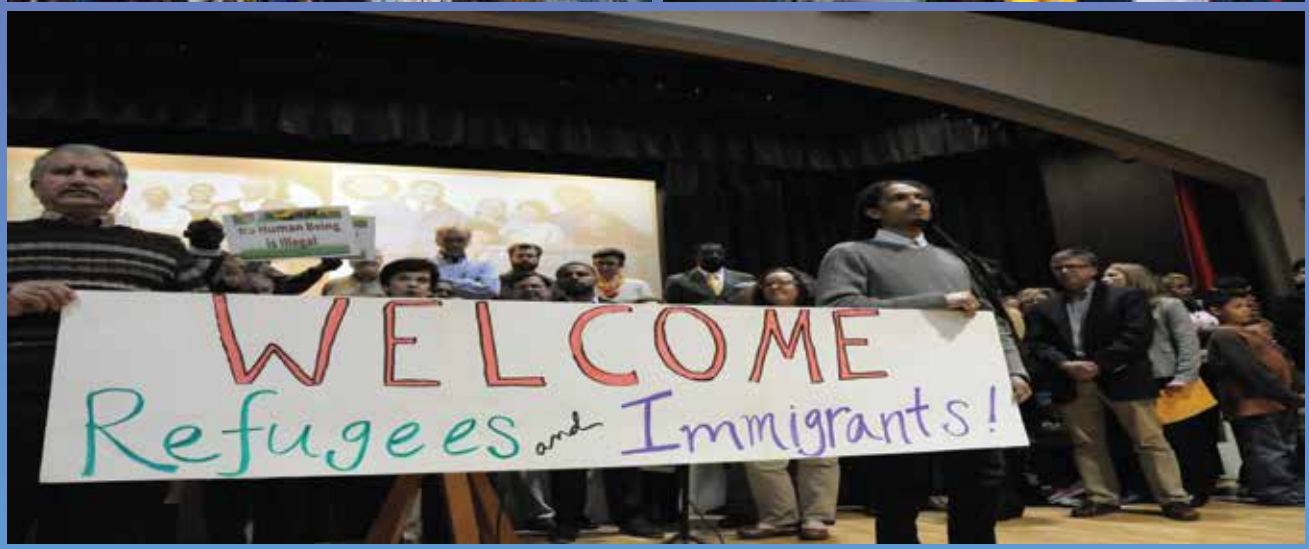
AMANA

VOLUME 10 ISSUE 1, MAY 2017

Religious Inspiration in the Move from Turbulent to Inclusive Societies



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Editorial

Mohammad Abdus Sabur

The presidential election in the United States of America is over. Donald Trump is the new president. Throughout the election period international and national media extensively covered the debate on policies and proposals put forward by Donald Trump. Concerned citizens, civil society and intelligentsia, in democratic or socialist countries as well as countries under monarchy or dictatorship followed the debate. But the question is why? The possible answer could be that like it or not, every country and its citizens get affected in one way or another by the policies and actions of the United States of America and its allies.

Issues raised in the election campaign include migrants, refugees, building a wall on Mexican border, Islamic terrorist travel ban from 7 Muslim-majority countries, extreme vetting of Muslims in general and concern about whether climate change is "fake". In the greater human world, people to people communication, exchanges, caring and sharing, extending solidarity support in difficult times irrespective of color and creed, religious and ethnic identity, these are essential components and building blocks for a prosperous and caring world.

We must not forget that colonization, enslavement, exploitation of natural resources, imposition of unjust war have been a common practice of all colonial powers. It is also true that during the cold war between the Western free World and the Communist World, a majority Muslim countries aligned themselves with the United States of America and its allies.

Terrorism in all its form is the enemy of the people. Similarly rule without consent of people, unjust war, destruction of homes, lives and livelihood also fall under the category of state terrorism.

When a government, whether elected or not fail its own people to realize their full potential and let them contribute to the society to the best of their ability, then it is only right that government take responsibility to pave the way so that the state is restructured and reformed through people's participation.

The fact is that the vast majority people in most of the developing countries still live in poverty, unable to find a job, lacking skills and with no access to resources. Meanwhile, ineffective state structure have grown. The possible way out is to empower people, strengthen local autonomous bodies and civil society organizations, allocate resources and ensure mechanisms of accountability and transparency.

The processes of human development and evolving an enabling, accountable governance take time. Educational opportunities and exchange of experiences between and among countries is vital. In the case of man-made and natural disaster a rich tradition of trans-border solidarity and resource-sharing is well established. It is expected that such collaboration will be further facilitated by all concerned including governments. On the part of civil society it is self-nurtured compassion, inclusiveness and nonviolence that must remain the paramount commitment.

The eight papers in this issue of Amana provide examples both of such collaboration as well as of lack thereof, between civil society and governments. Three of the 8 articles deal with the plight of forgotten peoples namely the Kurds, those in and from Afghanistan and those in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) in Bangladesh. The latter is complimented by a letter from Bangladesh, reminding us that there is more to Bangladesh than just the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Two are in the form of tranquil musings, far from the scenes of strife and recall "good memories". Two of the articles deal with the role of religion and, in particular of Islam.

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The Role of Religion in Asian Geo-Politics

Prof. Azyumardi Azra

There is little doubt that Asia is the single continent that is blessed as the place where virtually all major world religions originated and developed. It is in Asia that Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam were revealed and developed.

Contrary to the classic theories on the decline of religions facing modernization and secularization since the time of the post-World War II period, all these great religions are still very strong up until today in most regions in Asia. In fact like much of the other parts of the globe, Asia has at least in the last three decades been experiencing religious revival.

In Asia, during the various courses and stages of history, each of the religions plays a great role, not only in the lives of the faithful, but also in public and political life. Hinduism, the predominant religion in India, plays an important role in India; and Buddhism is a crucial element in private and public lives in Thailand and Sri-Lanka. Even though most Japanese would say that they do not practice Shintoism, it is clear that one would easily be able to find the traces of this religion in their lives.

Judaism is one of the most deciding factors in Israel. Christianity, more precisely Catholicism, is the single largest religion in the Philippines and Timor Leste; and at the same time Protestantism is making inroads in South Korea, Japan, China and some other places in Asia. Islam, the latest of the Abrahamic religions, is the predominant religion in much of Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam, and Malaysia), pre-dominant in South Asia (Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Maldives, Iran, and a big minority in India), and constitutes the largest majority in West Asia (the Gulf countries, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Syria, and Yemen).

Asian Geo-Politics and Religions

For centuries, as suggested earlier, religions have been part and parcel of human life in Asia. This is true not only in religious life, but also in other walks oflife ; social, cultural, and—of course—political. In short, religions are embedded in private and public life.

However, in the post-World War II period, newly independent nation-states have had different constitutional arrangements on the matter of the place of religion in each country. Countries like India, Singapore, Japan and South Korea, for instance, are secular' states that officially give no special place to religion; religion is simply a private matter and, therefore, should not interfere in political and public lives.

On the other hand, in countries where religions were accommodated in political and public lives like Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, the role of religion appeared to have declined with the introduction of modernization and economic development. Religion in general had been regarded as not very compatible with modernity,

modernization, and economic development. The modernization processes have been supposed to bring 'secularization', putting religions in very defensive positions.

Furthermore, in other countries, the declining role of religion in political and public lives has had a lot to do with the adoption of a certain political ideology that was adopted by respective countries. The case in point is the adoption of the ideology of communism in countries like China, the Soviet Union, North Korea and some others. The communist ideology, as can be expected, was hostile to religions; indeed religions were considered the 'opium' that led people to escapism and, therefore should be banned from public life.

At the other end of the continent, some countries in West Asia adopted authoritarianism-socialism - like Iraq and Syria, based on the ideology of baathism - that in many ways was also hostile to religions. This in the course of history, religion has inspired and driven certain groups of Muslims to oppose the regimes, creating cycles of violence that are difficult to break. The opposition continued to increase since the 1990s when the regimes failed to deliver their promises for better economic and social lives.

A momentum for change came when the waves of globalization and democratization swept the region, creating the so-called 'Arab spring', not only in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt in North Africa, but also in Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria in West Asia. And those who won the upper hand in the political changes in a number of countries are the Islamists, even though some kind of 'tug of war' with the secular elements in each country are far from over. In many countries the changes have also unleashed violent Sunni-Shia conflicts.
Still there are nation-states like Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and others that in one way or another have maintained or adopted a more friendly attitude to religions. Religions were (and still are) given a special status in the constitutions and otherwise. Despite that, religions tended to be sidelined in the process of modernization of the countries in the decades following their independence in the post-World War II period.

Contrary to the classic theories on the decline of religions in the process of modernization, religions are now in fact returning to public and political lives in many Asian countries. Economic development and socio-cultural progress in Indonesia, Malaysia, India, and China have brought back religions to politics.

In Indonesia, Islam increasingly reappeared in power politics since the early 1990s when the Soeharto regime introduced some kind of reconciliatory policies to Islam and to Muslim groups. This phenomenon increased significantly in the post-Soeharto period. Yet, despite many signs of increased attachment to Islam, Islamic political parties fared poorly in the successive general elections of 1999, 2004, 2009 and 2014.

In China, the phenomenal economic progress in the last two decades at least brought many people to link Confucianism as the spiritual base of development. Not only in China, but also in Singapore for instance, government high officials as well as experts have been discussing what they call 'new Confucianism' as the spirit and ethos behind their economic progress. At the same time, there is also an obvious policy of new openness and rapprochement towards religions implemented by the Chinese government.

Religions and Security Issues

Despite the return of religions to private and public lives in many Asian countries, religions have also, at least in the last two decades, been increasingly regarded as a problem of security. This has a lot to do with the rise of radical and terrorist groups in certain Asian countries that use and abuse their respective religions for their own political and religious purposes.

Religious-linked terrorism is clearly not unique to Islam that is often accused of being responsible, particularly in the post-nine eleven (2001) events in the USA. One can find throughout human history a great number of terrorist acts that in one way or another were linked with a certain religion. With the increased globalization and instant flow of information and news that has created a great deal of anomalies, the radicalization of religious individuals and groups have tended to accelerate.

Religions with central authority are of course more prone to violence and terrorism. But religions without central authority could also become prone, because of the decline of their religious authority and de-centralization of religious authority and leadership.

Practically no religion is free from that kind of abuse by small groups of its followers. Radical groups can easily be found among the Hindus in India; among the Buddhists in Sri-Lanka and Myanmar; among the Shintos in Japan; among the Jews in Israel; among Muslims in Indonesia, southern Philippines, southern Thailand, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Iraq; and among the Christians such as the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), North East India.

The root-causes of radicalism and even terrorism among the believers are very complex. In fact there is some kind of combination of various factors including politics, economics and also religious. In most cases, politics seems to be the most important factor. To take the cases of radicalism and terrorism perpetrated by some very small groups and calls in the name of Islam in Indonesia since the time of the Bali bombing (2002) up until today, it is apparent that politics, both domestic and international, is the main cause of terrorism. At the domestic level, the perpetrators of the bombings have been motivated by their anger and hatred of the Indonesian political system that they regard as being 'un-Islamic'.

As for international politics, it is clear that even before the tragic events of September 11 in the USA, the Muslim perpetrators of terrorism have condemned certain injustices in international politics and relations. For them, the US and other western countries are the enemies of Islam and of Muslims. Western countries, particularly the US, are considered to be basically hostile to Islam and the Muslim world. In fact, they believe the US and other western countries have conspired to destroy Islam and Muslims. A number of international cases such as the US continued support of Israel at the expense of Palestine and the US military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have only added fuel to their anger and hatred of the US and its allies.

Therefore, religion seldom becomes the main, let alone the only, cause of terrorism. Political, economic, and other non-religious factors, however, in turn could easily be given religious justification, when the perpetrators of any kind of terrorist act put forward certain interpretations of religious teachings.

The Case of Islam

The use, abuse and manipulation of religious justification are perhaps potentially larger in Sunni Islam, which does not have a single body of religious authority. In the matter of leadership, Sunni Islam is of course different from Shi'a Islam—like in Iran today—which has a centralistic leadership in the hands of the mujtahid mutlaq—the absolute decider—and in the body of wilayat al-faqih consisting of the most prominent 'ulama.

From a doctrinal point of view, I believe that certain doctrines within Islam can be used and abused for justifying acts of terrorism. The doctrine of jihad, for instance, could easily be taken as a justification by certain Muslim individuals and groups to conduct holy war against any perceived enemies, including even other Muslims. Certain verses of the Qur'an and the Tradition (Hadith) of the Prophet Muhammad are prone to be interpreted that way; indeed, there are religious interpretations and understandings that exist along the same lines.

Arguably, this limited 'literal' and sharia-oriented (zahir) understanding of Islam is more prone to radicalism - using selected verses of the Qur'an, while conveniently ignoring other 'literal' understanding such as the numerous verses that emphasize peace and benevolence, mercy and forgiveness. This kind of religious understanding as a rule makes some clear boundaries even among Muslims. Those who are opposed to their understanding are in fact regarded by them as having gone astray and, therefore, can be targets of jihad (war). This can be seen clearly in the cases of the Wahabis in the late 18th century Arabia and the Padris of West Sumatra in the early decades of the 19th century.

The 'non-literal' understanding of Islam, such as represented by Sufism, is more immune to violence. This is mainly because of the strong emphasis Sufism puts on inclusiveness and the 'inner' (batin) aspect of Islam. Even though the Sufi—like the 'literalists'—also appeal for purification through religious acts, they do it in a peaceful manner through spiritual exercises rather than by using force, as is the way of the 'literalists'.

Furthermore, the absence of a single authority in Islam—particularly among the Sunnis—makes it very difficult, if not impossible, to issue a religious ruling (fatwa) that would decide once and for all that terrorism as jihad is religiously unjustifiable and invalid.

Not least important is the precedent in Muslim history of radical acts that can be included in the definition of terrorism. The radical acts conducted by the Kharijis (seceders) in the post-Prophet Muhammad period, for instance, have in fact continuously inspired many, if not most, contemporary radical Muslim groups. There indeed exist certain radical ideologies among Muslims which basically state that it is religiously valid to conduct such radical and terrorist acts.

Therefore, there is an urgent need among concerned Muslim scholars ('ulama') to rethink, reinterpret, reformulate certain interpretations of classical and medieval 'ulama' concerning for instance jihad. For that purpose the 'ulama' and Muslims in general first of all must discard the defensive and apologetic attitude that is apparent when they respond to terrorist acts conducted by certain individuals or Muslim groups. They should admit that there are indeed terrorists among Muslims who—based on their understanding of Islam—conduct terrorism. Admitting this problem, then the 'ulama' could proceed to address the issue objectively from a religious point of view.

Religiously linked terrorism, like the one in Indonesia, basically is not associated with the state. Most of the radical groups in contrast are opposed to the state; they are originally non-state activists of obscure backgrounds. Moreover, they are as a rule outside the mainstream Muslim movements. In fact, they have bitterly criticized mainstream Muslims as being too accommodating and compromising to what they regard as 'un-Islamic' political, social, cultural, and economic realities.

There is a tendency, however, that certain radical individuals or groups could be recruited by or have certain links or connections with persons in the government or military. This is not new in Indonesia. The terrorist hijacking of a Garuda Indonesia airplane in Bangkok during the Soeharto period, for instance, was conducted by terrorists of ex-Islamic state movements in the 1950's that were recruited by certain of Soeharto's generals to launch the so-called 'komando jihad' (jihad command). There have been a lot of indications that certain military have incited and manipulated some radical groups in the post-Soeharto period.

Conclusion

Looking at the experience of religions in contemporary Asia, it seems that religion will continue to be an important factor in many communities. But at the same time, religions will also continue to face a great deal of problems, not only related to societies at large, but also within and among religions themselves. There will for instance be conflicts among different interpretations and schools of thought within any religion.

For that reason, internal and external mutual understanding and respect among the religious leaders is a must. This in turn should be spread out to the faithful as a whole. Through this kind of effort, religion once again can play a more contributive role to the creation and strengthening of a more harmonious and peaceful civilization.

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Understanding Islam in the Context of Interfaith Harmony

Waris Mazhari

We live at a time of unprecedented global interconnectedness. Never before in the entire history of humankind have people of different faith communities, cultures,countries and ethnicities been in such close contact all across the globe as today. This situation provides us wonderful possibilities to learn and benefit from each other and to work together for our own good and for the collective good of all. Much of this goodness is, in fact, being manifested today, at various levels and in different ways. The rich possibilities for promoting this goodness are being availed of by those individuals and communities who have developed the skill of harmoniously and creatively relating with people who think, believe and behave differently from them.

At the same time, this intense closeness that different peoples across the world are now experiencing has had another impact. Individuals and communities who have not developed the skills for relating with people who think, believe and behave differently from them may find the situation of being in close contact with others intimidating. They may react to this predicament with hate, resentment, aggression and even war. And with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction that can literally wipe off all traces of life from this planet, this is no mere theoretical issue.

Today, people—individuals as well as entire communities—are faced with the urgent task of learning to live harmoniously with those who think, believe and behave differently from them, whom they now live with as co-members of the 'global village'. Our common survival demands this. It is not something that we can choose to ignore if we wish to continue to inhabit this planet.

In this context, it has become absolutely imperative for different faith communities to learn to live harmoniously with each other. Given the fact that most countries today are now religiously plural and that, owing to the reach of almost instant communications, the actions of members of one community in one corner of the world can have a major impact on inter-community relations globally, it is simply unavoidable for faith communities to reach out to each other for the common good of all. For this purpose, different faith communities need to highlight teachings in their own religious traditions that accept and honour each other and recognize the goodness in other faith traditions and their adherents. This is the only way for their followers to develop positive understandings of others so that they learn that to live in harmony with people of other faiths is something that is mandated in their own religion and is not a deviation from it. This task of understanding, from within each religious tradition, religious pluralism as an asset, rather than as a problem, is something that people of faith need to take very seriously, for the collective good, indeed survival, of humankind hinges critically on it.

No religion is understood in a homogenous or singular way. Each religion has, throughout its history, been understood diversely by those who claim to follow it. This interpretive diversity includes diverse understandings about the status and worth of other faiths and their adherents as well as of other interpretations of the same faith and those who claim to

follow them. Some such understandings may be positive. There are others that are heavily negative, in which other faiths as well as other interpretations of the same faith and their adherents are seen as deviant or even worse, and as something to be combated. People who uphold such understandings of their religion see religious plurality as a problem, rather than as an asset.

Negative approaches of the religious 'other' (including of people and groups who claim to follow the same faith but interpret it differently) are today at the root of conflict in the name of religion that has assumed demonic proportions in many parts of the world. This is definitely the case among a sizeable section of Muslims. Misusing the concept of jihad and posing as 'champions' of Islam, Muslim extremist groups have unleashed horrific violence against those who think, believe and behave differently from them—including people of other faiths as well as fellow Muslims. This hate and violence in the name of Islam for both the 'external other' and the 'internal other' is now one of the gravest threats facing the whole of humankind. If we wish to inhabit a world where people of different beliefs can live together in peace and harmony and work together for the greater glory of God and for the benefit of all, this deep-rooted resentment and intolerance—of Muslims who think and believe differently as well as people of other faiths—simply has to be tackled and overcome. In this task, Muslims themselves have, of course, a principle role to play.

Some Muslims may argue that the ongoing terrorism in the name of Islam by some Muslim groups is a reaction to the actions of others. My understanding is different. Just as these Muslims blame the acts of others for their own violence against them, others blame Muslims for their violence against Muslims. Clearly, this blame-game can get us nowhere at all. Muslims must recognize that, as the saying goes, it takes two hands to clap, and, accordingly, must admit the role of extremist and intolerant interpretations of Islam and their adherents in fomenting hate, violence and also what is called 'Islamophobia' on a very large scale. They must heed this commandment of the Quran (5:8):

Believers, be steadfast in the cause of God and bear witness with justice. Do not let your enmity for others turn you away from justice. Deal justly; that is nearer to being God-fearing.'

Along with this, they must also recognize that although it takes two hands to clap, it suffices for just a single hand extended in friendship to build bridges of understanding and harmony between individuals and communities. Let Muslims take the initiative of extending that hand, unilaterally if need be—for their own good, for the good of the image of Islam and for the good of the whole of humankind. They must know that this is something that is mandated by Islam itself.

Since literalist, hate-driven, exclusivist, and supremacist misinterpretations of Islam are at the very root of the ongoing conflict and violence involving Muslims in many parts of the world, efforts to promote peace and harmony in Muslim societies and across the world as such simply cannot avoid the indispensable task of articulating and promoting alternate, authentic understandings of Islam that respect religious pluralism and accept and honour people of other faiths as well as Muslims who understand their faith differently. Overcoming extremism in the name of Islam also requires a sustained effort to show that such extremism actually is a deviation from Islam and that it has no sanction in it, contrary to what extremist Muslim ideologues insist.

If we are to promote peace and put an end to the hate and violence in the name of Islam that has become such a major challenge today, this ideological task is absolutely necessary. No amount

of political change or economic 'development' or military engagement, necessary though these may be, can substitute for this task. Extremist Muslim groups seek support among Muslims for their hate-driven violence against people of other faiths and against other Muslims by claiming that their activities are mandated by their particular interpretation of Islam. Hence, the only way they can be denied this support is by convincing Muslims that the extremists' interpretation of Islam actually has no sanction whatsoever in Islam and is, in fact, a complete deviation from it. This is crucial if Muslims are to be saved from falling prey to the appeals of radicals. A fundamental-change in the Muslim mindset, especially on the issue of inter-community, inter-religious and inter-sectarian relations, is thus called for.

For Muslims to accept peace and harmony as guiding principles in their relations with others, both people of other faiths and Muslims who understand Islam differently from how they do, they must be convinced that these principles are rooted in Islam and are not alien to it. This calls for Muslim scholars to work on highlighting Islamic teachings about peace and interfaith and inter-sectarian dialogue, harmony and understanding among the Muslim populace particularly, as well as among others.

For Muslims to become a force for peace and goodness in the world, they simply have to rethink several deep-rooted traditional views regarding relations between Muslims of different schools of thought and between Muslims and people of other faiths, engage in practical efforts to promote intra-Muslim and inter-faith dialogue, understanding and harmony, and recover and highlight, including through practical efforts, the message of peace that is basic to the Quran and that exemplified the life of the Prophet Muhammad. This is the only way that people can be weaned away or saved from violent, hate-driven discourses in the name of Islam that have managed to garner a sizeable number of supporters. This is also necessary for Muslims to recover and live by the true teachings of their faith. That this is also necessary for global peace goes without saying.

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Dialogical Essence of Islam as a Philosophy for Interfaith Peace

Dr. Mohsen Badreh

Religions are constituted of interacting systems of meaning and symbols because they are a part of human cultures. The meaning system of a religion is mainly built by religious elites but laity or ordinary religious communities mainly identify their religious life with the symbolic system and prioritize it, based thereon, in social and inter-faith communication.

Religions and denominations can have different or possibly contradictive meanings or symbolic systems, but since their symbolic systems are products of different geographical and cultural spheres, the differences and contradictions often manifest themselves in symbolic religious systems. For example, we have the meaning of 'praising' in almost all religions but the symbolic behavior that represent such concept are very different in various religious traditions. Therefore, if the followers of a religion prioritize the religious symbolic systems over meaning systems, the differences and contradictions surface in the most severe way.

In contrast, when the core meaning and thematic systems are considered, the mutual approaching dimensions of religions and denominations come into the spotlight. However, judging other religions based on symbolic structures can create a process that starts with epistemic violence; continues with linguistic-rhetorical violence; and finally leads to physical violence including terrorism, war etc. On the other hand, religious mutual understanding, based on thematic systems shows similarities and prepares the stage for interfaith communication in the form of peace, dialogue and invitation.

The above mentioned religious-fueled violence can be seen in all communities that attribute themselves to religions, including Muslim Ummah. But what is the perspective of original Islamic sources (Quran and credible Hadiths) on the problem of interfaith relations?

Islam identifies itself in a different way and introduces an identity that is most obvious in its name and is articulated in its original epistemic sources. Islam means surrender to the truth and truthful meanings and themes; and openness toward them wherever they are found and whatever they be, whoever gives them to you, of all sexes, ages, races, religions or political identities. Thus, being a Muslim (someone who practices Islam as a communicative method) is equivalent to confessing and accepting all truthful meanings and arguments, albeit in other religions. And a Muslim is a person who permanently searches for wisdom (Hikmah) and dialogue and listens humbly to all human beings.

The Quran wants Muslims to be "Those who listen to the Word, and follow the best (meaning) in it: those are the ones whom Allah has guided, and those are the ones endued with understanding." (Quran: 39; 18) The Quran, orders them to "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." (Quran:16;125)

This mindset leads to inviting other religious communities to dialogue and argument instead of mongering war: [Muhammad!] 'Say: "O People of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah. That we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah."'… (Quran:3;64) And imposing is not acceptable: "Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error …" (Quran: 2; 256)

Islam wants people to build their interactions and communications upon wisdom (Hikmah) and piety (Taqwa), respectively in philosophical and ethical dimensions of their life; Hikma is truthful meaning and Taqwa is being apart from arrogance in intrapersonal and interpersonal communications. Due to these principles no one can claim superiority because of his/her racial, linguistic, gender and even religious identities against other human beings. The Quran address us "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you." (49;13)

In short, though Islam does attribute a reasonable importance to religious symbolic system, importantly, it prioritizes the meaning and thematic system, because Islam is not a dogmatic "ism" but rather an approach or communicative method. And as a method its essence is dialogical not dogmatic. A dogmatist system prioritizes a symbolic structure and defines all social and interfaith relations based upon that structure. Then, it easily excommunicates all other people and thereby ends up in divergence and violence. But the dialogical essence of Islam calls for permanent searching of truth and wisdom all around the globe and finding commonalities in interfaith dialogues and living in peace and communication. Finally the way that Islam defines itself (as the sphere of truthful meanings throughout human traditions) and its dialogical essence can be introduced as a philosophy for interfaith peace and inter-religious communication.

Note: Quran verses are quoted from Yousef Ali's translation.

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Kashmir: The 2016 Uprising

Mushtaq Ul Haq Ahmad Sikander

Jammu & Kashmir conflict is the legacy of British colonialism and the subsequent partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. The state of J&K was divided between Indian and Pakistan administered Kashmir in the aftermath of the partition. Millions of people became divided and the Kashmir issue has since persisted between India and Pakistan. Seven decades have elapsed, but the humanitarian crisis has witnessed no end in Kashmir. The right of self-determination that was promised by both countries as evident by the United Nations resolutions to decide the political future has been denied to the inhabitants of the J&K state. This denial, reinforced by the suppression, militarization, iron-fist policy and lack of democracy has led to massive peoples movements that have started, evolved and declined since the birth of the dispute. The movement for right of self determination is most vocal in the Indian Administered Kashmir (IAK). In Pakistan Administered Kashmir (PAK), there are nationalist voices that call for implementation of right of self determination, but they are not met with a similar brutal and military response as is done by the Indian state. Further, the resistance has been quite vibrant in IAK, that constitutes the highest militarized zone in the world. This resistance has kept the conflict vibrant and it keeps hitting the media headlines time and again.

The 2016 people's movement IAK is a continuity of the people's movements of 2008-2010. The trigger for this movement was the killing of a charismatic young militant commander of Hizbul Mujahidden, Burhan Muzaffar Wani. Burhan was instrumental in reviving the indigenous militancy in the aftermath of the 2010 agitation. He gave hope to the beleaguered masses that they could fight militarization and occupation with armed insurgency. His charisma and use of social media with regular video uploads certainly elevated his status as a youth icon of the new generation of militancy. In a fateful encounter with the army on July 8, 2016 he was killed along with his two associates, which triggered a chain reaction of events that led to the spilling of pent-up rage of the masses against the Indian army and local police.

This rage resulted in one of the longest strikes the world has ever witnessed and that has lasted for more than six months. Along with the strikes, a strict curfew has been imposed in most districts of Kashmir valley. In the tussle between the 'security forces' and youth, more than one hundred people have been killed, fifteen thousand injured, maimed or disabled for life. The security forces have used pellet guns as a crowd control mechanism that has resulted in fatal injuries. A single pellet cartridge contains 300-600 minute round iron balls, which have the capacity to pierce the human body at different places. It targets scores of people at one time and certainly the doctors have a tiring job of operating the pellet hit bodies. These pellets have completely or partially blinded more than one thousand youth, and more than fifteen people have died due to multiple pellet injuries. Despite the lethality of the pellet gun, the state government has insisted on its continuance citing it as an important tool for crowd control and describing it as 'non lethal' in nature. Furthermore, the Indian government has banned its use for targeting animals but supports its use against common, non-violent Kashmiri protestors. The doctors find it cumbersome and in some cases impossible to restore the eye sight of youth who have been victims of pellets. The use of pellets has added fuel to the rage against the state.

The cry on the street is for complete Azadi (freedom) from India, but the state has not budged even an inch from its rigid stance and has been branding the agitation, uprising and people's movement as being a Pakistan sponsored and internal law and order problem. This brushing aside of a real people's movement and of the grievances of people will in the long run prove delusional for the state. The uprising and people's movement may be crushed just as its predecessor movements, but certainly it has politicized a new generation of youth who have been inculcated with anti-India hatred. Also the insurgency, its networks and charm has once again been revived in the hearts and minds of youth. This new generation insurgency certainly will not remain confined within the Kashmir valley only but will spill over into the main part of India and will be pan-Islamist in its connotation. The failure of the uprising to achieve tangible goals like demilitarization, revocation of the armed forces special powers act that grants impunity to the armed forces to commit atrocities without facing the rule of law and failure to punish the guilty security forces accused of human rights violations will certainly result in the demoralization of the peaceful people's movement. This demoralization of non-violence certainly will usher in a new phase of radicalization, extremism and violent insurgency, which can result in a new spate of violence. The violence will erode any peace constituency and moderation, in which neutral civil society activists will find it quite hard to survive, speak and continue activism.

The state has failed to distinguish between violent insurgency and non-violent people's movement, thus its response is similar to an iron fist policy. This iron fist policy has made many youth introspect about the feasibility of non-violence as a tool of resistance. A common Kashmiri certainly experiences that he is a subject instead of a citizen as compared to an Indian, and this renders him alienated and incommensurable with the mainstream Indians. He looks at the government as a ruler, instead of a welfare institution, that is constituted for his welfare. The democracy available in the main part of India is absent in Kashmir. All these reasons along with the fact that the Kashmir conflict is pending its final settlement have kept the conflict raging over these decades. The conflict has the potential to remain alive for the next five decades or more because both India and Pakistan do not have the political will to resolve the conflict and the resistance against Indian militarization is not going to die down anytime soon.

The common Kashmiri has always resisted the suppression and oppression and will continue to do so. But the Indian state, being colonial in its structure, framework and polity still believes that the genuine political aspirations of the people can be suppressed till eternity. They have as yet failed to understand the fact that the time for ruler - ruled, lord and subjects is over. Despite its loud claims, brags and boasts about being the largest working democracy in the world and its secular credentials, the India state rules Kashmir with an iron fist camouflaged with the fractured institution of elections to legitimize its brutal rule and present itself as democratic before the world. The world powers including the Muslim world is also turning a blind eye to these atrocities, as Kashmir has no resources like oil or natural gas that can bind the world attention to its cause. In spite of the hostility of the world powers, incumbency of the United Nations, the common Kashmiri is still optimistic of a future that is free, peaceful and democratic.

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Kurds, their Struggle, and their Aspiration

Dr. Ismael Mersham

The Kurds are an Indo-European people who live predominantly in the Middle Eastern region of Asia. The ancient and early medieval Kurds were mostly pastoralists, farmers and nomads, who were the inhabitants of the highlands and river basins of Mesopotamia. The earliest documents about Kurds are Assyrian records from around 1000 BC referring to the people living in Mt. Azu or Hizan (near Lake Van) by the name Kurti or Kurkhi. The term "Kurd" is first encountered in Arabic sources of the 1st century of the Islamic era.1

The Kurds established several dynasties especially during the 12th and 13th centuries and then constituted a political power in the Middle East. Sultan Saladin's rule and the Ayyubid (Eyoob) Dynasty in these centuries are known as the peak of Kurdish political strength in medieval times. These Kurdish powers –the Marwanids, Shaddadids and Ayyubid (Eyoob) dynasties –controlled a region stretching between the Anatolian Plains, the North Iranian and Armenian Plateaus, Egypt- and Hejaz, as is shown on the map below.2

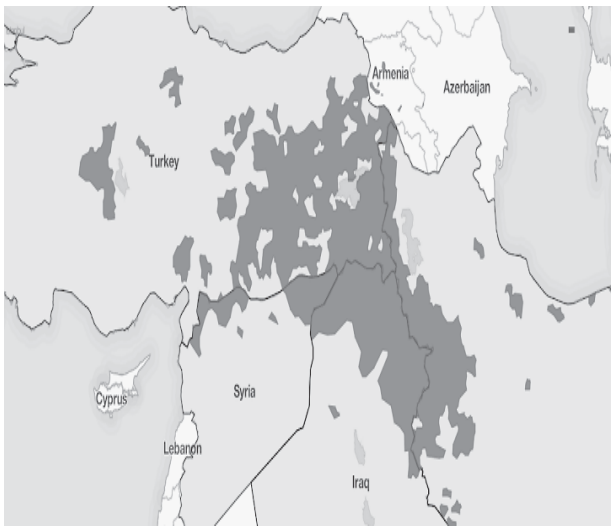
Recent history, notably the Sykes-Picot agreement in 1916, divided the land which was inhabited by a Kurdish majority, and according to the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 the partition was finalized with the creation of three new states: Turkey, Iraq and Syria. The total Kurdish population in the Middle East is estimated to be more than 35 million, the fourth largest ethnic group in the region after the Arabs, Turks and Persians. The Kurds are the most populous ethnic group in the world, which does not have an independent country, a circumstance that helps to explain the label they are often given, 'The World's largest stateless nation".3

The Kurdish population is as follows: in Turkey: about 18 million, Iran: about 8 million, Iraq: about 7 million, Syria: about 2.5 million, andin Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia and Lebanon altogether about 1.25 Million. Most Kurds embrace Islam as their belief and follow the Sunni sect, yet there are Kurds who follow Shiism, Christianity, and Judaism or are secularists, or follow ancient beliefs and sects such as the Yazidis, Shabaks and Yarsanism. The Kurds share a common language with several different dialects,belonging to different tribes and with some differences on ideology.

Kurdistan is the homeland of the Kurds, in other words, it is the region where the Kurds are predominant and which they consider as their country. It is located in Anatolia (Asia Minor) and Mesopotamia. The region stretches through Southeastern Turkey, Northeastern Syria, Northeast and Northern Iraq, and Northwestern Iran. The region is predominantly mountainous, but there are also vast lowlands and large plateaus.

Kurdistan has mineral and other rich natural resources. Therefore, many civilizations were founded and collapsed in the region throughout history. Its contemporary oil and water resources are significant and of vital importance for the people that live in the region. The Euphrates and the Tigris rivers, Lake Van and Lake Urmia, oil-rich Kirkuk, the fortresses of

Diyarbakir and the citadel of Erbil are internationally renowned natural and human-made assets of the Kurdistan region. Although it has rich natural, mineral and human resources, each Kurdish region in Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria is the least developed part of those countries. Long-term internal conflicts with central authorities have caused environmental destruction, economic recessions and social devastation in the region.



Map of Kurdish inhabited areas - source the Council On Foreign Relations4

The Kurdishstruggle and aspiration:

Although the political struggle of the Kurds for an independent Kurdish state, since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in their homeland was not recognized internationally, the treaty of Sevres in 1920 was designed to include the possibility of a Kurdish state in the region, but this was never implemented. Since the treaty of Lausanne, 1923 the Kurds as a minority in Turkey, Iraq and Syria have endured various forms of persecution and a harsh treatment at the hands of those newly created states. In Turkey they were deprived of a Kurdish identity with the government designating them as ''mountain Turks'' denying Kurdish culture and identity, not recognizing them as a minority group. In Syria, for decades tens of thousands of Kurds were denied citizenship, which meant deprivation of public education, right to marriage and to travel and other basic human rights. Until 2011, when the regime in Syria was facing a popular uprising, and under the pressure of its survival, the regime offered those Kurds citizenship to win their hearts and minds with the intention to recruit them in the military services and use them to fight the popular uprising. In Iran the Kurds are facing discrimination and marginalization due to their following the Sunni sect of Islam and to their different ethnicity and language.

In Iraq, which from now on will be the focus of this article, Kurds have faced discrimination since the creation of Iraq as a new state in 1921, and this was then intensified during the 1960s-1970s, reaching a climax of systematic persecution at the end of the Iran-Iraq war. For instance, in 1988 Saddam Hussein's regime razed thousands of Kurdish villages and attacked peasants with chemical weapons on occasions such as at the Halabja massacre, when some 5,000 people-mainly women and children-died in the attack on the morning of March 16, 1988.5 Following the first Gulf War in 1991, after a popular uprising by Kurds against the Saddam Hussein regime, there was a humanitarian crisis in northern Iraq; over 1.5 million Kurds abandoned their homes in a mass exodus to reach safety either in Turkey or Iran.6 The Iraqi counter-offensive, using heavy weapons and helicopters, meant that thousands died in the mountains due to serious atrocities and the cold weather and food and medicine shortages. The painful footages of Kurdish refugees attracted the attention of the world, and the support from the UN Security Council resolution 688 in April gave birth to a no-fly zone north of the 36th parallel, which covered parts of Kurdish northern Iraq, in order to encourage Kurdish refugees to return home. At the end of 1991, the Iraqi government had fully withdrawn its troops and administration from three Kurdish governorates (Erbil, Dohuk

and Sulaymaniyah), and the power vacuum was filled by Kurdish parties to carry out the duties of providing services to the local population. Since 1992 Iraqi Kurdistan has been ruled as an autonomous region by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), formed after local elections and covering about seventy percent of the Iraqi Kurdish territory.

After the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime in Baghdad, the new Iraqi constitution which was ratified in 2005 recognizes the Kurdistan Regional government (KRG)and the Kurdistan region as an autonomous federal entity within a unified Iraq. Furthermore, both the Arabic and Kurdish languages were deemed ''the two official languages of Iraq''. Since 2003, due to a relative stability, the region turned into a hub for economic boom for many international companies investing in the oil sector, and since June 2014 after ISIS attacked the region, the fighting in Kobani and Sinjar between ISIS and the Kurdshas occupied the world news. These factors helped Kurdish issues in general and the Kurdish autonomous region in Iraq to gain credit and recognition internationally.

From 2003 to 2014 the KRG area performed well on issues of security, economy, infrastructure rebuilding and political status in spite of allegations of government corruption, patronage and abuse of power by politicians, while the rest of the country was preoccupied with sectarian strife and civil war., The Iraqi insurgence to resist against the occupation was formed in 2003, mostly by former Baathist elements, Salafi jihadists and radical foreign fighters from Sunni Arab neighboring countries. Those fighters then joined the 2011 uprising in Syria and later in 2013 returned to Iraq to fight against the Baghdad government, having received weapons, finances and training in Syria. At that time Sunni Iraqi Arabs in provinces along the Syrian border, who felt discriminated and marginalized by the Shia dominated government in Baghdad under Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki, rose up against Al-Maliki's exclusionary policies. In the beginning those Sunni Arabs expressed their anger through organizing sit-in protests in most of their cities, but this was followed by armed confrontations on several occasions between security forces sent from Baghdad,which were heavily dominated by Shia militia, and Sunni demonstrators which ISIS militants infiltrated.

In the summer of 2014 when the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) forces staged surprise, serious attacks in the Sunni dominated region they were welcomed by the local people, and ISIL captured within hours most of these cities such as Ramadi, Falluja,Tikrit and Mosul, which is 70 km from Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan. ISIL, an organization dominated by jihadist Sunni Arabs, hold animosity toward the KRG, and their offensive brought them within just a few miles of the Iraqi Kurdistan capital of Erbil. Since then the Kurdish region has shared almost a one thousand km border with this jihadist militant group, which has formed a constant security threat to the achievement of the Kurds and their rebuilding overthe past two decades. In June 2014, ISIL militants started attacking Kurdish towns and villages, carried out killings, kidnappings and destructionof properties. The most severe atrocities were carried out against the Yazidi Kurds in an area around Mosullike the Sinjar region where they had settled a thousand years ago, killing hundreds of men and boys and abducting girls and women as spoils of war. The UN in its report says that the ISIL attack on Yazidi group was a deliberate attempt to destroy this indigenous group. The United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Syria report in June 2016 called it an act of genocide.7

In October 2016 the battle for the recapturing of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, from ISIL started, two years after it had been captured. Currently some 400,000 Kurdish troops which call themselves 'Peshmerga' are actively participating in an alliance with the Iraqi army and Shia militias, backed by the US-led coalition in a battle to retake Mosul from ISIL. During the past two years of the Peshmerga force being engaged

in the war against ISIL, pushing ISIS militants back from villages and towns inhabited b ymajority Kurdish populations, the total number of losses of the Kurdish fighters had, according to a spokesman for the Peshmerga force, until November 2016 reached 1,614 men, with an additional 91,515 injured and 54 missing or takenprisoner.8

In conclusion, the Kurdish people in the Kurdistan region of Iraq consider that it is worth sacrificing for the autonomous rule they have obtained, the rebuilding they have achieved and the freedom people have enjoyed during the last two decades, while their dream of a national homeland is approaching. The vast majority of the Kurds, despite their differences in political affiliations, faiths, sects, and ideologies, believe it is their fundamental rights, and they share one dream of having their own country. Yet circumstances have now brought the Kurds-or some of them, in particular the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan -closer to achieving a workable state of inclusiveness, to be a land of tolerance and coexistence regardless of many challenges ahead. For instance, the ministry of planning in the KRG has drawn up a vision for the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 2020, stating on its official home page: "Our history speaks of tragedy, but also of triumph. We maintained our culture and our identity. The Kurdish language and arts are alive and vibrant. We have emerged with our own self-governing Region, an oasis of stability and security in Iraq and an example that can lead all Iraq to a better future. And because of our past, we know that all people deserve to have their human rights protected. But we still face many challenges."9

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Letter from Bangladesh

Fr. Bob

Dear Friends,

"Thank you" for its Bengali language equivalent is not spoken often in the twelve towns where I have lived in Bangladesh. Consequently I marveled at my youngest neighbor, Niha, age three years, when she started telling me - in English and for no apparent reason - "Thank you very much". She is one who loves to be outdoors during heavy rain, running, shouting and collapsing merrily in the mud. Yet, Niha has already mastered the use of one of the most gracious expressions in the English language: "Thank you very much"

Three teenaged boys once stopped me near the town's stadium. "We want to interview you for our high school's annual magazine." By the time their questions and my answers had ended, another seven boys had joined us, listening respectfully. They want (and are attracted) to provide service for the poor which they believe that this wins respect for those who serve. They already sense that (intuit) there is more to life then earning money.

In a far-away village to which I bicycled every first Tuesday of the month (if that is what you mean?), Moin Uddin, a government health worker, had become my collaborator. While a group of men sat in a tea stall near the hospital, Moin regaled us by flawlessly speed-reading a newspaper article as articulately as a rapper. My regard for him is full of respect and affection. For I seek collaborators and Moin is one of them.

Early one chilly morning I arrived at the home of Jahangir, his wife and son. It was my third visit to see them. This time we set a date for taking his son to Dhaka for surgery. As I was leaving their home, Jahangir ran after me to ask something that had made him deeply curious. "Brother, what is your religion?" My reply: "Christian", to which he sighed flatly: "oh". Like many other Muslims, Jahangir wishes I was one of them. It would make him feel better to be helped by a fellow Muslim.

Borhan manages a three-wheeler cab service. When he sees me pass by on bicycle he invites me to take tea with him. "I like you very much!" he has often told me. Eagerly he informs others about my efforts for disabled children. Borhan's rare ambition is to someday be able to build an animal hospital to shelter the many stray dogs of the place, one of which lay peacefully at his feet as we sipped our tea together.

When my three years stay in Hobihanj neared its end, Bishop Bejoy wished for me to move to another one of the four districts in his Sylhet Diocese. However, I was intent on moving far away and he understood my missionary purpose. Accordingly, he arranged a farewell meal for me, at which gifts were given and his blessing bestowed on my future in the Barisal Diocese.

Around the time I was switching diocese assignations, executions were occurring throughout the country with greater frequency than ever. Thus, when I visited one of my former hometowns, Ataur, the dwarf who is doorman at the Chinese restaurant, was delighted to see me once more. Ataur led me by hand through the bazar while announcing "Bob Brother is alive!" Many people had heard the news that a Christian missionary had been shot and, as they know only one foreign missionary, they imagined I had been the victim.

In my new hometown, Shariatpur, I had hoped to be able quickly to attract parents with my offer of treatment for their disabled children. Within two weeks I had won over Kulsuma and Malek to accompany me with their child, Alameen, to Dhaka. On the day before our departure I returned to reassure them about our trip. Kulsuma, the boy's mother, requested me to sit down. She had a hard time saying what she had to tell me. "You are a foreigner"….she began. What it meant was: we are suspicious of you. Noone has ever offered to help us as you do. We fear trickery. We cannot go with you. Thus, I understood that I am once again starting from scratch in a new mission area.

During my first visit to Noria's large bazar I took breakfast in a dark restaurant. Another customer, without any preliminary comments, leaned over and inquired: "your age is 100 plus, no?" to which I replied: "My looks have deceived you." There are few 100 year-olds in Bangladesh and perhaps not one of them pedals a bike ten miles to get breakfast.

The police feel inconvenienced by my presence in Shariatpur, the only foreigner in their district. Assignations occasionally occur throughout the country. It is their job to maintain security for all, especially for foreigners. Several officers have told me: "You cannot live among the poor because there you are easily exposed to harm. You must live within a walled compound. Do not venture out of doors; stay inside. Go abroad for a long vacation." All their warnings are well meant. They are uneasy about the foreigner's safety. I appreciate their concern on my daily bicycle journeys as I frequently recall one officer's advice. "Keep looking over your shoulder". That much I can do.

Fr. Bob

The Forgotten Peace: The Chittagong Hill Tracts Accord

Ishak Mia (Sohel)

December 2nd, 2016 marks the 19th anniversary of the signing of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) Peace Accord in Bangladesh. CHT is the only extensive hilly area in Bangladesh, located in southeastern part of the country bordering India and Myanmar. After nearly two decades of armed conflict between the government of Bangladesh and Parbatya Chattagram Jana Samhati Samiti (United People's Party of the Chittagong Hill Tracts) or PCJSS a negotiated peace agreement was signed in 1997. The conflict in the Chittagong Hill Tracts began when the new constitution of Bangladesh in 1972 failed to recognize the culture and language of tribal hill communities and designated all citizens of Bangladesh as Bengalis. The prolonged armed conflict had led to widespread human rights violation, population displacement and several ethnic riots between Bengali settlers who migrated from plains and hill communities. The agreement raised the hope that it would bring an era of peace and stability in the turbulent southeastern hills. It also became widely hailed as a successful case of conflict resolution. As per the terms of agreement, the PCJSS guerilla members laid down their arms and returned to normal life. Since then, there has been no escalation of armed conflict which apparently indicates a state of peace. But this is far from a real peace. In the post-conflict period, the establishment of sustainable peace requires the fulfillment of key commitments made by conflicting parties in peace agreements. Merely producing a good agreement offers no guarantee that peace will last unless it provides a strong mechanism for implementation.

The CHT accord, has so far been minimally implemented, partly because of its various imprecisions in the accord. The major one is the lack of an effective mechanism that could help to implement the key provisions of the 1997 accord. Even though robust pledges were made on both sides towards restoring peace in the hills, the post-conflict complications with regard to implementing crucial clauses of the accord have thwarted the process of sustainable peace and reconciliation. Many of the key commitments of the peace accord still remain unfulfilled, particularly on the government's side. These include taking back of the deployed army to 6 permanent cantonments in CHT, rehabilitation of the returnee refugees and internally displaced persons, and the return of illegally grabbed land to its proper owners through the Land Commission. The PCJSS claims that most army camps have not been removed from the CHT, even though 19 years have passed since the accord was signed (bdnews24.com, May 08, 2016). A report published by UN Economic and Social Council (UNESC) in 2011 alleged that about 9,700 families were unable to regain at least part of their original homes and lands as these had been occupied by Bengali settlers or the military; these refugees have become dependent on food rations from the Government. The land commission that was set up in 1999 has so far been unable to resolve disputes over land.

Besides, the accord itself fails to address some other important issues. There is no set deadline

for withdrawal of temporary camps of security forces from the region. The accord doesn't hold safeguarding provision on constitutional grounds and thus, it can be amended or repealed at any time. It ignores investigation of the past incidents of human-rights violations. It overlooks the issue of continuing infiltration of Bengali settlers into the area which has already outnumbered the tribal majority population. It makes no provision for social reconciliation between tribal communities and Bengali settlers. Peace between diverse communities is solidified by cultural exchanges, and by encouraging pupils to see the things from different perspectives. These have been completely absent in Bengali settlers–tribal people relations. Thus, real peace is yet to be achieved among the communities in CHT.

However, the accord shows some positive aspects, especially by creating an atmosphere for development. A report shows that living conditions for most people have improved over the last few years in CHT (IDMC, 2011). It provides recognition of the three districts of CHT as tribal-inhabited region. In fact, minimal or non-implementation of the fundamental points of the peace accord on the government side has created the conditions where discontent and frustration among the CHT tribes is starting to rise. This may lead to outbursts turning the hills back to the atmosphere of the pre-accord era. Mr. Santu Larma, the former guerrilla leader, recently threatened that they would take up arms again if the accord continues to remain unimplemented (bdnews24.com, December 04, 2014).

A substantial part of the solution to the CHT issue lies in the full implementation of the peace accord and the responsibility falls on the shoulder of government to take effective measures for dealing with it. There is also need to open a special cell to monitor progress in the implementation of the accord. The Land Commission should work immediately to resolve the land dispute between the tribal people and Bengali settlers. As long as the issue of land remains unresolved, it will continue to provide fodder for suspicion over the peace accord and dissatisfaction with its implementation.

Ishak Mia Sohel currently works as Regional Program Coordinator at the Asian Resource Foundation (ARF) in Thailand and teaches occasionally on environmental conflict and peace-building at the International Institute of Peace and Development Studies (IIPDS) in Bangkok. He can be reached at peaceishak@yahoo.com

Good Moments of Dialogue: Reflections from Sweden

Kaj Engelhart

Sweden, a Scandinavian country in northern Europe, has changed considerably in recent years, from being a very homogenous nation to now being a highly multicultural and multi-religious one. Dominating the religious field is the Christian Lutheran Church of Sweden, covering around 70% of the population of approximately 10 million. Catholics are around 200 000. There are Orthodox churches, of people from around 20 different nationalities, and some of independent Evangelical churches as well.

Muslims in Sweden number about 400 000, and this figure has been increasing, with the influx of around 170 000 refugees last year. After opening its borders to large groups of refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia last autumn, Sweden has now introduced strict controls at its borders, reducing the number of new groups arriving, in order to ensure proper housing, schooling, work and other requisites for the integration of newly-arrived migrants.

With the growing number of Muslims, there is an evident need for intercultural and interreligious dialogue in Swedish society. A growing number of local interreligious councils as well as a national interreligious council, uniting religious leaders of around 20 denominations, try to meet this need, as do various church-related and other NGOs. The Lutheran and the Catholic churches have their own structures for establishing good relations with people of other traditions.

As the coordinator of the Catholic commission for interreligious dialogue in Sweden, let me give you some glimpses from the "field".

One evening, I meet a young Muslim who I know from a conference about jihadism in one of the Stockholm mosques. When he understood that I am Christian, he asked me for a talk, and so we found ourselves chatting over a cup of tea in a Stockholm hotel lobby.

Rashid is around 30, a former refugee from Afghanistan, where he taught in a madrasa in a village. He is a pious Muslim, and is well-acquainted with both the Quran and the Bible. He tries to show me, calmly and respectfully, how much of our Christian faith is not founded in the Bible: Jesus was God's son, yes, like all men who are also called sons of God. But was he God? No, God cannot have a son, even less a divine son. The story of his death and resurrection is falsified, and the divine Trinity is a Christian corruption of the monotheistic principle of God, with no grounding in the Bible.

Rashid presents the corrective picture given in the Quran. He is keen to underline that Islam accepts both the Hebrew Bible and the Gospel, but that the Quran is the final and perfect revelation, completing and correcting all that had been written before.

I listen to him and explain that not everything in the Christian faith was written down verbally and literally in the Bible. While the Quran for a Muslim is the exact word of God—in Arabic—for a Christian, the Bible was written by human beings, under inspiration from God.

Christians believe that Jesus promised that the Spirit of God would accompany his followers through history and that the truth of the Gospels, clarified and formulated consequently by ecumenical councils and dogmatic decisions by the church, grows in depth and clarity through the ages.

This is difficult for Rashid to accept. He is used to seeing the revelation completed in the Quran, while I understand revelation as an ongoing process, based on the life and deeds of Jesus in the Bible. We talk and listen alternatingly. We even laugh and joke. And a new friendship is taking shape!

Rashid asks me what I think of Islam. I answer that to me, many things are holy and true there, and that I have had beautiful and moving moments in Sufi and other places and that I admire Islamic architecture and appreciate the seriousness of many Muslims practicing their faith. I tell him that I wish him to be a good person and a good Muslim and that I admire his knowledge of the Quran and the Bible. And I thank him for wanting to share with me that which is dearest to him—his faith—and say that I have the same intention. We leave each other, after two hours' talking and listening, in friendship, shaking hands and wishing to meet again.

It is the first evening of Chanukah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, a dark December evening in the Great synagogue in Stockholm. Lots of people, happily greeting each other, shaking hands and gossiping. Near the Aron HaKodesh, the shrine containing the Torah scrolls, is a big Chanukah candleholder, with a candle for each day of the festival. After an initial piece of music, the rabbi of the congregation, a woman, greets the assembly and introduces the ceremony.

Now something extraordinary happens. A female Lutheran pastor and an imam from a mosque in Stockholm join the rabbi in lighting the candles in the holder! They make a reflection on light. They also affirm the importance of remaining united in faith in the one God and about the necessity to stand together in the face of evil, violence and cruelty.

All of us present in the synagogue, mostly Jews but others too, are moved and thankful for this reflection. We leave after the ceremony is over, going back into Sweden's cold winter darkness, but warmed by the feeling that there is hope, after all.

A Christmas Celebration In The "House Of God" In Fisksaetra, A Modern Suburb Of Stockholm

On the first floor of the church, the local Catholic congregation is about to finish Mass. On the ground floor, supper is served for a big community of local inhabitants: unemployed or lowly-paid people, lonely mothers with kids, elderly men and women, newly-arrived asylum seekers and paperless refugees, and some well-fed Swedish neighbors, coming out of curiosity. You can hear Swedish spoken, as well as Arabic, Polish. Spanish, Russian.

After the meal, everybody ascends to the upper floor. The church has been transformed into a party hall, with a Christmas tree in the middle, and traditional Swedish Christmas dancing starts. All take part, young and old, Christians and others. The local imam and his veiled wife are dancing, among other Muslims from the Middle East and Africa, as well as blue-eyed, fair-haired Swedes.

The "House of God" in Fisksaetra is a common project of the Lutheran parish, the Catholic community and the local mosque. The aim is to build a combined block with a church and a mosque wall-to-wall. In the meantime, all three stakeholders do what they can to create a spirit of solidarity and friendship in the local area, with so many people from so many nations and religious and nonreligious traditions represented there.

Listening to people from different backgrounds, including different religious traditions and seeking to help them get empowered materially, socially, educationally and psychologically and feeling at home in Sweden brings about a firm conviction that this is the right way to meet today's challenges in a world that is getting bigger and smaller at the same time!

Kaj Engelhart is the Director of the Commission for Dialogue in the Catholic Diocese of Stockholm, Sweden

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Afghanistan Refugee Crises: The Way Forward

Abida Rafique

Pakistan has been the host of millions of Afghan refugees since the Soviet invasion and now seeks their expeditious repatriation. By shifting from an open-door policy to a closed door towards refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan now is reluctant to house the remaining refugees. By the end of 2001, there were over 4 million Afghan refugees registered in Pakistan. Most of them have been deported to Afghanistan since 2002. Hence, Pakistan is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention or the 1967 Protocol. The temporary stay of registered Afghan refugees in Pakistan is regularized by means of Proof of Registration cards, all of which expired on 31 December 2012. The Pakistani government extended their right to stay for an additional 6 months until the end of June 2013 and in July 2013 announced a further extension of their stay till December 2017. UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported in February 2017 that approximately 1.3 million registered Afghan citizens remained in Pakistan.

The problem with the Afghan refugees is that the majority of these Afghans, were actually born and raised in Pakistan over the last 30 years, but are still considered citizens of Afghanistan. According to the UNHCR so far this year, some 200,000 Afghans have already been forced to pack up and leave with 98,000 refugees returning in September. Adding to the tragedy is the massive migration of Afghans from their cities since the Taliban attacks them. In this situation they are being forced to move from the cities where they will be safe. Also, there are many who have business and trade investment in Pakistan since Soviet times, so they don't want to relocate back to Afghanistan.

Another concern nowadays, arises from the fact that as reported, many non-registered Afghan nationals are involved in terrorist acts and it is also reported that threats generate from safe havens and from Afghan camps. Therefore, due to these elements Pakistan has been forced to change its policy toward refugees.

Thus, in order to address this issue there should be speedy registration of Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan and instead of forced migration there should be a slow and gradual move back with lucrative incentives by UNHCR and the Afghan government. Pakistan has performed a deeply decent act on the world stage. For decades, it has provided a haven to some three million Afghan refugees. With the passage of time many have been sent back to Afghanistan and the process is going on. Despite all that Pakistan is still, permitting three million vulnerable people to stay for as long as is meaningful.

Keeping in view such facts UNHCR should work with the government of both the countries in terms of re-settling back. Another issue is that there is not accurate census of Afghan refugees which are being claimed as more than 6 million on ground and more than 2000 to 5000 are registered refugees currently settled in Pakistan. Minimal aid is being provided to Pakistan to meet the Afghan refugee crises. It is also a fact that areas where refugees are currently settled in

Pakistan cannot bear the capacity and also do not have sufficient infrastructure in terms of schools, hospitals, markets, employments, etc.

This complicated context makes it all the more important for Afghan and Pakistani officials to resume their dialogue for the larger benefit of millions of suffering common people. Meaningful talks on Information sharing among the security or resumption of dialogue and modern border management are a means to control and monitor human and cargo traffic via international crossings. There should be a comprehensive joint venture with the help of UNHCR to create a forum to engage high officials from both side of Pakistan and the Afghan government. The Afghan government should identify safe areas and assist all Afghan nationals coming back from Pakistan in terms of basic necessities and employment.

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Workshop on SDGs held in Bangladesh

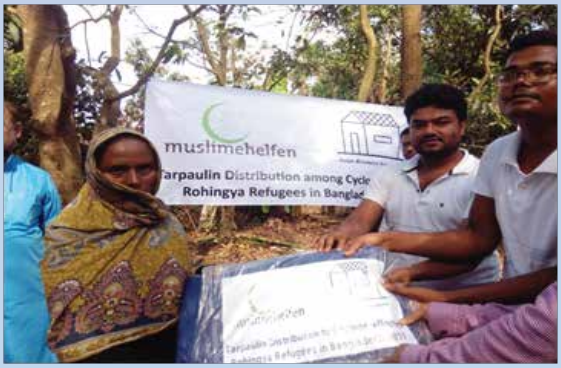
Asian Resource Foundation (ARF) and the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN), Thailand in collaboration with the Bangladesh Institute of Islamic Thought (BIIT), organized a day-long workshop on "The Role of Faith-based Organizations in Promoting Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)" on 15th April, 2017 at BIIT Conference Hall in Dhaka. It brought together 90 religious leaders,university teachers, authors, social workers, lawyers, intellectuals, NGO representatives and prominent personalities from Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Thailand. The workshop provided an opportunity for religious and faith leaders, along with other stakeholders to integrate and harness the wisdom and innovation so that faith-based groupscan work together on a resilient approach in promoting SDGs instead of competing with one another.

Food Packs Distribution in Rohingya Refugees Camp

ARF/AMAN with the financial support from muslimehelfen Germany, distributed food packages among the vulnerable Rohingya families in Kutupalang refugee camp of Cox's Bazar district in Bangladesh on 6th & 8th June, 2017. Over 2,000 Rohingya refugee families received the food packs in their fateful days during the month of Ramadan and the refugees expressed their gratitude to the donors and the people who worked hard during distribution.

ARF/AMAN Distributes Tarpaulin among the Cyclone affectedRohingya Refugees in Bangladesh

ARF/AMAN with the financial support from muslimehelfen, distributed tarpaulins (plastic sheets) among the unregistered Rohingya refugees in Kutupalong and Balukhali makeshifts in Cox's Bazar on 9th June 2017. The recently hit cyclone 'Mora' destroyed all the huts of the unregistered refugees for which they are facing food and shelter crises. The destitute refugees are very happy to receive the plastic sheets at the time of their living in the rain and sun and expressing gratefulness to the donors.



The AMANA magazine was initiated in 2005 following suggestions made at the first round of the Asian Muslim Action Network (AMAN) 'Peace Studies & Conflict Transformation' course. In Arabic, Amana means trust and embodies the primary objective of the publication in highlighting peace initiatives, peace collaboration, progressive Muslim action, and inter-faith cooperation and understanding. To ensure a wide distribution range and to connect with grass-roots communities, AMANA is printed in English, Bahasa Indonesia and Thai.

AMAN supports holistic development through awareness building with an overall aim of mobilizing and sharing resources in order to help marginalized groups in Asia. AMAN aims to build understanding and solidarity among Muslims and other faith communities towards people's empowerment, human rights, justice and peace. With over 1500 members, the network of AMAN spans Asia and is coordinated from Bangkok, Thailand.

Publications: AMANA Magazine and AMANA news online

Focus: Islam and peace; inter-faith partnerships; development initiatives; human rights; gender and peace.