Nabil Fayad
Speech at BYU
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Nabilfayad.com
Email: sdlsyrianparty@gmail.com

Dear ladies and gentlemen,

When one comes from a country like Syria, where civilians are suffering from a war that has been going on for more than four years, he feels that it is almost impossible for him, especially as a researcher, to devote his energy and his intellectual zealous to talk about anything else besides the Syrian crisis that is severely threatening the very existence of his country, its culture, and its people. However, the current crisis in Syria has its roots in the religious tradition of the country, mainly in Islamic theology.

The most important aspect of the conflict in Syria today is the confrontation between tradition and modernity, between the 7th-century Arabia and the 21st-century Syria. The war has become a manifestation of an age-old conflict between two ideas: the Heraclitian idea that advancement is inevitable and that one "cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters are continually flowing in," on the one hand, and Parmenides's monism and its view that change is merely an illusion, on the other. The latter tendency is represented by Islamists who want to drag Syria back to the 7th century and keep it there forever after.

As a neutral observer and as someone who has spent most of his life in Syria, I can say confidently that what is happening now is not just a military confrontation. Indeed it is an unprecedented tragedy that has made the entire world look morally bankrupt and completely unable to deal with such a calamity.

The crisis of refugees, for example, is much more complex that what people may think, for there is something that is being totally ignored by the media: religion. According to the best of my knowledge, there is a cultural battle lurking beneath the sound of guns, aircraft, and car bombs.

Religion, tradition, and a rigid view of Islam all factor into this struggle and turn it into a confrontation between an ideology of the 7th-century Arabia, on the one hand, and a modernist ideology that aspires to create a politically-diverse Syria, on the other.

To further contextualize my views, I would rather refer to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is well-known internationally that this declaration is a historic turning point in the history of humanity because it is an emphasis on the importance of human dignity and an affirmation that human life is always more valuable than an ideology, whatever that

ideology may be. But the truth is that most Arab countries did not comply with this declaration for religious reasons, of course!

I rightly believe that Islam, at least in its orthodoxy, radically contradicts some of the core tenets of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. When reading the authoritative Islamic sources, one cannot help but to conclude that Islam is at least partly incompatible with our modern views on human rights. Articles that substantially contradict Islamic law (Sharia) are:

Article 2:

"Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms ... without distinction of any kind..."

Article 16:

"(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family."

Article 18:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance."

Thus, let me shed, in this shortcut approach, a little bit of light on the main reasons for the current clash between Islam and Human Rights, and then discuss some of the intellectual obstacles that prevent Islam from entering the 21st century. By doing so, I hope to be able *to explain how some organizations that adhere to a literalist view of Islam can undermine international peace and security and destroy ancient cultures.*

There is no doubt that the Quran itself does not contain the slightest claim that it is valid for every time and every place, but the fact is that Muslim scholars—for one reason or another—take some verses from the Quran, and consider them, without any convincing logical argument, an evidence that Islam's most sacred text is limitlessly valid, then, now, and forever.

The first verse they usually cite says:

- "This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed My favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion" (5:3).

Here I will use three highly-regarded orthodox Muslim interpreters to understand this verse:

- "And [the] evidence [that] what you needed from your religion, I completed all to you, [so] do not increase it after this day" (Tafsir Al-Tabari).

Contrary to some of what is mentioned above, the Qurtubi says:

- "Many verses and laws of the Qur'an had come down chronologically after that verse, and among them one about usury, and another about Kalalah (one who dies without a parent or a child" (Tafsir Al-Qurtubi).

As for Ibn Kathier, he has an interpretation that is more in line with Al-Tabari:

- "The Almighty completed for them their religion, so they do not need other religion nor a prophet than their prophet prayers be upon him; so God made him the seal of the prophets and sent him to the mankind and to the jinn; no lawful but his, no forbidden but his, no religion except what he prescribed; and everything he tells is right and the truth" (Tafsir Ibn-Kathier 1301 – 1373).

Muslim scholars have been using another two verses to perpetuate the notion that the teachings of the Quran are timeless and not restricted to a specific place. One of the verses attests to the idea that the Quran is a complete guide for the believers by saying that "Nothing have We omitted from the Book" (6:38)

This verse has three similar interpretations. First, the verse is interpreted by Ibn Kathier as that "nothing was left unwritten in the Mother of the Book [Quran]" (Ibn Kathier). Second, Al-Tabari echoes the previous statement by saying that "We [meaning Allah] did not overlook [anything in] the book; there is nothing that is not in the book" (Tabari). Third, another confirmation of the previous view comes from Al-Qurtubi who argues that "in the Quran nothing of the religion is left without being referenced" (Qurtubi).

In short, Muslim scholars have been following such an approach to systematically keep the myth that the Quran altogether is for every time and place alive. To expound on the difficulties such an inflexible view generates, I will point out some contradictions between the Quran and the UN human rights charter.

1 – Demonizing the "Other" in Islam:

In Islam there are two kinds of the "Other:" the people of the Scriptures, and the other people who are neither Muslims nor the people of the Scriptures. As for the people of the Scripture, the Quran says:

- "Fight those who believe not in Allah nor in the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the Religion of Truth, from among the People of the Book, until they pay the tribute with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued." (9:29)

The "people of the Scriptures"—as a term— explicitly means the Jews and the Christians; however, we can also add to them the Sabeans. These groups have three options: either to fight the Muslims to death, convert to Islam, or "pay the tribute with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued."

The second kind of the "Other" in Islam presumably includes anyone who is neither a Muslim nor belongs to the "people of the Scriptures." This is practically the rest of humankind. These people have two terrible choices. Since that they cannot "pay the tribute with willing submission and feel themselves subdued," they have to either convert to Islam or to fight the invading Muslims to death.

2 – Slavery in Islam:

Expectedly, Islam was in harmony with the spirit of the age in which it was produced. The Quran does not prohibit slavery, yet at the same time it ironically forbids some of the then common practices which were far less threatening to humanity than slavery, such as "intoxicants and gambling, (dedication of) stones, and (divination by) arrows," (Quran 5:90).

To be fair, one must acknowledge that Muhammad however did encourage freeing slaves as part of redeeming one's sins. In several verses of the Quran, we read about "freeing a slave" as expiation for sins:

- Never should a Believer kill a Believer; but (if it so happens) by mistake, (compensation is due); if one (so) kills a Believer, it is ordained that he should free a believing slave, (4:92)
- Allah will not call you to account for what is futile in your oaths, but He will call you to account for your deliberate oaths: for expiation, feed ten indigent persons, on a scale of the average for the food of your families; or clothe them; or give a slave his freedom.(5:85)
- But those who divorce their wives by Zihar (he gives her his back), then wish to go back on the words they uttered, (it is ordained that such a one) should free a slave before they touch each other (58:1)

Despite this slave-for-sin strategy, the abhorrent practice of slavery is not completely banned in Islam.

Concubinage:

Concubinage, as a sub-product of slavery, is an issue that is recognized by Islam even today as legitimate. There are many references to concubinage in the Quran:

- If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess. (4:3; see also 4: 24, 25, 36; 10:33, 58; 30:28)

Nevertheless, it must be noted without hesitation that some of Prophet Mohammed's behaviors and attitudes are completely in contradiction with those of the Islamic scholars that came much later after him and furiously hampered any attempt to modernize Islam and contextualize some of the controversial Quranic verses.

Regardless of the varying positions of some of his early successors on "the ultimate validity of the Quran", some important Quranic provisions were suspended shortly after Mohammed's death according to the needs of the then newly-established Muslim state.

The flexibility with which Mohammed dealt with mundane issues of his time is quite apparent in the story of the Islamic prohibition of wine. In the beginning, it was considered that wine gives an inebriety and sustenance: "And from the fruit of the date-palm and the vine, ye get out wholesome drink, and food" (16:65).

In another verse, however, we read a different view: "They ask thee concerning wine and gambling. Say: 'In them is great sin, and some profit, for men; but the sin is greater than the profit'" (2:216).

A third verse seems to frown upon wine as it views as detrimental to one's communication with the divine: "O you who have believed, do not approach prayer while you are intoxicated until you know what you are saying" (4:43).

Then at last, one of the latest suras (chapters) of the Quran forbids wine all together and deems it as evil: "O ye who believe! Intoxicants and gambling, (dedication of) stones, and (divination by) arrows, are an abomination of Satan's handiwork: eschew such (abomination)" (5:90).

Furthermore, in his seminal book, *The Text and Ijtihad*, Abd Al-Husain Sharaf Al-Dien, the notable Shiite thinker, details myriads of ijtihads of the senior companions of the Prophet which are contrary to the Quran. So, some of them, among many, are related to Omar bin al-Khattab, the second Caliph of Muhammad.

The Sira (biography of Muhammad) tells us that the Prophet was paying to people whose faith was weak in order to maintain their Islam, and thus their loyalty would be guaranteed. This behavior was supported by some Quranic texts, including:

- Alms are for the poor and the needy, and those employed to administer the (funds); for those whose hearts have been (recently) reconciled (to the truth); for those in bondage and in debt; in the cause of Allah; and for the wayfarer: (thus is it) ordained by Allah...(9:60)

With the arrival of Omar ibn al-Khattab to power, he abolished the rule regarding those "whose hearts have been (recently) reconciled (to the truth)." Omar justified his actions by claiming that the Prophet had to pay new converts because Islam was still weak and in need of loyalty. But during his reign, Omar believed that Islam had already been established and strong. Therefore, he saw no need for such a rule.

In addition to that, authoritative Islamic literature tells us how Omar ibn al-Khattab banned temporary marriage, marriage that is temporary and without witnesses. This kind of marriage, according to Islamic Tafsirs, was permissible at the time of the Prophet: "So for whatever you enjoy from them, give them their due compensation as an obligation" (4:24).

Islamic sources make it clear that when Omar bin al-Khattab found that the matter had exceeded the limits of satisfying sexual needs to become a legal, God-sanctioned prostitution, he abolished the practice altogether, disregarding the fact that it was, and still technically is today, a permissible practice according to the Quran.

Conclusions:

1. There is not even the slightest reference to Quran's validity for every time and place in the Quran itself, and all what has been said on the issue by both moderate and extreme groups, from a realistic perspective, is just an invention of Islamic scholars that came much later than Mohammed.

2. The critical crisis that is plaguing Islam today is the desire of Islamists to imprison Islam in a jail of timelessness. It is such a way of thinking that has brought us today face to face with the likes of the Islamic State (ISIS), a terrorist group which threatens not only international peace and security, but also the age-long, thriving civilizations of countries like Syria and Iraq.

3. The solution to the global crisis that has resulted from the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria requires, first and foremost, the rehabilitation of the entire Islamic culture that produces that likes of the fighters of ISIS.

4. Such rehabilitation cannot be done by only utilizing the efforts of Arab secularists, moderate Muslims, and Westerners who are interested in doing humanity a favour by combating radical Islam. In order to achieve any tangible results in this regard, we need an urgent reformation of the public Islamic institutions that claim to be moderate while in reality they keep on perpetuating the sacredness of certain Islamic texts and doctrines that constitute the ideological backbone of almost all terrorist groups, from Al-Qaida to ISIS and Boko Haram.

5. Finally, in an ironic twist of fate, I find myself today here in front of you talking about a multinational Islamic terrorist group whose members do not drink wine, yet they behead people, mutilate bodies, destroy churches and ancient ruins, rape little children, and kidnap women to use them sex slaves. Wine is not drunk by those fanatics because the ban on wine in Islam is crystal clear. However, till today most Muslim scholars do not at all discredit the passages that make it permissible for fanatics to behead, loot, rape, and destroy. These passages have always been there and are still considered sacred. Until they are rejected by the mainstream Islamic institutions that have the influence to make a real change but are unwilling to, there is a good chance that the plight of our Yazidi brothers and sisters will be the plight of every life-loving man and woman who lives in the 21st century and has no intentions to return to the Dark Ages.

Thank you very much.