

## **Reducing polarisation in the world**

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There are wars happening in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Yemen. A million Muslims died in Afghanistan. Another million Muslims are reported to have died in Iraq. More people are dying and being displaced in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

After the demise of the caliphate in 1924, it appears that polarisation between Muslims and non-Muslims is getting worse. The clash of civilisations is fast becoming a grim reality.

Even the polarisation between Muslims is not decreasing.

The Quran states: "Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance." (16:125)

Radical factions have been wreaking havoc. They have arrogated to themselves the right to "interpret" Islam for all. Yet, what presents itself as an "interpretation" is, more often than not, a misinterpretation.

Radical fringes display hatred for people whose main fault is being different. It is important to restrain extremists before they perpetrate greater damage and injury.

Problematic preconceptions, for example the binary division of the world into a realm of peace (Islam) and an abode of war (everywhere else) are used.

The Arab Spring promised change for the better. Instead, it brought misery and destruction.

In Egypt, the Morsi government alienated significant parts of the Egyptians by its erratic behaviour.

When it tried to pursue retribution against the military, its nemesis took over.

By contrast, the attempted uprising against authorities in Turkey failed. Both nations now find themselves at different ends of the political spectrum. Hopefully, they will get nearer rather than drift further apart.

In Europe, the political temperature is rising. Xenophobic, nationalistic parties are registering growing support. The ill-wishers and enemies of Islam are pleased to see this happen, as it serves their interests.

It appears that the Islamic State (IS) received backing in hope that they would turn against the Syrian regime. When IS instead began beheading Western prisoners and its enemies in Syria and Iraq, it became difficult to support IS.

Another reason for misunderstandings is that different people see Islam differently. The discourse of jihadism falsifies Islam.

There is a need for a better understanding.

The way to reduce polarisation is to focus on what Muslims share (the Quran) rather than where differences arise (divergent explanations of what transpired in the past). In this way, the ummah should be able to recapture the universal understanding of Islam and address the deep problems it is facing. What is required is to follow the middle path of wasatiyyah, or moderation.

Political Islam has brought greater harm than benefit. It needs to be recalled that there is no exhortation in the Quran to establish an “Islamic state”.

The primary task of Prophet Muhammad was to spread the message of peace. Islam and Islamism are two different things.

Islam is a way of life, not a political teaching.

There is excessive focus on externalities and insufficient emphasis on substance. People are too concerned with the way people dress rather than with how to alleviate poverty, reduce ignorance and enhance good governance and people’s welfare.

In the United States, there is a risk that foreign policy will end up serving special interest groups rather than the American people.

Political action committees (PACs) on Capitol Hill have grown powerful to the point that people have begun referring to them as the “fourth branch” of the American government. This “privatisation” of government is problematic.

It is important for Muslim institutions of learning to emphasise thinking. After all, the protection of the intellect (‘aql) is among the chief purposes of the syariah. There can be little progress without a thoughtful approach.

Exchanges of views can help in reaching common ground on important issues.

There is a need for a rational approach. Extremists denigrate reason as it helps them to maintain their sway upon fanatical followers.

The Quran states: “Surely, the worst of beasts in God’s sight are those that are deaf and dumb and do not reason.” (8:22).

Elsewhere, it states: “And, it is not for a soul to believe except by permission of Allah, and He will place defilement upon those who will not use reason.” (10:100).

In the final analysis, it needs to be recalled that the “pen is mightier than the sword”.

The Quran states, “Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change their own condition...” (13:11) The right way to defend Islam is by explaining it

properly, including its higher purposes. At the same time, it is important to follow up with excellent behaviour.

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