What can Syria teach us in creating a new and better future?

It is clear that humanity is, once again, facing a crisis of identity and purpose. Weak global leadership, a crisis of displaced persons and the complex problem of integrating different cultures into countries other than their homelands, has led us to the threat of a complete breakdown of civilisation as we know it. In addition, we have the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Levant, how did they get to be so popular among the Muslim youth of the West? What started as a war of words to recruit Muslim youth, has now turned into a military war fought across many countries. The narrative of each warring party is increasing in tone to match the killings we witness daily by either side. This presentation aims to look at the narrative and language used by all sides of this conflict; a language that borrows words taken from the early days of Islam to convey legitimacy to the cause and the battle for ultimate leadership.

There is no neat solution, but a need for collective collaboration. It is now up to the younger generation to explore and debate. It is important that the elders' wisdom is harnessed to guide the youth with vision and new ideas. A new way of living is necessary if we are to secure the future of the human race.

The absence of any visionary initiative in any serious, long-term political solution to the crisis in Syria will have a serious impact not on national level alone but on World peace and security. The solution is to start a Syrian national dialogue supported by the United Nations; which brings together the conflicting Syrian parties, excluding the Islamists aligned with Al-Qaeda and ISIS, then this National body can represent and unify Syrians to create a peace process to overcome the conflict and put an end to the defragmentation of Syria's economy and life.

Introduction:

It is clear that humanity is, once again, facing a crisis of identity and purpose. Weak global leadership, the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Levant Countries, a crisis of displaced persons and the complex problem of integrating different cultures into countries other than their homelands, has led us to the threat of a complete breakdown of civilisation as know it. What can Syria teach us in creating a new, and better future?

Section One

How we got here. Syria and its importance during the Silk Route when not only trade happened but also the exchange of culture, ideas, beliefs and traditions to create one of the great civilisations in which different religions and cultures lived alongside each other tolerated and respected (Synagogue in Aleppo protected by the Syrian government). Our experiences of travelling in Syria, the welcome by the people, how cities differ according to their energy and tradition. Maaloula, one of the great centres for scholars to learn Aramaic. The Lord's Prayer in Aramaic. Draw on The Great Transformation by Karen Armstrong. The journey of Jane Digby to Damascus to embrace Palmyra the Ancient City she fell in love with forever. The breakdown of the tradition of tolerance and drawing on history, the collapse of great empires such as the Greeks, the Romans. Have we learned anything at all or will we just repeat the cycles of destruction?

Section Two

The challenges. Individual fulfilment versus the collective and how to reconcile this eternal problem. The need for wisdom and leadership. The need to re-think our beliefs on how society functions, on our resources and how we use them. Asking the hard questions about population, climate change, and how we live and work. Thinking of long-term solutions not the political quick fix. If the silk route was the catalyst for our growth and cultural development then is the internet the modern equivalent and if so should we seek to use it for the exchange of ideas and beliefs and as an important gathering of different societies to talk and discuss and not just for superficial gossip and subversive behaviour? At the same time human society is based on human interaction so how do we make the internet work in a modern sense whilst retaining and encouraging human contact, and interaction?

Sections Three:

Language at times of conflict.

I do think it is important you realise the significance of language at times of conflict. It is easy to bypass linguists and focus on experts in politics, conflict resolution and international relations/ diplomacy. However, we need to make use of all tools available to us to fight the global war we are facing. The war extremists are bringing to our doorsteps regularly through terror campaigns across the world.

The United States has already recognised the significance of language and created a body called 'Identifying & countering Islamist Extremist Narratives' in 2009.

Let me give you a brief idea of why language is important

There is a need to understand the language of the extremists as they use this as a tool to attract new recruits, especially from the West, young men and women who have travelled to join Jihad either as fighters or as Jihadi Brides. I cannot understand why anyone would want to join a war in a faraway land that is not their own, where they cannot or are barely able to, speak the language and where they may not even have distant family having ever lived there.

The other need to understand the language is to use it during our negotiations. Many spoke yesterday about terrorism, reasons for the war, and then a few spoke about negotiations. But in order for those negotiations to be a success, we need to pay close attention to the language and narrative that we use.

We see how the war in Syria has been fought at many levels: militarily, media/ propaganda, which uses words (As well as selective images shown to the world).

We all know language is what gives us our identity, we see it as a common factor for national unity, especially so for Arabs. Identity based on gender and age are linked to language, teenagers have their own 'speak'.

We use language to express feelings, such as anger against tyranny or love for a leader or faith. We use it to hide such feelings too, we mask our true feelings and true identity by altering our language, through alteration of the dialect we use or the vocabulary / register we use. So it is a tool for subterfuge. Many governments now employ dialect specialists to counter this problem, or at least to try to counter it and reduce its negative effects as much as possible. Both extremists and leaders in the West and elsewhere use language to promote their causes or indeed to reduce the 'other' to a level where they undermine them. We don't need to go too far back to see how leaders realise the effect language has on people: Algeria/ France, Turkey and the Kurdish language and Nigeria where the loss of bilingualism was shown in a 2014 study showed caused an exacerbation of the civil war there.

Cameron asked we refrain from using the word ISIS since the word 'State' lends the militants credibility. Soon after, a government twitter account soon changed from 'UK against ISIL' to 'UK against Daesh' . the claims made there state that 'Daesh is an Arabic acronym. Daesh hates the word as it is close to Arabic words Deas and Dahes, which mean to trample the one who sows discord' (Khaleej Times 3/12/2015). Cameron goes on to call IOSIS 'Medieval monsters (Parliament 2/12/2015).

How does language have such a strong effect on people?

Well, language has a binary Feature built within its nature, although we can have it as multi-polar, but those who wish to manipulate it usually restore to this binary character. So we could say evil vs. good (Axis of Evil), believers vs infidels. Language has historic connotations within it, when G.W. Bush called his war on Bin Laden, he called it a Crusade, invoking imagery in western people of long ago battles against the Muslim Saladin. This is good for Bush, but clearly, it enraged Muslims in the US and elsewhere who saw this as an attack on all Muslims. Of course, Bush chose his words carefully, he didn't pick them up from thin air. He invoked the image of a Muslim army moving onto Christian lands (American homeland) to destroy all they believe in. It worked. Those who went to fight, thought they were defending their homeland and beliefs, despite the war being quite distant from their own country. Equally, Extremists use this strategy to recruit young people, they show how the Crusade against them is a crusade of infidels against God , making it a Jihad, an obligatory duty thus on every Muslim on earth.

More importantly, language can be inclusive or exclusive, this has been used by Bush again in phrases such as 'ALL civilised nations must fight terror' in this we see two things: ALL, meaning either you are with us or you are against us. Secondly, we use the polarity of civilised:, the opposite is 'barbarian;, so you are either civilised if you join us, or you are barbaric if you are against us. In this, we find a new characteristic, which is language dehumanising effect, this is used by others in a way to allow the killing they do: It is more acceptable to kill someone if they are not human, if they are innate, and therefore we use such terms to ease the effect our war is going to have on ordinary people. We find we do this dehuminising ion order to justify our actions. If you are fighting a direct attack on your country, then you don't need to justify it. People can see the enemy bombing their homes and will back you regardless. However, when you plan to fight a war in distant lands, it is harder to convince people of the legitimacy of that war, hence you need to persuade them, this is where you use the persuasive act of language but also the dehumanising effect, if your people imagine the others where you are about to drop bombs are not humans like them, then it is

easier for them to ignore the number of bombs being dropped (Lack of moral relationship). Calling someone Evil allows you to manipulate others away from critical thinking when you discuss serious issues such as terrorism.

Equally, extremists use narrative that include sections from the Koran or Hadith, which means they are excluding non-Muslims from their speeches and only including Muslims. This is a good strategy on their part as they can pass messages through Islamically related themes that non-Muslims will not understand easily, if at all.

So far, you have seen the effect of language. NARRATIVE, which is how we use words is also quite powerful; we use it to persuade and manipulate others so they accept our point of view despite their former convictions, blame, inspire, seduce, illuminate or entertain, among other things.

In conflict resolution, we need to use language that allows 'saving face'. Currently, we see language that exacerbates the conflict, Assad being described as a 'butcher' will not give him a way out, as he needs to save face. Equally, calling ISIS barbarians gives them an excuse to behave in that manner. It is a case of 'well, if they see us as Barbarians/ animals, we may as well behave in that way, we have nothing to lose'. We need to be prudent in our choice of words in order to reach the first step of getting to sit around the same table for negotiations. Yaser Suleiman (1994) describes language as a 'lethal weapon of nation destruction'; what an apt description. Some claim that language is more important than territory in preserving the cultural identity of people (Fishman, 1972).

Back to recruitment narrative; it is used to naturalise politically motivated ideologies, which allows people to take actions they would not normally take, such as carry out suicide attacks. They can be used to justify such events and to cajole others. Narrative here is long term, which is the scary effect, it can take a long time to have its effect following the sowing of its seeds. So, it may not have an immediate effect, but a trickle effect, which makes it harder for us to pinpoint those at risk, until it is sadly probably too late.

For narrative to be successful it requires some knowledge of the matter in hand. In other words, familiarity of concept, so when Abu Qatada talks about the 'boy' , we need to know he is narrating a self-sacrifice story for us to follow. Non-Muslims will struggle to get that reference. However, for success, it relies on lack of full knowledge of any given concept. If you are unfamiliar with the full concepts, it makes it easier for others to convince you of it and of doping something that goes against your instincts. (Polygamy).

In the meantime, narrative could be used as counter narrative; this means to counter the narrative used by extremists when they recruit and when they want to legitimise their fight.

Communication changes according to the culture we belong to. Arabs and Asians belong to High Context cultures (HCC), which relies on body language, metaphors, euphemisms, and hidden meanings of language. This is how extremists use their language (In contrast to Scandinavians who are direct and blunt). They choose their words carefully (If language is lethal, words are the bullets;. Media uses this to its advantage, for example, using 'migrants v refugees' they are biased in their choice of words (In addition to the usual choice of news to broadcast and so on) but this is not for this talk.

Extremists also rely on stories, to allow us to reach the moral of their story, in a way that keeps their attention on hold.

So we really do need to understand not just the surface meanings of uttered words, but the pragmatic meanings behind them. The difficulty is that for this, you need a native speaker of Arabic with a decent knowledge of both Islam and the Arabic culture. The problem is recruiting such linguists is reasonably low in governmental agencies, suspicion of impartiality and loyalty are still there. So, you m ay take second or third generation Arabs, which will mean a loss of those skills to a great extent. Equally, some might struggle to understand the words and pragmatics of the Koran or refuse to translate it as they fear translating the word of God inaccurately. This does not pose a problem to Extremists. Some of the narratives are taken out of context, so even if we found someone willing to translate, they might not be familiar enough with 'minor' stories enough to get the message meant to be given.

Lack of decent dictionaries adds a problem; extremists use old archaic words that are hard to find in modern dictionaries. To get them from Arabic – Arabic dictionary requires reverting them back to their roots, which is not easy for a non-native speaker of Arabic or for a weak one. This also requires a lengthy research task, which is not always possible. An example is Jihad vs, Holy war. Merrion webster equates them when in fact they are not equal. Jihad could mean hard work, striving to succeed, etc. This is not listed in the dictionary. So a non-native speaker would reasonably ASSUME Jihad only means Holy War. And the examples like this are plenty.

In conclusion of the language: look at metaphors, historic connotations to speeches, avoid polarity in language as it leads to exclusion, when we should aim for inclusion, this includes avoiding exclusive language/ vocabulary, and finally, look at it differently, if we can use language to create and fuel hatred and war, why not use it to break conflicts and create global peace?

Section Four:

Creating the future. Posing questions for the present and future generations to consider. How does the human race fulfil its destiny? How do we work, exchange goods and services, live and create families? Are we individuals or groups? How do we place a value on contribution to society? How do we build for the future? What kind of future can we envisage? The Internet of Things. smart homes, smart cities, smart transport. Drawing on the great wisdom contained in less well-known scripts and documents such as The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Gnostic Gospels, seeking the true meaning of being human and not the easy short-term sticking plaster option. Taking the lessons of history forward in a positive way. Accepting that the past glories are in many cases lost forever but that the basis of their beliefs and structures can be the foundation of our future.

Conclusion and questions

There is no neat solution but a need for collective collaboration. It is now up to the younger generation to explore and discuss. It is important that elder wisdom is harnessed to youth and vision and new ideas. A new way of living is necessary if we are to secure the future of the human race.

The absence of any vision initiate any serious long-term political solution to the crisis in Syria will have serious impacts not on the national level but on World Peace and Security. The solution is to start thinking of starting a Syrian national dialogue supported by the United Nations; which bring together the conflicting Syrian parties, excluding the Islamists lined to Alameda, then this National body that can represent and unify Syrians to create a peace process to overcome the conflict and put an end to the defragmentation of Syria's economy.

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