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The Role of Wahhabi Discourse in the Syrian Uprising

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Abstract

Today, the Middle East is dealing with devastating civil wars and ideological struggles affecting the lives of millions of people in the region. These regional security issues are manifested through an increase in radicalization, fanaticism, and intolerance towards social groups who are considered ‘other’ or deviated. The consequences have been deadly violence across the region and worldwide. Radical discourses and Wahhabism ideologies have had the main role in this regard. There is a new wave of ‘Othering’ discourse in the Middle East promoted by some Muslim preachers, which increases the tensions between social groups. This paper analyzes such discourses looking at the case of Syria war as an example to show the way Wahhabism ideologies changed the nature of the Syrian uprising and turned it into an ideological and sectarian war for political interests. This paper provides insights into the impact of leaders’ discourses and ideologies on the masses. Learning the ideologies behind manipulative discourses can help in dealing with complicated conflicts, explain the important issues, and manage the problems facing humankind.

Keywords: Muslim leaders, Radical discourse, Sectarianism, Wahhabism, Violence, Syrian the uprising and The Middle East

Introduction

The Syrian conflict enters its seventh year with more than 465,000 killed, over a million wounded, and more than 12 million civilians, half the population of the country, displaced. The Syrian civil war is indeed considered as the deadliest conflict in the 21st century. The unrest in Syria began in the early spring of 2011 within the context of ‘Arab Spring’ with nationwide protests against Bashar Assad’s government, whose forces responded with violent crackdowns, and gradually, Syria began to slide into a large-scale war. The Syrian war has created profound effects far beyond Syria’s borders.

Today, the Middle East is facing serious security issues, and Muslims have become more divided along the ideological lines. The contemporary Syria war is associated with the emergence of radicalism and fanaticism as a result of some preachers’ discourses who advocated hatred and sectarianism. Such discourses construct the identity of ‘enemies of Islam’ for the social groups that are considered inferior or deviant and legitimize violence against them. On the other hand, radical ideologies are associated with ‘Wahhabism’ which has been regarded as the violent manifestation of the religion (Sirriyeh, 1989). Indeed, Wahhabism is not seen as inherently violent on its own but is recognized as a highly conservative interpretation of the religion by most Middle East experts and Muslims alike, which in turn, can and has been channeled into Jihadist ideologies.

Wahhabi Islamists are particularly hostile to non-Muslims and promote hatred toward them; however, “from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century, Wahhabi zealots fought mainly other nominal Muslims” (Hegghammer, 2009a, p. 411). This hostility is propagated through public speeches and specifically Friday sermons. The aim of this paper is to look at the Saudi-Wahhabi power and their role in the Syrian uprising to uncover the way Wahhabis manipulated the Syrian unrest for ideological ends.

Syria’s Political Climate and the Syrian Uprising

The major religious groups in Syria are the Sunni Muslims, forming a majority of 74% of the total population, Alawites, Ismailis, Shias (13%), Christians (10%), and Druze (3%). The Syrian uprising started in 2011 with non-violent nationwide protests. After the Syrian army opened fire on protestors killing dozens of them, more people came to the streets. Then, the uprising spread throughout the country, and people asked Assad to resign. However, the government forcefully suppressed the protest, and this led to more unrest in the country. By July 2011, hundreds of thousands of Syrians were taking into the streets. Gradually, the protestors became armed, and violence spread throughout the country between pro-government and opposition groups. This led to a widespread civil war between the government and the rebels who managed to take control over many cities and towns in Syria. In 2012, the civil war reached Damascus, the capital, as well as Aleppo, the second major city in Syria. In August 2015, the number of people killed reached 250,000 (Amnesty International, 2017). Thus, the conflict which had been started peacefully gradually changed into military sieges and armed rebellion. As of August 2014, about 85% of the victims had been male and 9% female, which shows that it is a military war between armed groups (Price, Gohdes, & Ball, 2014). Indeed, Syrians started peacefully asking for a free referendum, but as time passed by, it lost its peaceful essence and turned into a bloody civil war among the Syrian regime and the opposition group. The peaceful protestors soon were armed, and proxy civil war was started in large scale, and Syria “was morphing from a quasi-paradise into a boiling cauldron” (Smyth, 2012). In 2012, the UN announced

that the war had become ‘overtly sectarian in nature’ between Sunnis and Shias, and the emergence of ISIS added a further dimension to the chaos in Syria (Rodgers, Gritten, Offer, & Asare, 2016).

The war in Syria did not begin as a sectarian conflict at the initial points (Mabon, 2014; Pierret, 2014). McCants (2013) explains that the “sectarian language was largely absent from the early nonviolent protests and its leaders deliberately tried to create a multi-ethnic, multi-confessional front” (p. 23). In the early stages of the uprising in 2011, the protestors formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), whose leaders were mainly defector officers. Although FSA sometimes used Islamic statements, they hardly formed an ‘Islamist’ movement back then. However, by late 2012 the situation had profoundly changed, and armed groups were increasingly abandoning FSA and Syrian flags and taking the black banner of Al Qaeda instead. The radicalization of the Syrians happened later “as a quasi-natural phenomenon,” and is described as “the inevitable outcome of a brutal sectarian conflict that has made Salafi-Jihadi ideology increasingly appealing to Syrian Sunnis” (Pierret, 2013, p. 24). The emergence of radicals in 2012 was paralleled with changes in their rhetoric (Pierret, 2014). At first, Iraqis and Syrians rejected sectarianism, but later due to the massacres of people based on their identity, it became hard to resist. There was a wave of fear and horror in the Arab media “as images of sectarian massacres and the rhythms of sectarian rhetoric too often go viral online and satellite television stations too eagerly adopt sectarian frames” (Lynch, 2013b, p. 10). Indeed, the powerful radicals and extremists “spearheaded the regional counter-revolution” and propagated “a vicious sectarian hate speech that would shape the discourse and actions of the rebels in Syria, while preventing Shiites and Sunnis at home from uniting in calls for reform” (Matthiesen, 2013, p. 7). The most shocking issue in Syria is the openly sectarian violence and the “genocidal rhetoric often accompanying them” (Haddad, 2013b, p. 13).

As was mentioned, the uprising, although influenced by sectarian incites, was not firstly initiated as sectarian clashes; there were socio-economic reasons involved. The social and economic factors had a crucial role in the uprising

and “the protest movement was dominated by the losers from economic reforms, such as peasants who felt abandoned by the once socialist regime and inhabitants of the cities’ lower-class suburbs” (Pierret, 2014, p. 6). Indeed, Assad’s government was showing economic growth during the years before the uprising, largely due to his effort to privatize public assets, liberalize the finance sector, and encourage private investments; however, corruption, unequal distribution of the budget, and “center-periphery inequality explains the roots of the revolution in Syria” (Berti& Paris, 2014, p. 23). The exclusion/inclusion boundary in distributing the economic opportunities in Syria had little to do with sectarianism and Syrians’ identity or faith:

Both Assads, father and son, used economic reforms to consolidate power... namely the expanding Sunni urban upper-middle class. Sunni and Christian business elites in Damascus, and to a lesser extent, Aleppo, gained from Assad’s policies by obtaining more access to political power, a process facilitated by the rise of an entirely new generation of officers loyal to Bashar and committed to his political and economic plan. The marriage between Bashar al-Assad and British-Syrian Asma al-Akhras, the daughter of a well-to-do Sunni family originally from Homs, symbolizes this alliance between the Alawite military and political elite and the Sunni business elite (Berti& Paris, 2014, p. 23).

Therefore, the Alawites’ power did not stem from their Alawi heritage, their sect holds no official privileges, and they were not economically better than other Syrians (Tharappel, 2014). Moreover, Assad’s cabinet comprised of majority Sunni Muslims and the delegation team that went to Geneva for the failed peace talks was also almost entirely composed of Sunni Muslims (Hadid, 2014; Osborne, 2014; Van Dam, 1978). Hence, it is unlikely that the uprising was initiated, at first, as a Sunni/Shia conflict. Indeed, it is not correct to talk about the representation of specific religious communities at any social power level in Syria in terms of sectarian loyalties or to explain it on that basis, without taking into account the regional, tribal, socio-economic and politico-historical backgrounds of the people involved (Van Dam, 2011).

Syria is multi-ethnic and multi-cultural, and the minorities at first tried to be neutral in the conflict, not taking any sides, since the opposition groups became more armed and the government reacted with heavier military responses to counter them (Smyth, 2012). Syrian Christians initially tried to avoid the conflict, however, as soon as the opposition groups took control of Christian cities, they started ethnic and religious cleansing; sources inside the Syrian Orthodox Church reported an ‘ongoing ethnic cleansing of Christians’ carried out by the FSA and 90% of the Christians in Homs had been expelled (Agenzia Fides, 2012; BBC, 2015; Stadler, 2013). Some Syrian Christians believed that Assad’s government has been ruthless, but not against the Christians who were feeling free to practice their faith; he was oppressing some Muslim groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, who were aiming to overthrow him and establish an Islamic caliphate (Stadler, 2013). Practicing their faith freely in Syria, minority Christians highly feared the opposition groups in Syria, because they have no assurance that any other sect in Syria would protect the Syrian-Christian community (BBC, 2015; Kodmani, 2011; Lyon, 2010; Rafizadeh, 2011; Stadler, 2013). Their fear was not unfounded; two top Christian clerics were soon kidnapped, and there is no news of them for years (CNA, 2015; The Guardian, 2013).

Moreover, Druze minorities who were increasingly joining and supporting the FSA at the beginning of the uprising were massacred in Syria. The opposition groups forced the Druze to renounce their religion, destroyed their shrines, and then considered them Sunni (Gartenstein-Ross & al-Tamimi, 2015; Irshaid, 2015; Loveluck&Samaan, 2015; Yalibnan, 2015). This event made Druze turn side against them, and non-Syrian Druze minorities showed the harsh reaction to the opposition group to sympathize with their people in Syria. As an example, Israeli Druzes stoned some ambulances carrying wounded Syrian opposition soldiers to Israeli hospitals for treatment, killing one of them and injuring others (The Guardian, 2015). Stadler (2013) suggests that Syria had been previously described as a ‘safe haven’ in the Middle East. However, as the civil war lasted more than it was expected and with the emergence of ISIS, more Syrians and

including minorities and Sunni Muslims feared the consequences of radicals taking the control of the country (Smyth, 2012).

However, the Syria war has been described in the world in terms of a Manichean conflict between the noble freedom fighters who want democracy and the evil, brutal regime of Bashar Assad, but “the reality is far more complex and murky” (Carpenter, 2013, p. 1). Syrian government forces and opposition groups both have committed wartime atrocities that amount to crimes against humanity, according to Amnesty International and other human rights agencies (Rodgers et al., 2016). Amnesty accused both sides of committing a massacre, torture, rape, arbitrary detention, and kidnapping. However, the massacre of the Alawites, the minorities, and pro-government people by the opposition groups are not normally reported in the media (Al Jazeera and Reuters, 2013; BBC, 2013; Hersh, 2014; The Guardian, 2014). The Syrian opposition’s brutality and human rights violation later on concerned their worldwide supporters (Chivers, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2012; Smith-Spark & Abedine, 2013).

As the sectarian tone of the Syria civil war increased, some Saudi Muslim preachers clearly stated their real intentions behind fighting against Assad’s government. In May 2012, Taher Al-Majrashi, a Salafi Saudi preacher, clearly stated that “loyalty should be for pious Muslim leaders and not for those atheists,” implying that the only reason to fight with the Syrian government is that it is not Muslim (Wesal, 2012b). Another Salafist Saudi preacher, Sa’d al-Hamid, also argued that the war in Syria is neither for democracy, nor a nationalist revolution against dictatorship, but it is an ideological war against the Alawites and the Shias. Moreover, he called for a fight to overthrow the ‘Alawite regime,’ asking that, “how come a rubbish minority [referring to the Alawites] is leading the Syrian people” (Wesal, 2012a). Certainly, “such a discourse reproduced sectarian identities as it defines belonging in terms of ideology and excludes and includes members according to their religious identities” (Rifai, 2014).

On the other hand, sectarian war between the Shia and the Sunni would attract the attention of Bashar Assad’s international allies more than a war between people and the government. It is believed

that Assad deliberately increased the sectarian violence and tension to attract the Shia sympathizers. Thus, the Wahhabi discourse of hatred specifically favored the Syrian government. Hence, the civil war in Syria gradually transformed into a merely ideological war against the ‘Shia’ and the Syrian opposition group, which initially included both Sunni and Shia members but eventually became unanimously comprised of Wahhabi Sunnis only. Today, there are great concerns all over the world about the spread of ‘hate ideology,’ which advocates terrorism under the name of Wahhabism and funded by Saudi government and individuals (Blanchard, 2007).

Before these events, some researchers had already warned of the consequences. Assad’s coalition is mainly secular. However, the “ideological composition of the opposition is far more opaque,” that is, it is not certain to what extent they are radical; the radicalization of the opposition groups is indeed increasing (Carpenter, 2013, p. 3). The current situation in Syria shows that many Syrian people see their country as being threatened by foreign powers who are sponsoring the Jihadist groups that make up the opposition (Anderson, 2016; Osborne, 2014). Moreover, a large number of Syrian Sunnis also were supporting the Assads, whom they regarded as protectors of the country’s stability (BBC, 2015). In other words, public opinion is that Jihadists hijacked the Syrian uprising. Accordingly, Syria has turned into a chaotic and sectarian civil war, while the government is bombing “its cities as if they were enemy territory, and the armed opposition is dominated by Jihadist fighters who slaughter Alawites and Christians simply because of their religion” (Cockburn, 2014, p. 81). Even some moderate fighters in the opposition group changed their positions in favor of the government (Girdusky, 2015). Therefore, what is seen today is that the Syrian uprising is not a civil war anymore, but has turned into “a nihilist Al Qaeda franchise attacking both the Shiite community randomly and the Sunni community strategically” (Ollivant, 2013, p. 36).

The civil war in Syria came up as the worst contemporary human tragedy affecting the whole world. There are millions of homeless Syrians taking refugees from the UN. According to the Syrian

Observatory for Human Rights, around 320,000 humans have been killed in Syria civil wars so far, and about 150,000 have been wounded, most of them civilians (SOHR, 2015). By 2014, about 10.8 million Syrians have been affected by the conflict, meaning that half the population of the country has needed humanitarian aids (UNHCR, 2015). Syria's war is the worst humanitarian crisis today, with more than 11 million people being displaced as of October 2015 (MercyCorps, 2015). The war is still going on after seven years, leaving millions of people homeless and physically and mentally affected.

On the other hand, many researchers have regarded sectarianism as the main reason for the increase in violence in the Middle East. Sectarianism is defined as "the promotion and deliberate deployment of sect-based allegiance in the pursuit of political ends" (Ayub, 2013, p. 2). It also has special importance in the Middle East because of the multi-religious and multi-ethnic complexity of this place (Mabon, 2014). The war in Syria has caused the sectarian conflicts to return to the Middle East, the conflict that is going on and off for centuries. The war "has provided a mechanism for amplifying traditional sectarian conflict, effectively elevating it to a transnational affair" by inflaming the old sectarian tensions that now have prevailed the religious discourse throughout the Muslim world (Abdo, 2013, p. 2). In brief, Syria has become a place for regional and religious competitions where world powers, ideological conflicts have been involved in and, consequently, what started as a peaceful uprising for democracy and dignity was transformed into an "ethno-sectarian conflict that is increasingly difficult to contain within the boundaries of the Syrian state" (Heydemann, 2013, p. 1). The Syria tragedy has turned into chaos and violence since it took up a significant sectarian discourse. The mixture of "Salafist ideology, Al Qaeda nihilism, and the surfacing of the basest sectarian hatreds create a toxic mix, which is now infecting much of the region" (Ollivant, 2013, p. 37).

Sectarianism, Wahhabism, and Saudi social Power

The issues of sectarianism and fanaticism are currently widely debated across many Muslim political and social institutions. Makdisi (2000)

emphasizes the significance of religious discourse in the formation and construction of identities in today's world. Within the context of Lebanon, he showed that "how sectarianism was a manifestation of modernity that transcended the physical boundaries of a particular country" and argued that "sectarianism represented a deliberate mobilization of religious identities for political and social purposes" (Makdisi, 2000, p. 266). Haddad also defines sectarianism as a "variable sociological element whose relevance and centrality advances and recedes according to context and by extension salience" (Haddad, 2011, p. 6). Yahya (2016) points out that one of the most cunning and dangerous technique employed by the global forces is "the incitement of sectarian differences." He argues that efforts are being made unceasingly to create a climate of artificial enmity and conflict between Shiite and Sunni Muslims through such acts of provocation and then spread it throughout the entire Islamic world, which has led to widespread sectarian violence and terror. Sectarian violence is the result of provoking tensions between rival sects. Makdisi (2000) explains:

Sects are viewed as monadic groups of people bound and hence defined by their religious identity over and against other forms of social identity. Sectarian violence, then, is the expression of deep-seated and intractable rivalries and hatreds between groups whose unchanging religious identities create the conditions for situations of permanent, irresolvable conflicts (as cited in Daniel, 2011, para 1).

Sectarianism is a problematic issue and has been compared to 'racism' (Kelly, 2011). Haddad asserts that sectarianism in Muslim world context reveals power relations similar to those in gender or race studies with the difference that "sectarian otherness in the Middle East is no longer framed in primarily ethnic or national terms but in starkly religious ones" (Haddad, 2013b, p. 11). Hegghammer (2009b) defines sectarianism in the Muslim world context as the struggle and desire of the two competing sects of Sunni Muslims and Shia Muslims to decrease the power and influence of the other. Indeed, what is happening in the Muslim world today is that violence is being justified and framed in the form of sectarian identity and through excluding and condemning the

Other (Haddad, 2013b). Hegghammer (2009b) also points out that there exists moderate sectarianism, as well as the extreme one that goes for violence and primarily attacks and kills the members of the other group with the aim of marginalization of the competing sect. He explains:

Sometimes, radicals articulate their immediate political priorities in a concise and specific language, which makes it easy to identify the dominant rationale. More often, the discourse will be vague and ambiguous, citing general slogans (such as ‘establishing God’s rule’) or denouncing more than one enemy. However, ... each rationale has an accompanying ideal-type discursive theme or ‘frame’ which allows us to identify the dominant rationale even when it is not explicitly stated. The socio-revolutionary discursive theme is the mismanagement of the Muslim ruler. The examples used to justify calls for action are mainly tales of oppression, torture, and corruption, as well as the secularism and hypocrisy displayed by the local regime (Hegghammer, 2009b, pp. 260-261).

Additionally, sectarianism today is deeply political “even if it increasingly seems at risk of racing beyond the control of its cynical enablers,” and the painful reality is that sectarianism has proved to be too helpful for political ends to be avoided today (Lynch, 2013a, p. 3). Moreover, sectarianism is more an issue of prejudice and stereotyping (Chatham House, 2012). Indeed, sectarianism appears as one among many actual, and potential discourses of religion-in-politics and sectarian violence and discrimination have raised many concerns all over the world. The sectarian discourse is defined as “a modern discourse of religion-in-politics authorized by particular authorities in particular times and places” (Hurd, 2015, p. 61).

On the other hand, radical discourses and extremism are associated with ideologies of Salafism and Wahhabism; such ideologies construct an evil enemy identity of the ‘Other’ and specifically the Shia minorities and justify violence against them (Abou El Fadl, 2003; Alvi, 2014; Shukla, 2014; Ungureanu, 2011). Omar Ashour (2009) points out that Jihadism, Takfirism, and Salafism are the three ‘violence-prone’ ideologies. Research shows that terrorism

in the name of Islam is increasing due to the spread of extremist ideologies and sectarianism, which are based on the Wahhabi or Salafi beliefs (Abou El Fadl, 2003; Alvi, 2014). Alvi (2014) suggests that the ‘Arab Spring’ in 2011 also empowered the Salafi and Wahhabi movements in many countries while both “have a long track record of killing fellow Muslims in the name of Jihad” (p. 49). She emphasizes the role of ‘radical clerics’ whose sermons are widely circulated worldwide through social media in promoting hatred, extremism, and violence among Muslim communities. Indeed, Wahhabism, as an ideological sect in Islam, originated in Saudi Arabia and the country’s role in spreading radical views and propagating hatred toward other faiths and thereby increasing existing tensions between and within the countries by reinforcing faith-related sentiments has been of concern worldwide (Abou El Fadl, 2003; Anderson, 2016; Armanios, 2003; Blanchard, 2007; Darwich, 2014; Freedom House, 2005; Hammond, 2013; Hegghammer, 2009a; Lin, 2015; Mabon, 2014; Mahendrarajah, 2015; Safi, 2003b; Shea, Marshall, Gilbert, & Kerley, 2008; Shukla, 2014; Ungureanu, 2011; Wiktorowicz, 2001). Hegghammer (2009a) warns against the high level of xenophobia in Saudi Arabia and its overwhelming hostility to outsiders and points out that “the Saudi Islamist propensity for violence against non-Muslims may have been facilitated by certain Saudi xenophobia, rooted in the Wahhabi hostility to non-Muslims and the social distance between Saudis and non-Muslim societies” (p. 415). Al-Rasheed (2010) explains how the Saudi government spread the discourse of hatred and intolerance:

Through expansion in religious education, Islamic charitable foundations, and religious summer camps, the government had allowed radical preachers to develop their infrastructure and infiltrate government institutions, boosting the control of radicals over society, especially young and impressionable Sa’udis (p. 227).

Therefore, sectarian violence is not limited to some civil wars; it is responsive and dynamic, affecting all communities around the world (Haddad, 2013a).

The Wahhabi-Salafi ideology is, in fact, deeply influenced by Ibn Taymiyyah’s teachings (Cook,

1992; Nettler, 1995). IbnTaymiyyah was a 13th-century jurist who sought the return of Sunni Islam to what he viewed as earlier interpretations of the Quran and the Sunnah and is considered to have a profound influence on Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the founder of Wahhabism, Salafi movements, and jihadism in modern time. He is also known for issuing the Fatwa of Takfir (apostasy) against Mongols declaring Jihad against them, despite their conversion to Islam (Rasheed, 2015). According to Al-Rodhan, Herd, and Watanabe (2011), IbnTaymiyyah's books have been misinterpreted by extremist groups as a call for rejecting the 'Other' through violence. Wahhabism has provided the foundation for extremism (Alvi, 2014; Rasheed, 2015; Sarangi & Canter, 2009). There are ideological similarities between ISIS and Wahhabism. For example, both do not recognize the geographic borders and seek to expand their territories and rule over all Muslims. Moreover, in both ISIS and Wahhabism ideologies, anyone who doubts their ideologies is considered infidel (Al-Ibrahim, 2015). In the Wahhabism school of thought, the list of infidels who merit death includes the Shias, Sufis, and other Muslim sects, whom Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab did not consider Muslims (Crooke, 2015). Safi (2003a) explains:

Not every Wahhabi is a terrorist. However, the communal enforcement of literalist-exclusivist ideologies such as Wahhabism so dehumanizes entire groups both inside and outside the Muslim community that they narrow the gap to violence against both other Muslims and non-Muslims. So many places in the Muslim world where violence is a fact of life also feature these literalist-exclusivist interpretations of Islam (p. 28).

Additionally, Wahhabism is hugely supported and financed by Saudi Arabia and has launched mosques, organizations, and schools to propagate their version of Islam all over the world (Abou El Fadl, 2003; Sarangi & Canter, 2009). Indeed, the Salafists' rise and direct involvement in politics are relevant for several reasons. First, they have introduced a sectarian discourse that is far more confrontational than the past. Second, they use the violence being committed by the Syrian government to generalize about the potential for anti-Sunni violence among all

Shia, whether or not they are Alawite (Abdo, 2013).

Sectarian discourses are mostly manifested in some Saudi preachers' discourses in Friday sermons. Some Saudi preachers manipulate society through religious rhetoric, schools and institutions, political statements, and the usage of new and mainstream media (Alahmed, 2014). Indeed, only a few preachers who have a high social and religious status have access to the Friday sermon discourses, which are considered the main public speaking sphere in the Muslim world. Friday sermons are held every Friday noon, and it is obligatory for the Muslims to attend and listen to the speeches. Additionally, the Friday sermons are institutionalized discourses, meaning that, the government has control over the selection of the orators and their speeches since such speeches can be very influential in Muslim communities and the world. Tayob (1999) explains the importance of Friday sermons:

Anything can flow from a Friday sermon: ... a march against an embassy, a manifesto for an Islamic state, or a program of action against a perceived problem or threat. ... In a snapshot analysis, the Friday sermon could be deciphered in the power of the world and the mosque, the charisma of the individual preacher, the commitment of the worshippers, and the significance of order and regulation in the world around the mosque (pp. vii-viii).

Regarding the current events in Syria, the Saudis' support for the opposition groups have been often expressed in a sectarian discourse, even before the events show "any visible sectarian undertones"; consequently, this sectarian discourse had a crucial role in turning the Syrian uprising into "a cause célèbre" for the Jihadists (Lacroix, 2014, p. 5). Saudi Jihadists already had a long track of participating in violence in the Middle East and the US. They had the main role on 11 September as well as in suicide bombings in Iraq, killing Americans, Iraqi army forces, and the Shias (Al-Rasheed, 2010). Thus, the setting of Syria civil war, a minority Shia attacking a majority Sunni Muslims, seemed to help Wahhabi ideologies to a great extent. The extremists all over the world became united and attracted support worldwide to kill the so-called infidels, something they have longed for years. Anderson points out that the

armed groups in Syria include Muslim Brotherhood, Saudi Wahhabis, and foreign Jihadists who share the same Salafist ideology in establishing of religious state instead of the secular or national government (Anderson, 2016). Many researchers consider Saudi billionaires as the main source of funding for the terrorist groups worldwide (Alvi, 2014; Jones, 2014; Safi, 2003b).

This wave has not only affected a large population of Muslims around the world but also has largely influenced Southeast Asia. Propagating their Wahhabi Ideology, some Saudi preachers are encouraging mutual hatred towards other sects in Islam, as well as encouraging hatred towards other religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism (Freedom House, 2005; Shea et al., 2008; Shukla, 2014). In recent years, Malaysia has been affected by the sectarian conflicts between different sects (Alatas, 2016a). Muslims in Southeast Asia were traditionally moderate and tolerant, “but beginning in the 1970s, awash with petrodollars, Saudi Wahhabis began to export this ‘venomous religion’ via thousands of mosques and madrasas that have radicalized Muslims in South and Southeast Asia” (Lin, 2015, p. 3). Some Muslim youth in Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines have been radicalized and joined ISIS, and even they have created a military section for Malay speaking fighters. Accordingly, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Philippines have been victims of ‘Wahhabi-driven extremists groups’ (Lin, 2015). The produced religious prejudices directed especially at Shia minorities are illustrative of the ideology of Wahhabism that has sectarianized Muslim world in recent years.

Conclusion

The Syria war is associated with the emergence of radicalism and fanaticism as a result of some preachers’ discourses who advocated hatred and sectarianism. Such discourses construct the identity of ‘enemies of Islam’ for the social groups that are considered inferior or deviant and legitimize violence against them. Consequently, the Syria issue has been used to cash in on long-seeded ideological differences between ideological groups and proxy powers. The

emergence of ISIS and other terrorist groups around the world has also raised concerns worldwide about the discourses that promote extremism, hatred, and violence. The role of Saudi-Wahhabi preachers has been very influential in increasing violence and sectarianism in the Muslim world and specifically the Syria war. Syria has provided them the best setting to promote their ideology of hostility and intolerance towards ‘Others.’ As a result of these ideological and discursal clashes, millions of innocent people have been killed, injured, or have fled their homes taking shelter in the refugee camps. Muslim scholars and preachers have a critical role in controlling the discourse and social practices due to their high status and social power. They have privileged access to the Friday sermon spheres and public speeches and can control collective minds and actions.

Additionally, radical ideologies and violence usually emerge from radical discourses. Indeed, there are no ‘non-violent extremism’ and preachers who, although clearly express their disagreement on violence and physical harm against ‘Others,’ still, preach hatred toward ‘Others’ and encourage and educate their followers to do violent actions (Alatas, 2016b). It is hoped this paper has raised some awareness about these issues of worldwide impact.

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