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Islamic State: The Problems

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Abstract

Islamic State poses far greater challenges to itself than to the world. These challenges range from societal to religious, and political to economic. There is ever-increasing diversity in the world for the fact of formation of solidarity among various groups/communities that may run counter to regional, national, or religious identities. Diversity is a beauty, and should be endured. The Islamic State faces this question profusely, as fact of the world. There is an increasing realization of the pervasive 'differences' in the world, and as such the slogans of 'end of history' have proved too immature even in the wake of collapse of former USSR. Being blind to history, all accounts of 'end of history' coming from anywhere featuring burdened exclusion-ism tend to behave in similar ostrich ways. Islamic State religiously closes eyes to lessons of history including Islamic history. The ISIS, in some ways, proves 'clash of civilizations' right, but it is not the only way Muslims organize themselves in religion, and in society. South and South-East Asia shows a reasonable trend; though not popular as Arabization is. The ISIS grossly neglects the vast intellectual engagement Muslim scholars had with the issues of the modern world. The issues of caliphate and democracy are central to the understanding of global collective life. The Islamic State, is argued here, faces serious intellectual, religious, and pragmatic challenges that are too magnanimous for reasonable thought.

Keywords: Pluralism; End of history; Muslim plurality; Democracy; Caliphate; Recognition of difference

Introduction

We are discussing no small matter, but how we ought to live. – Socrates, in Plato's Republic.

'And he said, Now, this schoolroom is a Nation. And in this nation, there is fifty millions of money. Isn't this a prosperous nation? Girl number twenty, isn't this a prosperous nation, and aren't you in a thriving state?'

'What did you say?' asked Louisa.

'Miss Louisa, I said I didn't know. I thought I couldn't know whether it was a prosperous nation or not, and whether I was in a thriving state or not, unless I knew who had got the money, and whether any of it was mine. But that had nothing to do with it. It was not in the figures at all,' said Sissy, wiping her eyes.

'That was a great mistake of yours,' observed Louisa. – Charles Dickens, Hard Times.

It is one the greatest frauds on the people to suggest that religious affinity can unite areas which are geographically, economically, linguistically and culturally different. It is true that Islam sought to establish a society which transcends racial, linguistic, economic and political frontiers. History has however proved that after the first decades, or at the most after the first century, Islam was not able to unite all the Muslim countries into one state on the basis of Islam alone. – Abul Kalam Azad, India Wins Freedom.

Few Considerations

The two fictional characters-the illustrious Socrates and perceptive Sissy Jupe-bring forth two inter-related central issues of a qualitative human life. While Plato raises a fundamental ethical question for an agreeable vision of collective life that asks for a wide reflection, Charles Dickens clearly identifies deep problems and limitations with mono-type vision of peoples' life. With a subtle understanding of history, Abul Kalam Azad loudly asks to scrutinize the history of religions to ascertain practicality of political claims and simultaneously impresses upon us to engage in pragmatically possible notions of public life. All the three have a common fundamental point: debate ideas and keep Ideals in mind only.

Easy-attractive ideas claiming to achieve Ideals may have far-reaching dangerous implications. Not only it can breed violence, it may flatten the very pervasive diversity of human societies. Across the faith spectrum (not ideological in political sense of the term), the extremes of 'left' and 'right' (not in moral but spatial sense) will expand for the calls of reform and organization become prominent and antagonisms, thus, propel communalization. A given consequence of such vertical re-organization is: the role and scope of human agency diminishes. The emergence of ISIS and its approach to 'Islamic' revolution raises concerns and questions that ask for serious considerations. A proper way to engage with this puzzling fundamentalist revivalism asks loudly, at least, to avoid the knee-jerk response. Rather a penetrating insight of essence of religious doctrines, cultural context of form of practices and historical functioning (and adaptability) amidst dynamic social transformations are fundamental to understanding of any call of 'revivalism'. Such an examination requires, at least, three-dimensional inter-related assessment of: a) validity; b) desirability; and c) feasibility. In contrast to knee-jerk response, I attempt to present an outline of an approach based on above three components which scrutinizes the claims of 'Ideal' on both grounds — theoretical and practical.

Well before the contours of the proposed engagement are explored, there is a case-in-point that fairly underlines the unreflective approach prevalent at a certain popular level that directly influences (and shapes opinion/motivation of) the common people: "Abu Bakar Al-Baghdadi is our Caliph. Finally, we (wahabi-Muslims) are set to establish an Islamic State and (through it) we will teach a lesson to the world", pronounced a firebrand Wahabi preacher in his Friday sermon in South Kashmir. 'World' in this case included non-wahabi Muslims too. To the ill-luck of the Molvi, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia issued a fatwa 'disowning' the Islamic State and clearly disassociating it from Islam. It happened the same day and, interestingly, the Arabian Mufti belongs to the same school. Two days later, the local newspapers carried the news. Caught in trouble for the other sects will have a day in populism, he did what is expected in this kind of nomocratic approach. The following Friday, he ridiculed the IS and took no time in terming it as "un-Islamic". This 'popular' molvi quickly swung from one extreme to another without even bothering to take note of a simple fact that the memory of his audience is not so short. The affirmation and proclamation was promptly substituted by out-right rejection (both in a week's time!). The reason for propagation was the dream of an extremist "Islamic State" and prompt rejection found reason in Conspiracy Theory ("Enemies hand"). Like this molvi, few academic circles resonate this rigid-either "right" or "wrong"-moral positioning, surprisingly. Such an approach is bound to miss the complex interplay of human diversity, social dynamics, cultural affiliations, corresponding worldviews and systems of faith. This paper tries to present a broader framework that tries to correct this error.

Human Diversity: Enduring or Eliminating 'Difference'

There is enough of theoretical evidence to suggest that the concept and of moral goods, values, and freedoms do vary from culture to culture (as in works Micheal Walzer). The 'difference' exists not only across communities, it can be prevalent in one particular community was remarkably argued by Issaih Berlin. What 'good' constitutes can vary horizontally even in one community owing to its fluid foundation to history, time and space. More than this, John Rawls, Amartya Sen and others provided us an understanding of the inherent diversity within a single individual. An earlier clear illustration of this line of argument is reflected in Marx's The German Ideology. Following this dense line of thinking it can be argued that humans are diverse and this diversity is pervasive. Human diversity is not a secondary aspect to any prospective political arrangement. Any attempt to eliminate the existing diversity — cultural, religious, and sectarian and others — goes against the primacy of individual along with all her internal and external dimensions of life. As a saying goes, diversity is beauty and, therefore, ought to be endured.

Does History End?

History teaches a fundamental lesson: those who claim to solve the puzzle of rationale of collective life have been defeated by the history. With the collapse of former USSR, Francis Fukuyama wrote a triumphalist account of 'Western' liberal democracy and argued that there is a "remarkable consensus" world over about the victory of liberal democracy over the "rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism, and most recently communism." He thought that the world did reach "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution" and, thus, it constituted the "end of history" [1]. Quite expectedly, the thesis had a very short life. The debates of cultural, ethnic and other identities asserted national political space and such movements crumbled the

claims of objective "end of history". It may not be out of place to mention the two genius German philosophers, Georg Wilhelm Hegel and Karl Marx who believed that human societies are progressively directed to evolve into a form of a society where the fundamental wants are fairly met and the antagonisms disappear. The history, thus, will end in a sense that a perfect-universal social order would ultimately explored through a triadic (dialectical) evolutionary or (direct) revolutionary process. The two, however, differ in their envisions of the nature of 'final' stage. All the three, Hegel, Marx and Fukuyama, believe in, what is often called, 'directional history'. Leaving the first two aside, what did 'history' teach to 'triumphalist' Fukuyama? With the beginning of the concluding decade of the Twentieth century, the debates about the 'difference' in identities became prominent and the assertions for safeguarding by gaining political control 'militant'. Ethnic genocide in Bosnia-Herzegovina, issue of Chechnya and emergence of serious conflict over the political scope of religion in Algeria in 1990's ended Fukuyama's thesis of "End of History". The differences of worldviews must co-exist and any attempt (discursive or militant) to eliminate them faces its own death. There are enough of examples from the history that suggest that the rulers or governments ranging from ancient Greeks to medieval Christians and modern Hitler's who tried to develop exclusionist regimes failed; ultimately. History went on to teach a fundamental lesson: it does not end at your door. If it is true about race, culture, caste and creed, it is equally true of religions. Such political regimes may have temporary success, but they become history in the end. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, in the quote above, acknowledges limitation of faith in universalization and homogenization of culture, society and polity. Being blind to history, all such ostrich-approach burdened exclusionists tend to behave in similar ways. ISIS seems no different!

Is the 'Clash of Civilizations' Only Way?

In the past, many a Muslim scholars rejected some noble political values (social pluralism, political recognition to individual, etc.) precisely for the reason that they are "western" ideas. A close scrutiny suggests that most of these scholars/political leaders belonged to the Middle East and North Africa. One of the basis for such exclusivist either we or west was certainly the European colonialism. Such a thinking line persists that 'Islamic' civilization is to become 'universal' by confronting and winning over the 'west'. The clash seems inevitable. The other extreme professes centrality of West. In our times, this exposition finds its full defence in Samuel Huntington's The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order (1996). Propagating westernization in a similar tune what Max Weber thought of modernity, Huntington argued that individual freedom, social democracy, liberalism, socialism etc. are unique 'products of Western civilization' and, thus, West has all ingredients to be recognized as 'Universal civilization' [2]. The present day Middle East and some African Muslim countries that propagate, what is commonly called, Political Islam with some force prove Huntington's thesis. The ISIS is clearly a culmination point this exclusive extreme rightist 'universal' Political Islam. Though dominant, but the Middle East does not represent the Muslim World. The South and South-East Asian Muslims who share a very substantial population of Islam present a plural and accommodative worldview grounded in the very faith their counterparts in Middle East and North Africa practice. One may quickly add that a fundamental distinction between South and South-East Asian Muslims and the Middle East in understanding the worldview of Islam is influenced by the kind of reformation/revival movements the regions underwent in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Unlike Middle East (as mentioned above), the colonialists (the British) did not eliminate the traditional 'ulema elite structures in South Asia. [This led to great movements of renewal (tajdid) in South Asia. One of the most prominent schools of Islamic revival (that is truly global now) is Darul-Aloom Deoband [3,4]]. Can South and South-East Asian plural and democratic Muslim society be an alternative to Political Islam of Arab and Middle East? There are strong scholarly affirmations for these pluralistic and tolerant visions as 'universal' for Muslim world. One such noteworthy is Bassam Tibi, a German Political Scientist.

Though Islam was born in Arab and the Qur'an revealed in Arabic language to Prophet Muhammad, Tibi argues that these contextual 'grounds' 'ought not be stretched to the extent of identifying Islam with Arabness'. A distinction between Arabness and Islam must be made. He rightfully rejects the (wrong) Arabo-centric pride and cautions against the empty secular prophet-hood of Arab nationalists. The problem, however, is this: 'it is the Islam of the heartland that determines the mainstream of Islamic civilization' [5]. It is quite reasonable to admire and 'universalise' (without homogenizing the societies) 'the tolerance, pluralism, and open-mindedness of Southeast Asian Muslims' (ibid). Tibi's insights adequately help us in understanding the social base, popularity and acceptance of ISIS in the Middle East and the North Africa. The ISIS proves Huntington's conclusions, and there are far better reasons that suggest 'clash' is not the only way.

Democracy and Islam: Compatibles or Incompatibles?

The projection of (western-style) of democracy by the western scholars and leaders, on the one hand, and blind acceptance of such exclusivist accounts by most of the non-western scholars/leaders is equally parochial and, thus, problematic. The projection and rejection of democracy as 'ours' and 'theirs' grounded in the binary confrontation is flawed in many ways. The historic ideas like democracy, at least, reject the regional regimentation (see Tocqueville, 1835 and 1990). There are two cases one can point to as examples of such attitudes. First, Iran witnessed a parliamentary revolution called Iranian Constitutional Revolution (Enghelāb-e Mashrūteh) in 1906 with her monarch Mozaffar ad-Din Shah signing the constitution that promulgated the establishment of parliament. It was an appropriate acknowledgement of the demands for a majlis (parliament or assembly) that would curtail the powers of the then-monarchy in Iran. It was during this period, Edouard Valmont, a French diplomat, happened to serve his country (France) in Tehran. This constitutional movement included the religious and secular forces and the leaders of the movement saw Islam compatible with democratic principles. Valmont suffered confusion owing to his 'pride' in the French values of democracy. Though he found Iranians 'apparently' enlightened, but concluded that the Iranians suffer 'the lack of real comprehension of the spirit of the Constitution'.

Second, there are accounts, on the other side, that allege 'democracy' as one of the four 'pillars' of American 'campaign' against Islam (the other three being 'pluralism, human rights and free market policies'). Hizb ut-Tahrir holds this extreme rightist perspective. According to it, 'those who believe in democracy' actually deny 'Allah's right to legislate' and try to put 'man in the place of the Creator' and any Muslim who propagates democracy is allegedly an apostate: kafir (non-believer), zalim (oppressor) and fasiq (transgressor). The functioning of democracy is thus criticized:

The … claims of democracy have no actual reality; the claim that people rule themselves by themselves is a major fallacy. In all Capitalist Democratic societies, people do not rule themselves by themselves … In reality, people are ruled by a certain group of influential people, such as the prominent Capitalists in the United States and the aristocrats in England, which are two of the most deeply rooted Capitalist Democratic countries.

Hizb ut-Tahrir's outright rejection of democracy is fundamentally based on a conspiracy theory that democracy is American 'weapon' that asks for 'retaliation': non-democracy. Both the 'proud' westerners like Edouard Valmont, Huntington and others and Muslim organizations like Hizb ut-Tahrir and ISIS suffer a sort of parochialism. While the latter seemingly 'forgot' a substantial framework of democratic principles Imam Ali ibn Abi-Talib practised during his Caliphate (see his, Nahj-ul Al-Balaghah), the former deliberately neglect traditions of democracy of the non-Western world including the Muslim world. It is in this context I mention a pioneering 19th century Egyptian intellectual, Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi [6].

Rifa'a Rafi' al-Tahtawi was one of the early thinkers who argued that the democracy is perfectly compatible with Islam (as early as first quarter of the 19th century). One of the most fundamental questions he addressed was: what ought to govern society: Divine Law or the people? His answer was clear: the people whose legislations are informed by religion, not the religion. For a certain fact, it was al-Tahtawi who began thinking of Egyptian nationalism and took religion and patriotism as 'one' belief system. He, and like him on the left spectrum, argued that Islam possesses a perfect system of governing ibadah (religious prayer system) of the Muslims, but does not provide 'a prescriptive blueprint for governing Muslim society' [7]. His was a deep engagement with the questions of parliamentary government, freedom, equality, justice, homeland (watan) and political and civil rights of citizens. For him, it is quite necessary that there must a state patronage for the freedom of opinion and expression: 'Among the things that helped to broaden the scope of civilization in the countries of the earth is the kings' approval for scientists and possessors of knowledge to write legal, philosophical, literary, and political books' [6]. He thought that the ultimate purpose of the political State is to make peoples' lives comfortable and 'happy' and the 'greatest means' for this end is freedom. Drawing the relationship between freedom and happiness, he writes:

Freedom … is the greatest means for making the people of kingdoms happy. If freedom is built on just and sound laws, it will be a great means in comforting the people and making them happy in their countries [6].

The underlying belief for such a creative engagement with artificial principles was to live with the temporal social dynamics and acknowledge the limits of frozen frameworks. The greater confusions arise when the principles that are to conduct the faith structure are arbitrarily expanded to control the social world. It may, however, be noted that the religious ethical systems can become the foundation of the political and legal structure of the states. The two can be complementary to each other in limited ways, but, in any case, they cannot be one-and-the-same. Fundamental to this line of thinking is somewhat clear distinction between 'general' rule (that had been consistently revealed to prophets) and 'specific' principle (that were meant only for a particular situation). Contrarily, Hizb ut-Tahrir and ISIS choke the space and scope of human agency which otherwise is mandated to legislate and govern the society based on the general principles of ethics laid down in the Qur'an and hadith.

Caliphate or Islamic State: The Dilemma

The ISIS propagates 'caliphate' yet calls herself 'state'. The state, conventionally understood, is a well-defined territorial unit capable of running her affairs autonomously. Contrarily, religions are not bordered 'entities' rather claim extra-territoriality. In comparison to religions, the state is purely a human innovation that emerged as a popular category (nation-state) of a particular type of human association in the post-1650's Europe. Common to all states of the world is coercive apparatus to implement the state laws that does not warrant peoples' consent, generally. While as following laws of the land is involuntary (violation is crime), religion and observance of religious law is voluntary. The shari'a is agreeably consent-based religious law and cannot be forcibly implemented. The coercive application of shari'a through state will dilute the very foundational character of it, that is, consent. Islam and politics cannot be separated for it provides the ethical foundation for the political processes, legislation and public policy, but State and Islam must not be one. Without such a necessary distinction, the ISIS mixes the two. That is why it carries a double standard: 'caliphate' and 'state'. Apart from this conceptual issue, there are some other pertinent practical problems asking for a serious consideration.

Who ought to be caliph? Should he belong to a particular family or be of a particular lineage? Or the qualification, as tradition says, is simple: appoint the 'best'? If there are many a 'best', how to choose the best; there are ambiguities. A saying of Prophet Muhammad that is reported in Bukhari restricts Caliphate only to the Arab Quresh dynasty (the family he himself belonged to). It is for this hadith, the Shia's have argued from the very beginning that only the progenies of Prophet Muhammad should rule. Thus emerges a point of controversy: who should rule versus what should rule? For some, it is caliph (a true guide and 'infallible Imam', as Shias look upon Ali ibn Abi-Talib) or sharia (as traditionalist Sunni argue for) [7]. How far is the first possible is evident from even recent past when Khomeini established vilayat-i-faqih believing that the 'hidden' Imam would show the true path through ulema immediately after Islamic Revolution in Iran [8]. In case of the latter, the two set of problems arise: some argue that the sharia precisely guides the personal and social ethical system and has limited role in public political life and secondly, the sharia backed by the 'modern' state (as we have today) implemented as a State Law will lose the (voluntary) character of being a religious law (as discussed above).

There is also no a definite procedure of election/selection or appointment of a caliph. The first four caliphs, who are said to be the ideal caliphs of Islam (all others with an exception of Umar bin abdul Aziz are actual caliphs), did not follow a uniform procedure. Abu Bakar, the first caliph, was appointed through a community consensus (Ijmah); (though there was some dissent against his selection) [9]. It is not clear whether all the members did participate and some sort of franchise adopted. Abu-Bakar designated Umar bin al-Khitab as caliph of Islam during his caliphate and Usman ibn 'Affan was appointed by a committee. And Ali ibn Abi Talib was appointed by an assembly of people. The embryonic stage and the relatively small population made this somewhat 'direct' system in some cases and some sort of collegium in other possible. And add the popularity of these privileged four (Rashidun) as life-long companions of Prophet Muhammad among the newly converted Muslims of the age. One must not be blind to the context in which it was 'successfully' practised (even these years were not short of mutual tussle and conflicts that consumed lives of hundreds of Muslims including three among first four caliphs and grandsons of Prophet) [10]. The subsequent history is a bitter lesson.

Conclusion

This humble attempt of assessing the very idea of ISIS on the basis of three inter-related tools validity, desirability, and feasibility is hopefully only a beginning of a serious scrutiny; not a conclusive word at all. Given the complex structures within and without, the Islamic State has a very limited scope and appeal at all the suggested components. Definite frontiers of state, exclusive community boundaries and oppressive social systems are deeply violent and, thus, antithetical to every message of Peace.

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