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The Need for Global Solidarity with Muslims

By Paul Hedges

Synopsis

Negative messages about Islam are being spread by various politicians and media groups globally, and needs to be countered by a positive voice for global solidarity with Muslims. Singapore's context makes it easier to do this here than in many places.

Commentary

BOTH GLOBALLY and in South East Asia many politicians, ideologues, and media commentators point to the Islamic community as the people who need to rectify their own community or tradition in the face of militant violence and terror committed in the name of Islam.

Certainly, Muslims need to play a role in creating a positive and inspiring narrative that shows how Islam is compatible with life in plural societies. Also in helping to combat the militant interpretations of Islam that endorse violent terrorism as Jihad, which violate centuries of tradition. However, putting the onus of responsibility on Muslims ignores an arguably far greater imperative: this is for all communities to stand in global solidarity with Muslims.

Global Networks and Narratives of Hate

Across North America and Europe many politicians from a range of spectrums have tapped into the existential concerns of ordinary citizens about what they perceive as a possible threat from militant Islam. Perhaps most noteworthy at the moment is the rising power in US politics, Donald Trump. His claims that Muslims are a threat to the United States, and that a blanket ban should be imposed on Muslims entering the US, are powerful rhetoric.

This is rhetoric which plays into the fears of citizens in the US (and many Western nations) stoked by mainly right-wing media outlets spreading accusations and scaremongering about Islam, immigration, and Jihad. It also plays into the perception of Muslims around the world who see themselves as abused and on the defensive against Western aggression.

This is, of course, not just a Western issue, and recent reports suggest that Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric is winning him supporters amongst those who share such sentiments in places as diverse as India and Myanmar. This will further reinforce a global sense of persecution and injustice amongst Muslims in many places.

A False Perspective Reinforced

The narrative on each side will simply reinforce the other. A sense of crusading zeal and aggression against Muslims by politicians and others within civil society will simply convince more young Muslims that there really is a clash of civilisations.

As such, we will likely see an increase in recruitment for groups such as ISIS/ Daesh and other terrorist groups who feed off the fears and social disenfranchisement of Muslims around the world. This in turn will provide more fodder for the parts of the media which are committed to creating a sense of Islamic terror as an existential and major threat.

Such a perspective is, as is well known to analysts in the area, not true. For instance, figures from American law enforcement agencies have shown that over the last few decades it is right-wing, often white supremacist, groups who have provided the major terror threats faced in that country. Meanwhile, groups such as ISIS/ Daesh have grown simply due to power vacuums created by the havoc caused by military interventions in the Middle East which have not been properly thought through nor followed up.

Nevertheless, for various reasons governments and the media have allowed a narrative that places Islam and terror perpetrated in its name to top global headlines and run the agenda. These narratives feed back into the sense of disenfranchisement, ennui, and anger felt by many Muslims in the West and beyond. Suggestions, moreover, that the problems lie within the Muslim community simply do not deal with the reality of global narratives.

Not an Indiscriminate Stance

Of course, Islam is far from monolithic and we do not need to simply stand behind everything done by all Muslims, everything done in the name of Islam, nor the actions of governments or powerful actors in many Muslim majority countries. Justifiable criticism of, for instance, the ban on women driving in Saudi Arabia, the restrictions on women's education in some countries, or other such things need not to be condemned. It is the case though, that while done in the name of Islam, such things are not part of the intrinsic message of Islam and often go counter to it. Therefore to stand in global solidarity with Muslims is not to ignore abuses or simply to offer indiscriminate and politically correct defence of everything claimed to be

Islamic. Rather, a message needs to go out that the condemnation of an entire collective is not tolerated, has no justification, and is opposed by the majority community.

In the face of the politics and media storm of fear and conflict, concerned politicians, media, and civil society need to create a different narrative. A voice needs to be heard that says that people stand with Islam against the spread of hatred. Of course we all know that bad news is what sells and so the many irenic voices which are out there often cannot be heard so readily in the public space.

This, however, simply serves to make it more urgent to make such calls and make a dramatic stand of solidarity. Especially in a small country like Singapore, the voices of politicians and the media can more readily reach the people. They cannot be alone though; religious groups, those of no religion, and others in civil society need to issue statements saying that they oppose the kind of message heard from politicians like Donald Trump and spread by certain media outlets. From the grassroots to the elite we need to stand in global solidarity with Muslims at this time.

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