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Oman: A beacon of hope in the Middle East

10 APR 2015 00:00 | QAANITAH HUNTER



Oman does not get involved in regional politics and places a high value on religious tolerance.

COMMENT

Do you remember that May morning two years ago when we woke up to the news that “al-Qaeda is alive and well in South Africa”? This week we saw news that the Islamic State has extended its recruiting network to South Africa.

Although the narrative may be similar, the players are quite different – and this time it is not a loosely put together hotchpotch of half-truths. It is real. And the most we are doing is sitting back helplessly.

On May 13 2013, investigative reporter De Wet Potgieter attempted to “expose” a huge and murky network of terrorists operating in South Africa. The report, carried by the Daily Maverick and chased by almost every other major news network in South Africa at the time, was labelled as barefaced lies. Some even said it was Islamophobic.

Perhaps, then, it came as little surprise that a month later, the Daily Maverick issued an apology to the implicated individuals after finding no proof that connected the al-Qaeda terror network to South Africa.

Things have changed dramatically globally since then and balaclava-clad youths with black flags now wreak terror in the Islamic world. Videos of beheadings make even the Lord’s Resistance Army’s Joseph Kony look like a Nobel peace prize contender.

South Africans, far from the epicentre of the Islamic State scourge, looked away, hoping that if we ignored it long enough, it would go away. But as the beheadings and executions became commonplace, there was a dreaded sigh and then a “not in our name” mumble.

It is really difficult to pin down the Islamic State with any accuracy. Are they really Sunnis? Who is funding them? Are they a Western decoy?

These conversations continued until we were jolted to the reality this week that they may have established a recruiting network in South Africa.

While the details remain sketchy, what we know is that a 15-year-old Cape Town girl was apprehended and removed from a British Airways flight after being linked to the terror group.

There is no doubt the Muslim world is heavily fragmented, disagreeing on everything from the Muslim Brotherhood to the war in Syria.

Enter Oman: an interesting non-player in Arab/Muslim politics and the inevitable conflict in the Middle East.

Oman is the only country that does not have its finger in the war pie – despite sharing borders with key Arab players Yemen and Saudi Arabia. With a population the size of Cape Town's, Oman – as per its legislation – does not get involved in regional politics.

At a gathering of its religious scholars in the capital Muscat this week, the country's shared ideal of religious tolerance was shined and polished like a valuable ancient vase.

The minister of religious affairs, Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Salmi, emphasised several times in an interview with the media: "In Oman, Shias, Sunnis and Ibadhis [a sect found mostly in Oman] can live peacefully together," he said.

Unlike several Middle-Eastern countries where religious affiliation has divided nations for centuries, Oman discourages the segregation of congregations along Shia, Sunni or Ibadhi lines. The Omani government strives to allow all religious denominations a space to practice their religion.

Anglican priest Chris Howitz told me that even small congregations were welcomed and accepted. "Here people can disagree with you but still remain your friend," he said.

But you cannot talk about religious tolerance in isolation, especially in a region where public beheadings and mass executions are so frequent that they barely grab the headlines.

Al-Salmi explained how the country has a firm policy not to become embroiled in the affairs of others. He cited a Qur'anic principle: that no man shall be held accountable for the misdeeds of his brother. He would further denounce the Islamic State, saying it has no place in the "peaceful religion of Islam".

A similar sentiment was expressed by a body of South African clerics who this week unequivocally shunned the Islamic State as a "group of mass murderers who do not act in the name of Islam".

But while it is interesting that the narrative of denouncing the group is shared globally, the response to it has been so varied.

This, perhaps, is where the international community broadly, and the Muslim world in particular, faces its biggest challenge; uniting beyond the differences, religious affiliations or even geopolitics, to come up with a solution to combat the fundamental barbarity of the Islamic State.

The mainly moderate Muslim community in South Africa learnt a tough lesson this week: in the age of social media, distance is no barrier against global terrorism.

Qaanitah Hunter's trip to Oman was funded by the Omani ministry of heritage and religion affairs.

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