How to end violence in the Middle East? The answer is religious tolerance

Matt Daniels and Doug Bandow

August 9, 2018

It doesn't take rocket science to figure out that the Middle East is a mess. And that religion lies behind much of the violence.

While U.S. policymakers tend to cite a few bad actors, such as Iran, blame is in fact widely shared. America's allies—Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, for instance—are hardly paragons of religious tolerance. And Washington's failure to understand the Middle East's religious character played an important role exacerbating sectarian violence which has become so pervasive.

Those who live there know the problem. There's a popular joke in the Middle East right now.

An Iraqi man driving along a road is pulled over at a makeshift check point. The guard, pointing a gun at him, asks, "Are you a Sunni or a Shi'a? The man, not knowing whether this is a legitimate check point and which side the guard is on, responds, "Well, actually, I'm an atheist." The guard promptly says, "Yes, yes, but are you a Sunni Atheist or a Shi'a Atheist."

In fact, their disillusionment is so ubiquitous that atheism has become "a thing" across the region. Middle Eastern governments have noticed this phenomenon and are attempting to combat it. For example, the Iranian regime declared "war on un-Islamic thought" and Egypt's government recently introduced legislation that would outlaw atheism. Indeed, Muslim states typically view disbelief as worse than Christianity or Judaism.

Clearly, these governments learned nothing from the Arab Spring, Green Revolution, or other popular uprisings across the region. Such repressive laws and policies are like a pressure cooker without a safety valve – they serve only to frustrate people, expanding ever-present societal tensions without providing any mechanism for their release. At some point most governments lose control and are no longer able to contain these forces, after which revolution results.

Imposed orthodoxy is disheartening for numerous reasons. What makes this challenge so serious is that religious coercion constitutes a direct attack on the most fundamental of all human rights – freedom of conscience. In practical terms such an approach projects a dystopian future. The persecuting state's own people are hurt the most, but the rest of us, connected through globalization, also suffer.

The good news, perhaps, is that such efforts have little chance of success. Coerced religion makes no sense, except as a political exercise. After thousands of years of religious persecution, it should be obvious to all that it is not possible to force someone to believe or not to believe. Beliefs, at their core, are simply not matters of choice but of persuasion and conviction. Religious coercion can only drive beliefs underground, where they metastasize and eventually reemerge ever more virulent.

Then there is Islamist terrorism. While Americans look at the bloody phenomenon through their own eyes, terrorism is far more common overseas against other peoples. Religious fundamentalism can act as a precursor and accelerant to violence. But the issue is more complicated. Geopolitics matters as well as religion, and the United States has found that intervening overseas can create new terrorists as easily as it can eliminate old ones.

What, if anything, should the United States do about conflict and terrorism with religious roots? If we have an answer then why, nearly seventeen years on, have we not started implementing it already?

America can no more eliminate religious hostility than Middle Eastern governments can force their peoples to believe. But American history has much to offer. There was a time when Catholics could not hold public office in Maryland, Baptists were threatened with imprisonment if they did not attend Anglican services and tithe to their local Anglican parish in Virginia, and Quakers were burned at the stake in Boston Common. At least we eventually discovered that such laws, far from maintaining public order, ultimately work against themselves.

The U.S. system of religious tolerance and pluralism, the result of many mistakes and lessons learned, works best, and other nations would do well to learn from our errors rather than emulate them. And growing frustration with sectarianism in the Middle East may be creating an opening to promote greater tolerance and understanding even there. Most atheists, too, would prefer a system of religious balance and openness rather than one of coercion and repression.

America now has a system of religious accommodation that works and which can serve as a model for other nations. But to succeed at convincing others to follow it, the United States must do better acting on its own principles, as well. If there is one lesson Washington policymakers should have learned, it is that war will not eliminate the sort of bitter sectarianism which has cost the Middle East so much.

Matt Daniels, JD, Ph.D, is Chair of Law & Human Rights at the Institute of World Politics in Washington, D.C., and the creator of www.universalrights.com

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan.