



TheMiddleEast *Online...*



Exclusive to The Middle East Online. . . Tackling the enemy within

By **Pat Lancaster** in Muscat

The Middle East region is going through some of its worst times in contemporary history. The Palestinians have suffered the effects of oppression under the Jewish state of Israel for more than six decades but these new, post-Arab Spring conflicts, are pitting Muslim against Muslim in an frenzy of death and destruction unprecedented in modern times.

The fall out from conflicts such as those in Syria, Libya and Iraq is causing consternation and fear in countries far beyond the Arab world, most recently in Sydney, Australia and Copenhagen, Denmark, where innocent victims were slaughtered by extremists purporting to be acting in the name of Islam.

The perpetrators of these crimes might be described as deranged lunatics who act on behalf of nobody but themselves. But, as a result of their brutality the world's media has become preoccupied by the fact that the terrorists grievances appear to have had their roots in Islam. On a six day visit to the Middle East earlier this month, heir to the British throne, Prince Charles observed: "The radicalisation of people in Britain is a great worry and the extent to which this is happening is alarming." And Britain is not alone in its concerns. There is not a capital city in the world that is not currently on a state of high alert to divert the threat of this covert conflict, which could just as easily come from within national borders as from anywhere outside.

A dangerous distrust has been developing between the West and followers of the Islamic faith that has nothing whatever to do with the majority of the world's Muslim population of around 1.7 billion. Most Muslims abhor the actions of extremist groups such as ISIS and Boko Haram, who they denounce as being without religious faith or any shred of humanity. Following the recent brutal murder by ISIS of the young Jordanian pilot whose plane was shot down over Iraq, Queen Rania of Jordan (below) noted:

"We are in a confrontation with those who have hijacked our religion...They claim to be the successors of the Islamic Caliphate but they have no conscience, and no heart...We need to act. And we are in a race against time".

But is it already too late to demolish the walls of suspicion that have grown up between non-Muslims and Muslims? One man who believes it is not is the head of Oman's Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, Sheikh Abdullah Al Salmi. "I am someone who likes to have faith in the future, to be optimistic," Sheikh Abdullah told The Middle East.

Oman has a long established reputation for religious tolerance, which is enshrined in its constitution and allows non-Muslims to celebrate their faith in safety. Towards the end of last year, the Omani capital hosted an international conference on "Shared Values in the World of Multiculturalism".

The three-day event in Muscat was organised by Oman's Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, in cooperation with the Latin Academy. The conference focused on ways of improving issues of understanding, acquaintance and co-existence among various global cultures.



In a speech, Sheikh Abdullah al Salmi (right) told the audience that a number of reasons had been behind the Latin Academy decision to hold the conference in Oman. Not least of these is the leading role the country has played, during the reign of its leader Sultan Qaboos, which began in 1970, in the deployment of communication to promote better understanding between peoples and to uphold the value of peace in the region and the world.

Nasser Abdulaziz al-Nasser, High Representative for the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations said the Muscat event came at a very important time, particularly given the difficult circumstances in the region as a result of sectarian and religious conflicts and acts of terrorism. He highlighted the role of cultural diversity, respect for others and the great responsibility of clergymen of all religious persuasions in spreading the call for moderation.



Speaking to The Middle East after the conference, Sheikh Abdullah noted the importance of ensuring mutual respect existed between religions as well as societies.

"We need to avoid interfering in each others internal affairs but we should always be willing to cooperate in being part of peacemaking efforts." The Minister went on to describe the actions of Islamic extremists as "a perversion of Islam and its values. The atrocities committed by groups of radical extremists are harmful to Islam. They effect the reputations of Muslims in Europe, the West and elsewhere. But let us hope that the innocents will not be held responsible for the actions of the criminals."

As to whether the actions of the extremists can be curbed, Sheikh Abdullah believes, all efforts should be made to prevent the spread of the discontent in which violence and political dissent develop and grow, concentrating on policies of prevention as well as cure.

"Political stability is crucial and so are ongoing development policies. If you can couple these two things it may help curb the spread of radical movements that have corrupted so many societies over the years," he noted

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