

Regional Social Movement: An Inescapable Necessity for Peace in the Middle East

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Abstract

The Arab nations of the Middle East have recently become the center of religious and ethnic aggression. This paper aims to answers to the following question: what efficient approach can be used to reduce of the religious violence in Middle East by political sociological approach? This paper indicates that the formation of a regional peaceful social movement can be effective in reducing religious tensions and violence in the Middle East if it finds associated with tolerant and committed participation and activism of civil-intellectual elites and non-governmental groups, beyond religious divisions and fanaticism. Continuous effort for reduction of poverty and good distributive policies for the masses is also of great importance in this regard. Furthermore, this must be followed by the presentation of practical strategies for peace and the integration of the masses. The author believe that regional social movement along with the integration of public opinion and the production of attitudinal and intellectual transformation in the masses can deprive violent Takfiri groups, such as ISIS, from public support. This can lead to a social bottom-up and general pressure and coercion for peace and, ultimately, necessitate the regional and trans-regional powers to establish peace, but it is a time-consuming process.

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Introduction

In the age of cyberspace and globalization, the world has witnessed a politicization of religious and ethno-linguistic issues under the influence of the enormous capabilities of the Internet and social networks. Consequently, religious and ethnic activists with political, identitical, and cultural claims and motives have tried to sidestep political isolation and marginalization and return to the sphere of politics. For this reason, Manuel Castells refers to the emergence and intensification of two types of identity, namely "resistance" and "project" identities, with a focus on resistance against the "legitimizing" identity of the dominant political system and on the establishment of a new political system based on the religious, ethnic and ideological identity in the era of "network and cyber community (Castells, 2001: 24) From this perspective, sociologists, such as Kate Nash, believe that the mission and scope of political sociology studies in today's world has exited from classic and merely class-based dimensions and state-centric paradigm, and been oriented towards "cultural policies" with a focus on the activism of identities and players of religious, ethno-linguistic, and feminist identities, and the like. Similarly, new social movements with identity-based, non-instrumental, and non-class features have been formed and developed with cultural, identitical, and civil orientations and with an international networking nature in the context of dramatic opportunities of communications and information revolution. Religious fundamentalist movements are among these movement spectra, some parts of which related to an extreme violence-based approach (Nash, Contemporary Political Sociology (Nash,

2001:13-16).

In connection with the fight against religious violence, military and political strategies and actions have been adopted and practiced with the participation of governments and international governmental organizations. Nevertheless, it should be asserted that religious violence has increased and expanded. In this article, the authors do not deny the urgency of political and military strategies in the fight against this miserable phenomenon. However, the authors believe that these measures have been largely contaminated with parochial political and power-based purposes of the international regional and trans-regional actors and powers. With an alternative approach, this article is founded upon the underlying assumption that the formation of a regional, peaceful and social movement as well as a government's continuous effort for combatting poverty and ensuring good distributive policies for the masses, can be effective in reducing religious tensions and violence in the Middle East.

Theoretical Framework

A comprehensive definition of the concept of social movements is necessary, here at the start of the discussion. Diani defines social movements as networks of informal relationships between various individuals and organizations that possess a specific form of collective identity and mobilize the resources in connection with the disputed issues (Diani, 2001: 117). In the current era, social movements have become the most important social agents influencing the political dynamisms and the progress of reformist, peaceful, and justice-seeking goals for such reasons as follows: critical stance to power, origination from the social body, the networking nature at sub-national, national, and global levels, identity-based nature, their non-instrumental and cross-class essence, the absence of power-driven narrow-mindedness, the accompaniment of the new middle class as well as intellectual and civil elites, and, above all, the enjoyment of the support of the global public opinion (Della Porta and Diani, 1999: 13-16; Hamel

and Maheu, 2006: 264).

In this paper, "framing and bridging theory" was used as an important theory. Erving Goffman and Snow's "bridging theory" can be a useful theory to build coalitions for peace in the Arabic Middle East in the context of religious differences and commonalities. These two theorists have looked at social movements from the perspective of cultural-value framework and bridging between the frames. Framework is a general interpretation and predefined structure where the affiliated individuals view and recognize the world from that perspective and assign meaning to realities in their life or interpret them. In fact, framework refers to the beliefs, values, and norms related to a specific culture (Della Porta and Diani, 1999: 104-105). These are the frameworks that generate collective actions and collective identity. Social movements use frames to diagnose and interpret problems to inspire and legitimize collective action. Social movements use injustice as basic common frame for dialogue and to engage social activists from different frames (Arenas, 2015: 12). Goffman and Snow support the view that three conditions are essential for the success of any social movement as follows:

1. Frame bridging: In this process, the religious and cultural frames that are ideologically congruent and similar will be linked together (Nash, 2001: 155). The movement activists and leaders try to link the perceptions, interpretations, beliefs, and values of the individuals and potential members with the interpretations of the movement's organization. Therefore, collective action occurs when the messages of the movement's organization become congruent with the audience. **2. Frame amplification:** It refers to the common cultural and value frames regardless of the political, religious, and intellectual gaps and divisions. **3. Frame extension:** It refers to the extension of the common value, cultural or religious framework among leaders to the entire audience and social body to attract the largest possible audience. In frame extension, it is attempted to present the movement's messages with more caution and greater flexibility and also with the

expression and amplification of the commonalities, with a de-emphasis of differences. In this way, members with fewer similarities and commonalities will be also absorbed. **4. Frame transformation:** The formation of the dominant interpretation of the shared value framework for promoting the common goal or goals that are related to peace and opposition to war and violence (Della Porta and Diani, 1999: 113-118).

I- Current International Environment

By means of a fair, realistic, and gray approach, one would not take quite a negative line towards regional and trans-regional diplomatic-political and somewhat military actions in rolling back and fighting with the extremist groups of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). However, it should be argued that the political and military measures and actions for the decline of religious and takfiri violence have been incomplete and received serious challenges that are addressed below. One of the main challenges in the Middle East peace process and regional stability in the Arabic Middle East is that some regional and trans-regional powers have been directly or indirectly involved in creating and strengthening of extremist and takfiri groups, particularly Al-Qaeda and ISIS.

One of the other most important challenges to peace and stability in the Middle East is the dominance of political ethics and power-based intentions over international efforts at political and military levels. One can possibly argue that no regional and trans-regional powers have been uninfluenced by these intentions and challenges. In "political ethics", which is quite distinct from civic morality and true or desired morality, everything is considered as a means to serve the promotion and realization of the power and strength of political designers and actors, including governments. This type of morality implies a sort of pragmatism and expediency, and any kind of behavior or idea will be valuable when it serves the realization of the strategy of promoting power. In this type of morality, inner purposes become hidden under the

guise of surface purposes, including peaceful ones. "Power" is among the concepts that must be considered relative in the sense that whether the holder and implementer of power at high political levels (government) or group and individual levels have a positive and affirmative attitude towards power to achieve the great collective objectives of peace and justice or have a narrow and exclusive attitude towards power? The desirable attitude to power is that power is regarded as a means rather than a goal; indeed, it should be viewed as a means to achieve the genuine collective and global goals and objectives regardless of narrow individual and collective or national goals (Sardarnia, 2018: 79).

One of the main challenges and criticisms leveled against the already-conducted political and military measures and actions in the fight against takfiri groups and, in general, in the establishment of peace and stability in the Middle East is that these measures and actions have been mainly infected by power-based and pragmatic purposes of the regional and trans-regional powers. Taking a deep look at the international meetings of peace and security in relation to Syria, one can perceive the political ethics and power-based and pragmatic intentions dominant over the meetings. The United States and its allies first pursued the project of overthrowing Bashar al-Assad's regime; however, this project was replaced by the ISIS repression project with the appearance of serious security risks to America and its Western and regional allies on the part of takfiri groups. Interestingly, Trump, the new president of America, also recognized this goal as a priority. In her latest position in April 2017, Nikki Haley, the new US Ambassador to the Security Council, stated that the overthrow of Assad's regime was not the priority of the American government. In addition, she announced that the rocket attack on Syria and army positions on April 7 was a restricted and unrepeatable attack. She declared that this missile attack represented the government's decisiveness in response to the chemical attack to Idlib (Tabnak Internet Portal, ID 682743).

From this point of view, it is possible to realize the bipolar

nature and framework dominant over the international meetings on peace in Syria and fight against takfiri groups that have been held in Europe or Kazakhstan and elsewhere. In all these meetings, Iran, Syria, and Russia are at one end of the spectrum and the United States of America, its Arab allies (Saudi Arabia and Qatar), and its Western allies are at the other end of the spectrum; hence, no consensus has been reached in these meetings. Through a realistic and fair approach, one can say that all parties have followed their own considerations of national security and power-based criticisms in these meetings and, thereby, the oppressed people of Syria have been the real victims who have been paying the price for the power-based pragmatism of political actors at the levels of governments and opposition political groups. Russia, like America, has also its own power-based and pragmatic considerations. The most important goals of this country for intervention in the Syrian crisis include: consolidating its position as a global player, compensating for the intervention of the West and America in the Ukrainian crisis in the context of an emerging Cold War by means of intervention in the Syrian crisis, and maintaining its regional allies, i.e. Iran and Syria.

With an analytical approach, it can be said that the geopolitical and geo-cultural confrontations in the region have acted as a serious obstacle in reaching consensus in international meetings on peace. The most prominent form of this geo-cultural and identity-based confrontation is that of the Shiite Crescent (Iran, Syria, and Lebanon) with the Sunni bloc under the leadership of Saudi Arabia. The development and expansion of the war in Syria and the creation and dissemination of takfiri groups, from one point of view, are analyzable in the form of the Sunni bloc's interventions. In the meantime, the Islamic Republic of Iran has entered into the fight against the takfiri groups for bringing peace and distancing the leading geopolitical center of Shiite (i.e., Iran) from the direct crosshairs of ISIS. However, Iran's support of Assad's regime based on some considerations and

Saudi's fear of the empowerment of Shiite Crescent have made this confrontation more intense and created a situation in which the region cannot be free of war and conflicts. Therefore, with the above considerations and challenges, one cannot be hopeful of the establishment of comprehensive and inclusive peace in the region, thereby, other measures should be devised.

II- Main Impediments of Peace

One of the most important reasons in the genesis and spread of radical takfiri groups in the Middle East is vast poverty and economic crisis. Studies show that injustice, inequalities, discriminations, economic crisis and poverty are the main factors that led to religious terrorism in the Middle East (Karim Pashaki and Alizadeh, 2009: 78). A large number of ISIS supporters consider economic injustice and poverty as the rooted reasons in attain to this terrorist group. Oliver Roy argues that most of the supporters of terrorist groups are poor and rural migrants in Middle East (Roy, 2008: 59). Many of ISIS's militants are the mercenaries that fight for individual and material interests (Lauchs et al, 2012: 3.).

In this paper, it is argued that although intellectual and cultural approaches are very important in the disarming and discrediting of takfiri groups, but they are not sufficient, hence economic approaches are necessary; so long as vast poverty and unemployment persist, they will serve as the main challenge and hence impediment of peace. So, both the intellectual and economic innovations and approaches are necessary for isolating these religious terrorist groups and delegitimizing them among the masses. As long as poverty and inequality persevere, these anti-peace groups will have vast basis among the masses. Economic frustrations and cultural poverty are the main motivation for the participation of masses in these groups (Nazari and Pirani, 2017: 123-125). Factors such as flawed modernization, unequal distribution policies and continuous irresponsibility of governments lead to the dissatisfaction of the masses, so practical

innovations by governments in this region and reformations of performance legitimacy are necessary for stability and delegitimization of terrorist groups in masses or social bodies in Middle East.

III- Formation of Regional Social Bottom-up Movements

In the previous section, a brief analysis was performed and it was stated that international diplomatic-political and at least some military action is required in the preventing of pervasive instability. However, due to the mentioned reasons as well as current historical experiences, it is possible to reach the general conclusion that "top-down" or state-based approaches do not suffice in the least to bring peace, and end the religious violence of takfiri groups. For as long as the regional and trans-regional powers do not distance themselves from the parochial and pragmatic power-based purposes, and do not move towards true peaceful principles, these measures and actions will only take largely artificial and short-term aspects in the control of violence.

With regard to the aforementioned reasons and challenges and the requirement for the deep and profound commitment to the true peaceful principles and ideals, the main theme of the current paper is that the adoption of "bottom-up" approaches or strategies can be complementary to the inadequacy of top-down approaches which can play an effective role in peace. In this approach, the most important social actors and agents are the new social movements. In fact, social movements originate from the social context and body outside the governments. However, whether in the Middle East or elsewhere, social movements should meet a series of essential and unavoidable requirements and preconditions in order to be effective in bringing peace and curbing religious violence. These requirements and preconditions are mentioned in brief as follows:

Independent Cadres of Leaders, Activists and Elites: Although social movements have a more flexible structure in terms of organization, they will not be able to influence political

and social dynamisms without strong civil and political leaders and activists. The availability of a strong cadre of leaders and ideologues, independent of governments, in the body of social movements can bring another destiny to the social movements. People in the Middle East are experiencing the horrific phenomenon of takfiris' violence, and the political and international measures of power have been even unable in controlling this phenomenon. Therefore, the arena should be inevitably restored for the activism of the leaders and social activists that have come from the social body independent of governments. Hence, it is required that the main leadership cadre recruits members from among the reputable individuals and activists who are committed to peace in the region. In this way, the leadership cadre will be equipped with a strong group of major leaders, middle leaders, and activists so that they can strongly and powerfully influence political dynamisms, especially political measures and arrangements around peace in the region.

Regional-international Coverage of Social Movements: One of the requirements and characteristics of social movements in the era of communication and information revolution and globalization is that this collective actor and agent should exit from the narrow subnational and national fence and go into regional and international activities. The terrorism and instability caused by violent takfiri groups in Syria and Iraq are by no means limited to the national level between the two countries, but also a number of other countries at the regional level have not been spared from the violence and attacks by these groups. It can even be claimed that the consequences of their acts have spread globally. Therefore, the unsafe context replete with blind violence and terrorism in the Middle East requires the emerging social movements to have an organizational and networking coverage and to embark on the recruitment of new members at the regional level so that they can achieve their main objective which is peace and safety, in earnest.

One of the major benefits and results of the formation of

regional movements is that public opinion about the origins and perpetrators of terrorism at the regional level is shaped and institutionalized with an emphasis on quick social actions in order to promote peace and end terrorism in the Arabic nations of the Middle East. In the framework of "resource mobilization" theory, one can argue that an emerging social movement with regional coverage can mobilize more important resources in the Middle East and even in the world and use them in order to create a strong social mobilization of people to push for peace and disclose the inner intentions of war-mongers and promoters of irregularities. These new resources are: extra-organizational links with the new movements and groups with common and genuine objectives and positions, relationships with civil and political non-governmental activists and the recruitment of members from among them at the regional level, the attraction of willing and committed followers from the social body and masses, the absorption of financial, ideological, political, and publicizing resources, and the like (Opp, 2009: 128-129).

In the age of cyberspace and the Internet, peace activists and actors benefit from far more capabilities and opportunities for the internationalization of the peace movement and the mobilization of public opinion. These opportunities and capabilities include sending group e-mails in unlimited quantity, creating the possibility of international virtual networking for the movement and its objectives, and spreading video conference, chat rooms, social networking sites, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc. with various functions and capacities. Such capacities can have highly important and constructive functions for this social movement to promote peace and accompany public opinion by imposing social pressures for peace and the control of violence. These capacities include disclosure functions and the imposition of pressure with the aim of making the movement peaceful, the function of identity formation around the noble goal of peace-seeking efforts, networking function within the movement outside the organization in cyberspace to build regional and even global

comprehensive coalitions for the establishment of peace in the Middle East, the function of organizing the protests and mobilizing public opinion and the masses around peace and responsiveness of political elites and powers in this regard, and the function of attitudinal and intellectual transformation in the masses and the accompaniment of these transformed masses with elites and social activists who seek peace in the Middle East (Claping and Nossal, 2001: 446; Diani, 2001:121; Sardarnia, 2018: 262-265). In a sense, one can claim that the peaceful social movement in the Arabic Middle East can create a sort of contextualization for the development and institutionalization of a "regional civil society" by taking advantage of these important cyber and non-cyber opportunities (Kaldor, 2003: 79). Moreover, this movement can enjoy all the capabilities of activists, civil institutions, political leaders and transformed masses for the serious and strong effectiveness in political dynamisms in order to bring an end to the violence and put pressure on all the governments and agencies contributing to the prevalence of such violence.

Formation of Peace Coalitions Beyond Religious & Ethnic Fanaticism: One of the important impediments to peace is the religious-ethnic divide. There is a great theoretical controversy about the role of religion and peace or their conflicts. There are those who argue that religion creates identity tension, division and hostility. From this viewpoint, it is often claimed that religion is near to or even at the heart of most wars. Moreover, religion can and has been used to justify aggression, war and violence. Others argue that religion is an avenue that promotes generosity, patience, higher purpose, peace and the common good. In reality, religion has the capacity to bring the best and the worst of humanity, it depends on the approach adopted toward religion (Linehan, 2013: 1).

One of the main requirements for the effectiveness of a peaceful social movement in the peace process in the Middle East is the creation of a cohesive collection with a high consensus on

the centrality of peace and anti-violence. The existence of a number of ethnic-religious divisions and gaps can lead to violence and conflicts and may prevent the achievement of a consensus. The status of the Middle East in the last few decades and the current religious and ethnic violence clearly represent this issue. However, we should not be completely hopeless where the decline of religious violence is concerned. This consensus requires institutional, attitudinal-intellectual, and dialogic contextualization as well as tolerance or leniency.

Erving Goffman and Snow's "bridging theory" and "the Emic approach" can be two useful theories to build coalitions for peace in the Arabic Middle East in the context of religious differences and commonalities. According to the bridging theory and the emic approach, leaders and activists of peaceful social movements should first reach the requirement of consensus-building and coalition over the noble goal of peace and anti-violence at the level of elites and activists. They should come to this important point that there will be no possibility for peace and the generation of bottom-up social coercion and pressure in the Middle East as long as division seeking and religious fanaticism mixed in ethnic-tribal subcultures and autocratic mentality are dominant in the region, and the principles and commonalities of Islam and civil and democratic tenets are ignored.

At the elite level, the leaders and ideologists of the movement should try to highlight Islamic religious commonalities, considering the fact that Islam particularly emphasizes religious leniency, peace, absence of conflicts between the religious followers, civil morality, unity of Muslims with different community-based orientations, and democratic principles through modern interpretations consistent with the religion. These leaders should constantly consider division seeking as a despicable deed and the major source of violence and also as an item that provides the conditions for the interference of foreign and regional powers. In addition, at the elite level, a dominant interpretation of shared religious values and beliefs should be highlighted in such a way

that religious fanaticism and defamation of other religious followers will be prevented.

However, the social peaceful movement in the Middle East cannot be successful in achieving this noble goal if it remains limited to the elite level and becomes disconnected with social body and masses of religious fanatics. Within the framework of this theory, elites and leaders of the movement should attempt to extend the shared value framework based on Islamic religious ties to the total Muslim masses in the Middle East. From the attitudinal perspective, they should try to orient the people's beliefs and attitudes towards tolerance, pacifism, anti-violence, and condemnation of violence through the media and social networks or Internet information channels, newspapers, conferences, parades, and the like. Similarly, it should be attempted to increase the social and political consciousness of the masses on disasters, violence in the Middle East, the current civil war in Syria and Iraq, and the blind violence of the self-governing and takfiri government of ISIS through simple and historical language. By providing and implementing these measures, it can be hoped that the relationship between the leaders and the masses will become more consolidated in terms of cultural, intellectual, and attitudinal transformation. Ultimately, a serious and inclusive social bottom-up pressure will be generated for peace and for imposition on the regional and trans-regional powers. With the continuation of this trend, the culture of protest against violence in the region becomes institutionalized, and violent takfiri groups encounter no support and no legitimacy in the eyes of the community and religious, but transformative, masses.

One of the challenges of the etic and emic approaches reveals itself when examining the vocabulary typically used for the field of peace-building. Yet in the case of Muslim peace building, the terms such as pacifism, nonviolence, and peace and so on, are culturally and religiously dependent. Although some scholars emphasize commonalities by etic approach that must be extended to masses, continued religious differences and particularism

impede peace in Middle East. In the study of Muslim-based nonviolence, the scholars must respect the parameters developed by those participating in nonviolence in their own right. In this way, while still using the etic approach, they must make room for the emic understanding revealed by each distinct case (Linehan, 2013: 4). In this paper, the peace-building recommendations on the basis of the emic approach are at the starting point and are still being developed, but can make useful avenues for future in this region.

Consensus and Public Action for Peace by Institutionalization of Dialogic Culture: One of the requirements for the success of an emerging social movement toward peace in the Middle East is intellectual, institutional, attitudinal, and elitist contextualization for discussion beyond religious fanaticism and prejudices to overcome sectarian divisions. In this connection, Amartya Sen's theoretical approach and the "etic approach" are useful and expressive.

From Amartya Sen and Habermas's theoretical perspective, the solution in the Arabic Middle East is the intellectual, attitudinal, and political contextualization and the cognitive equipment of people for the leniency of religious, ethnic, and political identity as well as dialogue between identities to reach a relative consensus. The monolithic culture, the monopolistic and sectarian monologues dominant in the Middle East, as well as the geopolitical and geo-cultural arrangements have acted as major obstacles to peace so far. In the framework of deliberative democracy model, the organization of the emerging social movement in the public sphere at Internet-cyberspace level and the real non-online cyber level should primarily organize and institutionalize the continuous process of a public dialogue to reach consensus at the level of elites with the centrality of peace and justice within the framework of religious commonalities and democratic principles. If these discursive negotiations are unbiased and free of solitarist and exclusively religious, sectarian or political identities, and exact attention is paid to the negative

consequences of sectarian and religious violence and the power-driven interferences of the regional and trans-regional governments, they can prepare the ground for a general consensus on and commitment to peace. Then, such a general consensus in the context of hatred violence and the attitudinally and intellectually transformed masses can prepare the ground for public, collective, and inclusive action for pacifism and the end of violence.

Conclusion

One of the main concerns of political and social scholars and analysts is why religious violence in the Middle East does not come to an end and has witnessed an increasing trend. Have the international political and military measures been proven to be successful in overcoming the political and religious violence in the Middle East? Evidence and observations suggest that political and military measures or top-down approaches, followed by the role-playing and intervention of the trans-regional and regional powers, have failed to fully curb and control the religious violence of ISIS takfiris. In addition, none of these international meetings have led to a consensus. The most important reasons for this failure include: the direct and indirect interference of regional and trans-regional powers in shaping and strengthening religious takfiri groups, superiority of political morality and opportunistic and authoritarian pragmatism over the political actors and trans-regional powers, the negative impact of politicized identity seeking, and political avarice of the regional powers in the context of confrontations and competitions in terms of geo-culture.

In this article, it was attempted to progress this fundamental point that although top-down political and military measures will have at most a temporary role in the relative control of the violence, these actors paradoxically set fire and claim peace simultaneously when attending these meetings. Accordingly, the fundamental belief in this article was that the state-based and top-down approaches polluted with power and hypocrisy have been

proven to be inadequate in the establishment of comprehensive peace. In fact, the establishment of comprehensive peace requires the adoption of an alternative bottom-up approach with the formation of a social peaceful movement and the activism of elites, civil rights activists, and political activists as well as the companionship of the social body or masses in collective action for peace.

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