2015).
- b) Egyptian Copts who represent the largest numerical bloc of Christians, where they number between 5-11 million; representing 10% of the population at the beginning of the previous century and presently (Ibid.).
- c) The Christians of Iraq are the oldest historically in the Arab East; they were 1.4 million prior to the American invasion in 2003, and their number presently is between 250-300 thousand (Briefing Note, 2014) in terms of ratio, they were 3% of the population and are presently 2% (Ujaqa, 2015).
- d) Syrian Christians are presently 4% and they used to be 20% of the population (Ibid.).
- e) Christian Palestinians are 2% of the population compared to 20% prior to the 1948 catastrophe (Abed Rabboh, 2014).
- f) The Christians of Jordan are presently 3% of the population, and used to be 6%.

It would appear that there are four facts overlooked by the religious organizations and their extremist discourse as relates to the Christians of the Arab East, namely:

- a) Christians are an essential part of the social and cultural fabric of this region; hence, the Christian presence is not incidental as is the case with

Muslim communities in Europe which recently went there either to study, work, tourism, or investment.

- b) Christians are a part of the "Arab nationalist struggle" against Ottoman rule which lasted for more than four centuries, which abandoned the region to the English, French and Italian colonial powers, after leaving it without science, or knowledge or human dignity (Fadwa, 2009).
- c) Christians are an integral part of the "Arab enlightenment;" for it was they who introduced the printing press "the tool of printing and rationality" in Aleppo since the seventeenth century, and it was they that raised the banner of language and its various sciences, and the space does not permit, in this context, to cite the names of writers, novelists, artists, and otherwise, because this would emphatically require many, many volumes (Ibid.).
- d) Christians are a part of the nation which suffers from despotic and oppressive rule. Therefore, like their Muslim compatriots, they suffer from the despotism and corruption which the nation is witnessing.

Hence, in the shadow of a condition of extremism which reached a crescendo through the advent of ISIS and other terrorist group in terms of hostility to Christians particularly in Syria and Iraq, a Catholic organization-headquartered in Britain- warned that Christianity could disappear completely (Christianity (It Might Completely Disappear), para.5, 2015) in parts of the Middle East within a decade, unless emergency international aid is provided. Says John Pontifex the editor of "Persecuted and Forgotten? A report on Christians Oppressed due to their Religion 2013-2015", that there is, "a cultural extermination of Christians which is erasing this religion from wide spaces of the Middle East, the cradle of the church." And Iraq is one of ten countries classified with the highest levels of persecution (Ibid.). The said Organization estimated that the number of Christians in Iraq decreased to around 275 thousand, while their number in neighboring Syria declined from 1.25 million in 2011, to around 500 thousand presently (Ibid.).

Iraq which is considered a country most exposed to the disappearance of Christianity is facing the most ferocious campaign from ISIS who distributed a leaflet in Mosul in which they informed the Christians that they have three options: either to embrace Islam, the People of the Book pact and pay the jizya, and should they refuse- the sword" (A Press Report, 2014). ISIS issued a similar edict in the Syrian city of Raqqa in February 2014 demanding payment of the poll tax jizya in gold in return for protection (Ibid.).

In reality, targeting religious minorities in Iraq and Syria is but a strategy that seeks to achieve numerous objectives. According to the Iranian American historian

Hamid Dabashi ISIS, through the attacks targeting Christians, aims to realize four goals, as stated in an article for him posted in the Qatari Al Jazeera website:

First goal: desire for ISIS to destroy one of the symbols of religious and cultural coexistence in the Middle East.

Second goal: Incite religious communities to internecine conflict such as Christian, Shii and Yazidi minorities, with a view to undermining stability inside states.

Third goal: Instigate western states to enter into war with ISIS (which confers on it “legitimacy” by virtue of fighting the infidel West as they claim), as well as this conflict supporting its claim that Islam is in a state of war with the rest of the world. Moreover, the western states will be inclined to interpret the attacks against Christians as targeting them. The Iranian American author states that a fact that should not be overlooked is that most of the victims of this terrorist organization are Arab Christians.

Fourth goal: The attacks targeting religious minorities are an attempt to cover the defeat of ISIS in Kobani-Ayn Al-Arab and its loss of this city. In effect ISIS wishes to appear invincible, and wishes to be continually present in the western media.

Fifth goal (which may be added as a goal from a western perspective): Namely, that terrorism which targets Christians contributes to intensifying hostility to Islam, whilst some Muslims will incline to extremism and espousing what they term “jihadi thought” (Kneib, & Abdel Rahman, 2015).

CONCLUSION

Political violence was- and continues to be- one of the political cards used by the protagonists- or antagonists- at a particular moment when dialogue, discussion and reason are absent; such to apply pressure on the competitor or other opponent whether inside a single state or in the arena of international relations. However, what is happening concerning extremist religious armed groups such as ISIS and its sisters in the Arab East defies understanding and interpretation within the ambit of this logic.

Those groups creatively kill and slaughter in “Hollywood” style by using appropriate lighting, harmonious colors and music, and precise movements in their videos which they broadcast in the Internet (Alrajehi & Al-Shalabi, 2015); for instance, killing the 21 Copts in the Libyan coast, the burning of the Jordanian pilot, acts of drowning in water, planting explosives on the bodies of their victims, tanks overrunning their victims, or perhaps pushing Syrian soldiers from atop of buildings, or killing prisoners by hand as though slaughtering sheep, bombing mosques, churches, tombs and statues, in addition to forms of terrorism which are humanly unimaginable! (Nimer, 2014).

The shocking problem is that ISIS finds supporters for its discourse and terrorist conduct: from Tangiers to Gaza, from Ta’iz to Zarqa, from Sinai to Kuwait despite all of this morass of crime, destruction and terrorism: Is it the case that the Arab individual has come to live the “dualism” of the murderous authority and the ISISism that is less murderous, or at least its target is the “other” (Christian) rather than the “I” (Muslim) essentially?

Perhaps, but results on the ground indicate the fatal truth that Arab societies have been ISISized over the decades; for according to an analysis of four opinion polls conducted in four Arab countries about ISIS it was found that there are 8.8 million persons that strongly support this state, and if we add the sympathizers with ISIS and those who view it positively then the figure rises to around 42 million persons (News Report, 2015).

Is this reasonable? Why does the ordinary and simple individual, Muslim or Christian, fuel the extremism of existing political regimes on the one hand, and the armed extremist groups in this humanly degrading manner involving manslaughter, displacement, and the usurpation of rights on the other?

In facing the extremist terrorist organizations which claim bearing the sword of death in one hand, and the “spirit of God” in the other, I agree with the opinion of the eminent Lebanese thinker Ghassan Salameh who analyzes the “destructive self” which contributed to creating those organizations:

The regimes which oppress us have come out of the wombs of our societies, and the dark movements that spread death in their path have sprung forth from the core of our culture, and the world is not tolerant anymore of our mental lethargy nor with our shirking responsibility for what we are doing with ourselves and with others (...). The world does not anymore share our self-view as though we are victims of these bloody transformations, but rather is now inclined to consider us as colluders, in deed or by word and particularly by inaction, with every regime and every group which espouses or exercises savagery. (Ghassan, 2015)

The big question that arouses profound doubt is: How can we explain the silence of many politicians, intellectuals and journalists in the Arab World vis a vis the process of uprooting Christians occurring in the East without there being any official intervention or popular tangible and genuine condemnation of those practices targeting this important component of the nation, namely Arab Christians or the Christians of the East?!

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