

How to end Islamist terror

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Recently, I watched a video produced by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In the video, ISIS jihadists executed a Jordanian pilot, who is a fellow Muslim, by dousing his body with a flammable liquid and then burning him alive in a cage. The video was even more ruthless, brutal, and barbaric than I had imagined it would be. I feel compelled to offer a discussion about how we can end this violence which continues with no end in sight. Although I have an undergraduate degree in history, I am not an expert in foreign policy or geopolitics, but since there seems to be a poverty of leadership surrounding this issue, I offer a few ideas in the hopes that others more qualified than me will join the dialogue.

Establishing liberal democracies throughout the Muslim world

In my view, Islamist terror will never cease until there is a strict separation of church and state in Muslim countries and constitutional guarantees of absolute religious freedom within those countries. Western Civilization has learned, through very painful experience, that when religious institutions possess the power of coercion, horrible atrocities are usually the result. One need only consider events such as the Inquisition, the wars associated with the Protestant Reformation, and the Salem witch trials to realize that religious power should be subservient to the will of the people through elected representatives. Therefore, the ultimate solution to Islamist terror begins with the democratization of Muslim society, i.e. the establishment of secular, representative government in all Muslim countries. In particular, this must include Saudi Arabia and Iran, because these two regimes are the root and sustainer of most of the Islamist terror we witness today. For example, Saudi Arabians have invested untold millions to build madrassas in places like Pakistan to indoctrinate young Muslim males in the extremist Salafist branch of Sunni Islam. These madrassas are in essence incubators of jihadism. Iran is the primary sponsor of Shiite terrorism, providing training and financial support for groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, and other terrorist organizations. Until the people of these nations are allowed to participate in free elections to choose leaders who reject extremism, reining in the power of the mullahs and ayatollahs, the religious establishments of Saudi Arabia and Iran will continue to propagate Islamic terror.

The Opportunity of the Persian Awakening

Iran erupted in mass protests after its 2009 presidential election was tainted by voter irregularities. The Persian Awakening, also known as the Green Revolution, was a plea to the world community to support the aspirations of the Iranian people for liberty and bring about an end to the Shiite theocracy which had ruled Iran with an iron fist since 1979. I believe this outbreak was a Providential event,

supported by God. The failure of the West, especially the United States, to rally strongly to the side of the Iranian people was a historic failure – a huge lost opportunity for the cause of human freedom.

The Opportunity of the Arab Spring

In 2010, a Tunisian street vendor burned himself to death in an act of protest and despondency against a government that was out of touch with the needs and aspirations of its people for liberty and opportunity. This act spawned widespread protests called the Arab Spring throughout many Muslim nations, which led to the downfall of several autocratic regimes. Once again, I see the hand of God at work here – Divine Providence supporting this movement as a way to solve the problem of Islamist terror. Unfortunately, the Arab Spring has faltered, largely due to a failure to provide leadership on the part of the United States and the broader world community.

In 2011, the Arab Spring spread to Syria. Instead of firmly supporting the Syrian people's legitimate longing for liberty, the president of the United States, Barack Obama, ultimately betrayed them. In a shocking reversal that stunned the international community, President Obama abandoned the Syrian people to genocide, after having promised to come to their aid if the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons against them. The president refused to enforce the "red line" that he himself had established against chemical attacks. As a result, the death toll of Syrians from the civil war which continues today has surpassed the 200,000 mark. By failing to provide leadership, president Obama is also responsible for the emergence of ISIS. Nature abhors a vacuum, and in the vacuum of leadership created by the abdication of America, ISIS was given free rein to grow and conquer large territories in first Syria and then Iraq. In fact, ISIS now controls cities that American troops bled and died for in their successful campaign against Al-Qaeda during the Anbar Awakening of 2006. The Anbar Awakening provides a model of how America can partner with moderate Muslim forces to defeat extremism.

The Inexorable March of History towards Liberty

Despite the failures in Western leadership, all is not lost. Through the Persian Awakening and Arab Spring, the world was given the opportunity to advance the cause of liberty throughout the entire planet, not just the Muslim world. The cause of liberty knows no limitation of time. It is God's will that a world of freedom and peace be established, and no matter the obstacles, they are merely temporary setbacks.

For example, the year 1848 is known to historians as the Spring of Nations, and bears many similarities to the Arab Spring. There were revolutions all over the Western world, most notably in France, the Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Italy, and the Austrian Empire. The people were demanding then what the Muslim peoples are demanding now – liberty and equality. Tens of thousands died, and within a year almost all of these revolutions collapsed. Nevertheless, a few achievements survived, such as the abolition of serfdom in Austria and Hungary, the end of absolute monarchy in Denmark, and the termination of the Capetian monarchy in France. Even though most of the people returned to being ruled by oppressive regimes, these nations are all liberal democracies today where there is equality, religious freedom, and representative government.

Likewise, even though the Arab Spring has thus far encountered setbacks in places like Libya, Egypt, and Syria, it has produced one standout success in Tunisia. Here is the lead paragraph from a February 5, 2015 newspaper article: (Reuters) - ***Tunisia's parliament approved a coalition cabinet on Thursday including secularists, Islamists and smaller parties, in the latest step in its transition to full democracy following a 2011 uprising. Four years after its uprising against autocrat Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, Tunisia has been held up as an example of political compromise and democratic transition with new constitution and free elections.***

It is not too late to rescue the Persian and Arab Springs, but, if we fail now, it may take generations before the next opportunities arise. Here are a few suggestions for how the cause of liberty can be advanced.

1) Establishing a League of Democracies: The United States should champion the cause of forming a new international body composed of nations who practice democratic ideals. According to a 2004 article in *The American Interest*, authors Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay believe that about 60 countries would qualify for membership. In time, this organization would eclipse the United Nations. The UN has been ineffective and at times counterproductive in the fight for liberty. Its fatal flaw is its policy of granting membership to states run by dictatorial and tyrannical regimes. A League of Democracies would establish the moral clarity necessary for the task of establishing worldwide liberty.

2) Partitioning Iraq: The borders of today's Iraq do not reflect the aspirations of the people who live there but are the result of centuries of conflict between imperial powers beyond their control. A League of Democracies could provide a mandate and support for partitioning Iraq into three independent nations – a Kurdish one in the North, A Sunni state in the middle, and a Shiite nation in the South. It is unrealistic to expect the current Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad to adequately protect the rights and interests

of the Kurdish and Sunni citizens of Iraq.

3) Support for the Syrian people: The United States should unequivocally support those Syrians who are fighting for survival against the Assad regime and ISIS. This should include the establishment of no-fly zones to protect the civilian population, and the training and arming of Kurdish and Free Syrian militiamen. The primary contribution of the West would be air power, so spotters on the ground would be necessary for accurate targeting. However, it is neither necessary nor desirable for large numbers of Western troops to be deployed on the ground. There will never be peace in Syria until both the Assad regime and ISIS either surrender or be defeated. The goal should once again be the partitioning of Syria into three states – Kurdish in the North, Sunni in the center, and Shiite/Alawite on the coast and other population centers.

4) Support for the Muslim Reformation: Support should be given to Muslim leaders, such as the courageous Iranian professor Hashem Aghajari, who are calling for an “Islamic Protestantism.” Professor Aghajari recognizes that the ayatollahs should be stripped of their authority to define Islam for others – faithful believers should be free to follow the dictates of their own consciences. Many Islamic scholars recognize that Islam needs to reform itself in order to integrate into the modern world, and strong support should be given to them in the same way the West supported Soviet and other anti-Communist dissidents during the Cold War. Organizations of reform-minded Muslims should be created and supported both in Western nations and, more importantly, in Muslim ones.

5) Insistence on religious liberty: The West should take an unequivocal moral stance supporting absolute religious freedom within Muslim nations. Apostate laws should be condemned, and the rights of minority religions within Muslim nations should be championed. If Islam loses its monopoly on religion and must compete in the marketplace of ideas to gain converts and keep its adherents, it will have no other choice but to reform or perish.

6) Championing Women’s rights: Women’s organizations and others should speak out and support the rights of women in Muslim countries. These rights should include the right to education, employment, protection against sexual crimes, protection against coercive marriages, and equal legal status to men.

7) Energy development in the West: Western nations should support developing domestic sources of oil, natural gas and renewable energy in order to gain complete energy independence from autocratic Muslim nations and Russia. (Russia is a major weapons supplier to the Assad regime in Syria.) The lower the price of oil goes, the weaker these autocracies become, and their resources for fomenting terror are reduced.

8) Economic sanctions against tyrants: Anything that can be done to weaken the financial power of tyrants is a plus for liberty.

In sum, the West needs to adopt a comprehensive strategy that includes all factors – political, military, economic, ideological, and spiritual. It took seventy years for the West to triumph over the Communist world of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact. I am convinced that the struggle against Islamic terrorism can be accomplished in less time than that. What is needed more than anything is strong, morally clear leadership. It is my prayer that another great American president will emerge in 2016, someone with the character and strength of a George Washington, an Abraham Lincoln, or a Ronald Reagan. Let us all pray for the appearance of such a leader.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of things that can be done to defeat Islamist terrorism and advance the cause of liberty, but it’s a good start. I look forward to hearing the ideas of other Cornerstone contributors and readers regarding these ideas.