Anger Management

The Politics of Frustration in the Arab World and its Implications for the West

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About the Author

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He has also served in a number of other capacities including in Afghanistan, OSCE (in charge of politico-military affairs), Guatemala, Ecuador and Riyadh.

Ambassador Sabadell attained both his Bachelor Degree in Law and his Certificate as Legal Business Advisor from Universidad Pontificia Comillas (ICADE) in June 1991.

He completed his Certificate of Advanced Studies on Political Science and Sociology at the Department of Social History and History of Political Thought from Universidad Nacional de Educacion a Distancia in November 2002, with a paper on the Political Control of Military Actions.

His research focuses on Islam and the Arab world, Security, European Union, Conflict and Conflict Resolution, Development, the Sahel, and Migration.

Acknowledgements

Day to day work as a diplomat often feels like bailing papers out of one's desk to avoid sinking. Pressure from current events and the need to respond to demands from many different sources conspire to drive practitioners away from thinking in strategic terms.

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Cover Image
A portion of an oil painting by Mauritanian artist
Saleh Lô (https://salehlo.weebly.com/)

Presentation

The Arab world is in the middle of a process of deep social and political change. It has the potential to alter domestic politics and the regional strategic balance and to re-define political ideologies and identities.

The emergence of Arab peoples as key political actors, in combination with widespread, profound and mounting popular frustration, is a game changer. What Arab populations think and, crucially, how they feel, will determine the future evolution of their countries and of the region, and may call into question existing social contracts, the pertinence of present borders, the role of religion, the model of relations with the rest of the world, the sources of legitimacy and other basic components of political and social consensus.

Popular movements that articulate feelings of humiliation and despair and translate them into public action can play a central role in defining the roadmap.

The experience of the successive attempted revolutions across the Arab world clearly indicates that discontent with the current situation and a yearning for dignity and democracy can be the driving force behind powerful social and political demands. But there is also a significant risk that this impulse for change can be seized by extremist movements, who pump from the deep wells of frustration and hopelessness, channel those sentiments to provoke hate and resentment against the West and use the defense of Islam as a turbine to generate political energy.

We are at a crossroads. The direction taken by populations across the Arab world in the coming years will determine their evolution and their approach to international relations for decades. Vital interests are at stake for the West: these developments will define its interaction with 400 million people living in Europe's immediate neighborhood, and shape relations with the wider Middle East and North Africa

region, including Iran, Turkey, and even Afghanistan and Pakistan. It will also affect a large portion of Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular the Sahel and Nigeria, and, to a certain extent, the totality of the Muslim world, around 1.8 billion people, among them a considerable number of Western citizens. This can have profound geopolitical implications, influence the global scenario for the foreseeable future and maybe change the nature of international politics.

To address this situation with sense and sensibility the West needs a new mindset. Policy-makers need to start by recognizing that policies towards the Arab world pursued after 9/11, focused mostly on security and extremism, have largely failed in political terms, further antagonizing significant sectors of those societies. The West needs to understand Arab societies better, communicate better, and define and implement better policies towards the region.

The first chapter of this paper will present the drivers for political change in the context of an extremely unstable regional context and argue that a deep and likely irreversible transformation is already ongoing in the Arab world.

The second chapter explores how popular frustration can play a political role in this context. Understanding populist movements in the West can help us ascertain their internal logic, in particular the centrality of culture and identity issues. To determine how this phenomenon can manifest itself in the specific context of the Arab world, the paper will describe the complex and multilayered roles of religion and of anti-Western sentiment, and how they are framed and manipulated by extremist propaganda.

The third chapter aims to provide operational advice on how to better understand social and political evolutions in the Arab world and how to communicate better. Improving communication is key in the short and medium term, in order to avoid losing the ongoing battle of perceptions by letting extremists continue to occupy the public space and define the dialogue with their message of hostility against the West.

Despite this urgency, political messaging and communication per se will not significantly alter the situation. Addressing crises, reinforcing human

development, redefining the social contract in Arab societies and renewing their relations with the rest of the world are key components of a New Deal that needs to emerge to counter the current tragic situation of the region.

This is a wide-ranging topic and this paper will only scratch the surface in many of the issues. It is addressed mostly at Western practitioners. Its aim is not to define policies or to recommend substantive solutions to the underlying extremely serious problems of the region, but more modestly to contribute to build a frame of reference to make sense of the current very complex situation and propose actionable guidance for day-to-day work and communication in and around the Arab world.

Executive Summary

1. The **emergence of Arab populations as effective political actors** has changed the political landscape of the region. The ideas and feelings of Arabs will define the future of their countries and communities.

2. This is happening in a context of widespread popular disaffection whose political manifestation cannot yet be ascertained, and in an extremely unstable and unpredictable regional environment. It is hard to exaggerate the **gravity of the situation** and its potential to deteriorate. With four ongoing conflicts and several other countries at risk, mounting political and social discontent, a painful crisis of identity, intense and growing resentment towards the West, and the highest youth unemployment rate in the world, the situation seems ripe for movements that can capitalize on feelings of frustration and articulate them in a politically effective manner.

3. The successive attempted Arab revolutions in 2011 showed how dissatisfaction with the social and political situation could generate a powerful demand for dignity and democracy and launch popular movements against existing regimes. There is a **risk that forces for change can be sucked in by extremist ideologies** that exploit

frustration and resentment to promote hatred against the West as one of the central tenets of a new political identity.

4. This paper will address the **role that frustration can play in the politics of the Arab world**. It will analyze contemporary populist movements to identify how the internal logic of populism could be applied in this region and how the cultural context can shape local messages. It will also propose actionable guidance for the West, in particular in terms of communication.

5. In political terms, the main **drivers for change (Chapter 1)** are widespread frustration on the one hand and increased political activism on the other. These forces operate against a fragile regional background that also seems to point to imminent strategic transformation. All these factors can interact among themselves and reinforce each other to form a perfect storm.

- **Frustration** is an elusive political concept, but its effects are clear and concrete. Its deep roots in the region are richly nourished by political and socio-economic grievances and exacerbated by a widespread sense of collective failure.

- **Political Activism** is a powerful but latent force in the Arab world. The Arab Spring evidenced a clamor for dignity ('Karamah'), a call that combined the demand for better social conditions and for a new relationship between Arab citizens and their States and between Arab countries and the world. These revolutions were mostly unsuccessful, but the root causes behind them have not disappeared and new grievances have materialized. The genie will not easily be put back into the bottle.

- **Instability** manifests itself in particular in ongoing and potential conflicts. Strategic rivalries, religious divisions, historic grievances, diverging views of local political actors, rival nationalisms, economic competition, family alliances, aspirations for media dominance, and other power games intersect and overlap, forming what looks like non-Euclidian political geometry.

- **New Actors** challenge the status quo but are not able to propose an alternative sustainable order:

  » **Local** actors include Islamic State, militarily defeated, but still relevant as a new form of insurgency focused on strategic communication.

  » **Regional** actors like Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are taking over new and more ambitious roles.

  » **Global** actors, Russia in particular, occupy the space left by the more limited activity of the United States.

- **Lack of Leadership** emerges as a clear result of these trends and of the upcoming succession processes in several countries.

- **Sectarianism**, whose emergence owes more to political calculation than to ancient hatreds, now affects the lives of millions of Arabs, with the risk of transforming any conflict into a clash of religious identities.

6. To understand **how frustration and anger can be articulated into politics (Chapter 2)** this paper examines the internal logic and the social and psychological mechanisms used by populist movements, mostly in the West. It is important to recognize in particular that populism is a form of identity politics built on frustration.

7. The centrality of identity resonates powerfully in the Arab world. The paper will briefly describe **political movements in the region** that have used this logic at least partially: Arab nationalism at the time of Egyptian President Nasser, Arab uprisings mostly in 2011, and extremist groups. The analysis of these episodes highlights three main issues that need to be addressed separately to understand the shape populism could take in the specific context of the Arab world: Islam, anti-Western sentiment and extremist propaganda.

- **Islam** plays a central and multidimensional role, not necessarily religious, as a political language, an identity and a source of legitimacy. *Aggiornamento* (religious update) is

happening for the majority of Muslims, both in doctrinal terms and in terms of individual and collective religiosity; but its success is endangered by the gravitational pull of extremism and by the West's identification of Islamic language as potentially dangerous.

- The different layers of **anti-Western sentiment** also warrant closer examination. The visible part is the opposition to Western policies, including its support of the status quo in the region. Beneath the surface lies a widespread belief that the West is hostile towards Islam, a feeling skillfully exploited by extremists to present their actions as legitimate. Even deeper and often implicit is the identification of the West with a certain type of modernity, stoking a fear of change that is not exclusive to the Arab world.

- **Extremist propaganda** has been able to exploit and manipulate anti-Western sentiments and the perception that Islam is under attack to frame a discourse that justifies violence against local rulers and the West. The effectiveness of this communication strategy has changed the rules of the game both in terms of terrorism and of political influence.

8. **What is to be done? (Chapter 3)** The situation cannot be resolved in the short term; it needs to be managed. In the best of cases, it will take several very difficult decades to change the current sorry state of affairs. The West is not necessarily the first responder, but it cannot opt out of reality. If the West wants to play a constructive role, it must start by a critical examination of the wisdom and effectiveness of policies implemented since 2001. What is needed is not a new strategy, but a new mindset, that will translate into better understanding of the situation, better communication with Arab populations, and the formulation and implementation of better policies towards the region.

9. **Better Understanding** of the situation is key. The West is, literally and etymologically, disoriented. It needs to abandon the tunnel vision that made it focus narrowly on security and extremism and come to terms with real political and social dynamics, drivers for

change and forces at play, including the role of religion. There is a need for a deeper, more granular and more textured perception of reality, that can incorporate not only ideas, but also emotions. Techniques used in the context of marketing and electoral campaigns, including big data and machine learning, can provide significant insights.

10. **Better Communication** is as difficult as it is important. Perceptions will play a key role to define the future evolution of Arab societies, as Daesh and other extremist groups have clearly understood. The West's communication effort will struggle against an internally consistent and powerful world vision, that has a significant head start and seems impervious to refutation. There are no silver bullets, no counter-narrative or alternative narrative that can immediately alter the terms of the discussion. But there are examples of good practices that can help improve the situation.

1. Drivers for Political Change in a Context of Regional Instability

Facilis descensus Averno
(Descent to hell is easy)

—Virgil, Aeneid, 6:126.

In the last few years we have seen the state of the Arab world deteriorate to previously unknown levels. After the hope for change raised by successive revolution attempts across the Arab world, the region now suffers from protracted wars, failed and fragmenting states, foreign interventions, aggressive regional competition, terrorism, sectarian tensions, mass displacements of populations, stagnant or contracting economies, massive youth unemployment and lack of political liberties.

The current scenario does not seem tenable. This section will analyze a series of drivers and dynamics that make change in domestic politics as well as in the regional order not only inevitable and deep, but also probably irreversible.

Two main drivers for political change can be identified: frustration and the political activism of Arab populations. Both interact with each other in complex ways, and operate against a background of deep regional strategic uncertainty, defined by instability and conflicts, the emergence of new actors and the risk of sectarianism. All these developments can be mutually reinforcing.

Popular Frustration

The feeling of popular frustration in the Arab world is not new. Rami Khouri (2017) has studied early warning signs that were widely ignored for decades, signs that spoke of Arab citizens' discontent and of the risk of many of the current problems. The combination of anger, humiliation and

hopelessness, together with the emergence of new grievances, draws a very concerning image of the region.

The roots of this frustration are multiple and intertwined.

Economic and social conditions are a significant component of this feeling of despair. Despite real achievements in terms of life expectancy, the fight against poverty and education, growth in per capita income terms in the Arab world in the last decades is among is the lowest in the world. The situation is particularly damaging because, according to the Arab Human Development Report (United Nations, 2016), the region is richer than it is developed and suffers not only from a poverty of income, but also from a poverty of capabilities and a poverty of opportunities. There is a pervasive feeling of inequality, of exclusion and of injustice, in particular among youth, who represent around one third of the population.

The lack of jobs is probably the most visible and discouraging consequence of this situation. With the highest rate of youth unemployment in the world, many of the 27 million people who will join the workplace over the next five years will have few options to be included. To add insult to injury, more than 60 percent of Arab populations believe that connections matter more than qualifications for getting a job (Lagarde 2018).

Table 1 (Source: United Narions 2016)

Average annual growth, human development index, 1980–2013
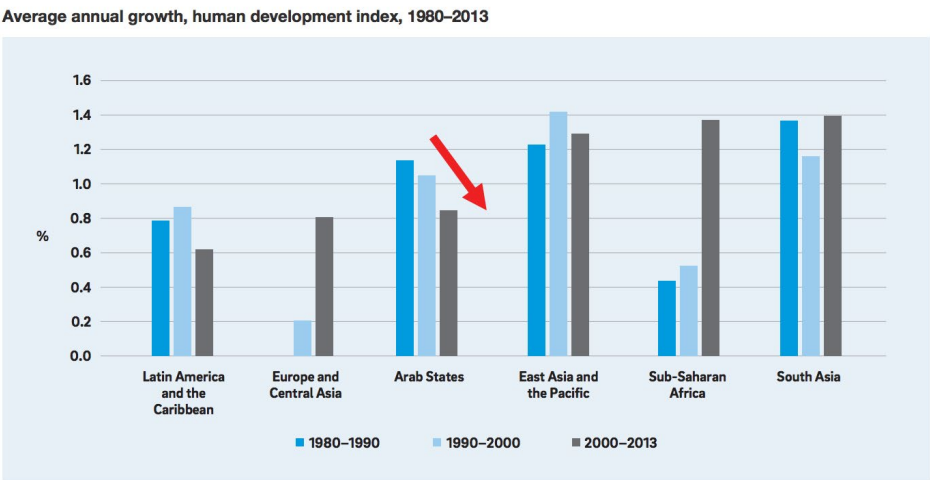
Source: UNDP 2014.

This creates additional social problems, such as the impossibility of getting married at an age considered socially acceptable, a concern that should not be underestimated in the Arab world's largely conservative and traditional societies.

The situation of women also plays a part in this dismal picture. The study of this key issue falls beyond the scope of this paper, but it is obvious that the empowerment of women needs to be tackled if the Arab world is to advance effectively, because no society can achieve progress while excluding or limiting the opportunities of half of its population.

Political conditions are also a source of frustration. Nazih Ayubi (1996) described the Arab world as a region with hard states, with large bureaucracies, mighty armies and extended security apparatus—but without strong states, pointing out that local political systems were "lamentably feeble when it comes to collecting taxes, winning wars or forging a really 'hegemonic' power bloc or an ideology that can carry the state beyond the coercive and 'corporative' level and into the moral and intellectual sphere."

This impression seems confirmed if we look at recent polls; the Middle East 2016 Report (Zogby 2016) identified the lack of representative government as either the first or the second main obstacle to peace and stability in the region in the seven countries that were analyzed. Moreover, the 2016 Arab Opinion Index (Arab Center, 2016) showed that 79% of the population considers that corruption is very widespread or widespread to some extent.

A third more subtle but hugely influential source of frustration is the feeling that the Arab world as such is being neglected and left behind. It is a frustration that affects Arab **identity**.

Fernando Bryce, The Book of Needs (Source: Harvard Art Museums)

Arab civilization has been in decline at least since the end of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War; but the full awareness and the political consequences of this decay were not apparent for most of the population until the defeat of the Arab coalition in 1967.

After the Second World War popular expectations of unity and progress based on the ideologies of Arab nationalism and Arab socialism grew in the region, in contrast to a long previous history of foreign intervention and domination. The defeat in 1967 by Israel, considered by the Arab side to be a much smaller adversary, provoked intense soul searching. It seemed that the Arab world had lost its once preeminent position and was now trailing behind in every single aspect of development: Military power, political freedom, economic growth, literacy, science, education, culture, etc.

To address this feeling of collective failure, two broad explanations and consequent policies were possible: the first one was the need to integrate further into modernity, even at the price of compromising tradition. The model for this option would be Ataturk's Turkey. This option was discredited by the recent humiliating experience of colonialism and occupation as

well as by the lack of success of attempts in different countries, including Iran's "Westoxification".

The alternative was to retrench in Arab identity, in which Islam plays a central role. The model to be followed was that of a glorious past, imaginary or real, in which Arabs were the preeminent force in the world and in which God rewarded adherence to religion with territorial conquest and political success.

> The calamity of the Arab world has been the historic lack of political, ideological, cultural and economic opportunities to effectively unify tradition and modernity.

The calamity of the Arab world has been the historic lack of political, ideological, cultural and economic opportunities to effectively unify tradition and modernity, bringing in the advantages of progress in a manner that respects and promotes local identities. This is in contrast to the success of other countries and communities, like the Japan of the Meiji Dynasty or, in a different manner, contemporary China.

As Hisham Melhem (2014) states, no one paradigm or theory can explain what went wrong in the Arab world in the last century. But the feeling of absolute desolation and collective lack of perspectives is a significant component of the feeling of frustration that exacerbates and aggravates all the other factors.

Political Activism

Arab uprisings in 2011, known as collectively as the Arab Spring, were clear examples of how frustration can occupy the center stage in the region. Widespread discontent and latent instability enabled a tragic but minor incident in a small town in Tunisia to set off a chain reaction that altered the political dynamics of the whole region.

It is important to remember that before these events took place, most commentators would have thought the possibility of a general Arab uprising as remote if not impossible. Academic studies on the region focused on the absence of traditional party politics, the robustness of authoritarianism and the longevity of autocracy; the Arab street was considered a minor player in the political game of each country, absent from day to day politics and controlled by powerful security systems.

Initial revolts in Tunisia completely changed that perspective. There was a feeling that the time had come to change things in the Arab world, that evolution was not only necessary but inevitable.

In a way, the Arab Spring was seen as the end of the Arab exceptionalism and its resistance to democracy. After several waves of democratization around the world, including in Africa in the '90s, the time had come for Arabs to join this seemingly universal trend. Popular movements in the region belied perceptions of the "Arab predicament": It simply would not follow the script which holds that the centrality of the Arab-Israeli conflict is fostering an ever-growing Islamization within Arab societies, a search for charismatic leaders, and an identification with supranational causes. (Roy 2012)

In fact, aspirations put forward in the different countries were in no way specific to the Arab world or to Muslim societies (Obaid, 2017). They were not only of a socio-economic nature. The key word was **Karamah—dignity**—and it referred not only to the relationship between the Arab citizen and the state, but also to the place of Arab countries in the world. As Shibley Telhami (2013) points out, Arab revolts showed "a craving for Arab advancement and empowerment."

Slogans against "*Istihmar*" (a word that sounds similar to colonialism but actually means "becoming a donkey") mentioned by Robert Worth (2016), clearly show the feeling of humiliation. The call for Egyptians to walk with their head high was central in Tahrir Square and, ominously, reused by Daesh Leader Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi proclaiming that "a day will come when the Muslim will walk everywhere as master, having honor, being revered, with his head held high, and his dignity preserved" (Denby, 2015).

It is critical not to forget or minimize the incredible courage required for citizens to stand up to their often brutal regimes. In Syria the trigger for demonstrations was the arrest and torture of several 14-year old children who had written anti-government graffiti on the wall of their school. Demonstrators were under no illusion of what regimes were ready to do to maintain their power.

And yet they marched. In little more than one year the rulers in four countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen) fell, a popular uprising in Syria ended in a dramatic and still ongoing civil war, foreign intervention ended demonstrations in Bahrain and protests erupted in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Sudan.

The global results were not what populations demanded. The failure of these uprisings is, according to Marc Lynch (2016), a catalog of unintended consequences and misjudged strategies; a genuinely tragic story, because it offered a real opportunity for the installation or consolidation of democratic systems in the region.

Root causes have not disappeared; generally, the demands have not been fulfilled and now new grievances have emerged. Going back to the causes is not a practical recipe to avoid the consequences. It seems clear that these uprisings were **not episodic.**

It is said that repression and violence have blocked political activism in the Arab world for a generation. Even if this is the case, children who were 10 at the time of the uprisings will turn 18 this year, and demographics provide an unending supply of angry young men and women.

Moreover, if we look at historical precedents, revolutions do not necessarily happen in one single event. Eric Hobsbawn's (1962) classical study of the 19th Century shows the continuity between the French Revolution of 1789 and the revolutionary wave of 1848, notwithstanding the powerful conservative alliances deployed against it, confirming Victor Hugo's well-known assertion that nothing can stop an idea whose time has come.

Or to use a more local expression, the genie will not easily return to the bottle.

Instability and Conflicts

Popular forces unleashed during the Arab revolts are at the root of a completely new regional landscape, a scenario of uncertainty and ambiguity that announces a yet undefined new order.

Its most extreme and tragic consequences are the new conflicts in Syria, Libya and Yemen, with hundreds of thousands of victims, millions of refugees and displaced people, several other millions in need of external help for survival, regional and international armed interventions, and the risk of conflict spreading to neighboring countries.

Meanwhile, in Iraq the situation continues to be fragile, with a serious humanitarian situation that affects millions. Daesh has been militarily defeated, but the threat is not over.

Across the region, even those Arab states not in conflict situations find themselves in unprecedented straits. Qatar, for example, is alienated from its Gulf Cooperation Council partners, essentially under economic blockade by its neighbors, reinforcing the role of regional and global powers in the region.

The Costs of Conflict in the Arab Region (Source: United Nations 2016)
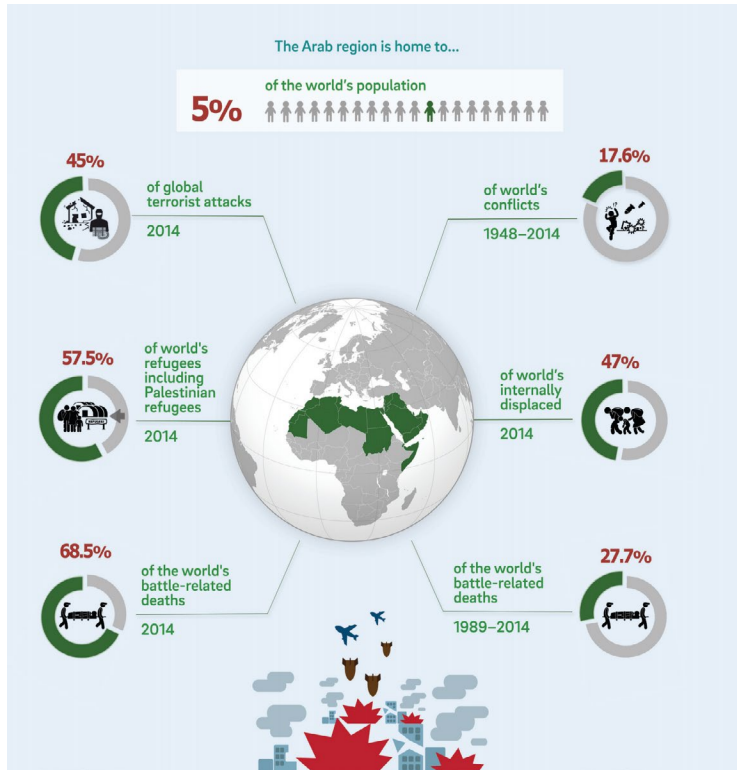
The risk of international conflict is real. Competition for regional dominance between Iran and Saudi Arabia can lead to an open armed struggle, directly or through proxies, with the potential participation of the U.S. and the risk of presence of nuclear weapons in the medium to long term. Israel is also in a particularly sensitive situation, with mounting contestation in Gaza and the West Bank and the risk that clashes against Hezbollah may turn into an open conflict with Syria and Iran.

A very thoughtful study by the International Crisis Group (Hiltermann 2017) underlines that conflicts in the region intersect deeply with each other and have metastasized. They need to be analyzed in terms of clusters of conflicts and concentric circles, because trying to solve isolated crisis (migration, terrorism) without addressing their root causes and their interaction with other conflicts may prove not only ineffective but utterly counterproductive.

There is great potential for things to get even worse. Conflicts go on, without a foreseeable end, with their unbearable toll on civilians day after day.

The risk of new clashes, including with greater regional dimensions, is real, and their consequences could determine the fate of the region, and of the world, for decades to come.

New Actors

Locally, regionally and globally new actors, as well as spoilers and fence sitters, (Carter 2017) have emerged, adding new elements of uncertainty.

In the **domestic context**, extremist groups, in particular Islamic State (IS, ISIS, Daesh), mark a radical departure from previous insurgencies. As a military force, it was able to take control of vast swathes of both Syria and Iraq, and represent a vital threat to two main countries in the region. Its territorial expansion allowed it to establish political and even legal institutions as part of a state building project (Revkin 2016) and to credibly challenge the international order prevailing since the First World War, including the intangibility of borders.

But beyond its territorial manifestation, Daesh needs to be understood as a new form of insurgency that pivots around strategic communication (Philips 2017). It recruits on a 24/7 basis in over 20 languages over the Internet using videos, memes, tweets and other social media postings and swarming in on anyone that retweets, likes or endorses their materials to try to seduce them into the group (McDowell-Smith, 2017). Daesh's unprecedented social media drive has resulted in over 42,000 people from 120 different countries joining the group between 2011 and 2016, according to data by the European Commission (RAN 2017).

The risk of the emergence of this sort of new actors is increased by the weakness of alternative organizations and narratives. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, for example, ousted from government in 2013, has left a vacuum for new representatives to exploit opposition to the status quo.

Table 2 (Source: United Nations 2016)

If the past is any indication of the future: A majority of the Arab region's population lives in countries most at risk of conflict

By 2050, 3 of 4 people in the Arab region will be living in high conflict risk countries

Population (millions)

High conflict risk (more than 16 years) Medium conflict risk (5-15 years) Low conflict risk (0 –4 years)

Source: Report Team calculations based on UN DESA 2013 and UCDP/PRIO 2014.

Alliances in the **region** have also shifted as a consequence of the Arab Spring. Strategic rivalries, religious divisions, diverging views of local political actors, contending nationalisms, economic competition, aspirations for media dominance, and other power games intersect and overlap forming what is starting to look like non-Euclidian political geometry.

Iran's presence throughout the region has expanded after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and it now plays a strong role in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, predominantly through connections with Shi'a allies. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has become significantly more assertive, positioning itself as the main actor to counter Iranian influence.

Turkey, meanwhile, has seen its position in regional politics grow, in particular with regard to its involvement in Syria's war and its strong interest in Iraq's policy vis-à-vis its Kurdish population.

The **global** context has also changed beyond recognition. One of the main consequences of the Arab Spring is the end of a regional order based on U.S. activity and support. The emergence of Russia as a revisionist power, that wants to carve its position at the expense of former dominant forces, reinforces the erosion of status quo. But it remains to be seen if the evolving scenario will result in a new sustainable order, and whether Russia can credibly take over the heavy responsibility of leading a consistent and stable political framework.

An additional consideration in this context is the **lack of leadership** in the Arab world, both as a cultural and political reference and in strategic terms. The aging of long established leaders that have provided predictability for years, sometimes decades, imposes a succession debate in a setting where clear formulas are not available, adding a new factor of instability.

Politics, like nature, abhors empty spaces. The nature of future local and regional leadership will define the evolution of Arab societies and States to a large extent.

Sectarianism

The Sunni-Shia divide further exacerbates and complicates the already brittle situation. It has been a factor of disunion since the foundation of Islam, but we must remember that it has not in general been the cause of overt conflict in modern times. Even the Iran—Iraq war was not determined by these considerations, and Iraqi Shias fought alongside Sunnis against Iran.

The roots of the new sectarianism can be found in 1979, with the Iranian Revolution and the seizure of the Grand Mosque in Mecca. But more relevantly, it was the invasion of Iraq in 2003 that unleashed the current wave of Sectarianism.

The reinforcement of the Shi'a majority, that had been neglected by the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein, bred distrust among the three main communities of the country, Shi'a, Sunni and Kurd. Sunnis' resentment and fear was skillfully exploited by Al Qaeda under the leadership of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

He understood that instability and fragility could easily be transformed into an uprising and even into a civil war by enticing hatred between communities. He embarked into a brutal campaign of sectarian killings with the deliberate determination to incense relations between groups and provoke violent reactions that would keep conflict alive and reinforce the role of Al Qaeda as protector of Sunnis. (Warrick 2015, Kilcullen, 2016).

The most significant incident was the 2006 bombing of the Al Askari Mosque in Samarra, one of the holiest places of Shi'a Islam. The response was a wave of violence that included assaults against Sunni mosques and the killing of thousands of members of both communities in the lasting clashes that ensued.

> The roots of sectarianism should not be found in blind religious hatred dating back to hundreds of years, but in concrete and sometimes deliberate political decisions taken in the last few years.

The roots of sectarianism should not be found in blind religious hatreds dating back to hundreds of years, but in concrete and sometimes deliberate political decisions taken in the last few years. Sunnis and Shi'as had coexisted in Syria and Iraq, as elsewhere in the Muslim world, celebrating together, marrying across communities and raising children known affectionately as "Su-Shi".

The antagonism, however, is now part of the everyday life of millions of Muslims, making the conflict more personal. By introducing religious denomination as a factor of division, the stakes have been raised, because it can directly affect the identity and security of uninvolved individuals and their families. In these circumstances, politics ceases to be a spectator sport.

Mutually Reinforcing

The most worrying feature of this situation is that all these drivers for change can reinforce each other to form a perfect storm: Widespread frustration and despair, exacerbated by identity considerations can lead to angry political activism, in a context of deep regional instability marked by the weakness of traditional actors and the emergence of new and potentially violent domestic ones, with regional and global powers unable to agree on a way forward.

This is a specter that could haunt the Arab world for decades.

2. How Frustration Becomes Politics

Note it down! I am an Arab.

(…)
Patient in a land
Where everything lives in outbursts of rage.

(…)
Note at the top of the first page:
I do not hate people
And I do not steal from anyone.
But … if I starve
I will eat my oppressor's flesh.
Beware, beware of my hunger
And of my anger.

—Excerpts from *ID Card* (1964)
Mahmoud Darwish

It seems unlikely that the situation described in the previous section can continue indefinitely without major disruptions.

The risk of domestic and international conflicts, including of a regional dimension, is real, and could completely change the social and political dynamics in unpredictable ways. Successful insurgent groups, including a re-edition of Daesh, is not an impossible scenario. The reinforcement of repression or the possibility of upgrading Arab authoritarianism by making it stronger, more flexible, and more resilient (Heydemann 2007) can block political evolution, at least temporarily.

On the other hand, the economic success of some countries, and significant improvement of social conditions in the region is another, much more positive, possibility. If accompanied by political openness and regional

stability, it could open the door for a healthy political debate and a rein-forcement of democracy.

> In any foreseeable scenario, there is a distinct possibility that popular movements driven by frustration will play a significant role.

But in any foreseeable scenario, there is a distinct possibility that popular movements driven by frustration will play a significant role, and this makes the study of how disaffection and despair can be politically articulated in the Arab world necessary and timely.

To understand what shape these movements could take, this section will examine other political expressions of anger. Looking particularly at pop-ulist movements in the West as case studies can be helpful in this context, as this phenomenon has been the object of intense public scrutiny in the last few years, offering important insights into these movements' internal logic. By using categories elaborated in Western societies we may be able to better understand the dynamics at play in other cultures.

Identifying the basic features that Western populism and potential Arab movements could have in common is key to understanding potential evo-lutions. The centrality of identity is a key issue that should not be ignored or underestimated.

But beyond this common base, populism is a very flexible concept, that adapts to each particular cultural and political context. To identify how it could be formulated in the concrete case of the Arab world, focusing on the roles that could be played by Islam and by anti-Western sentiment and how they can be framed in terms of extremist propaganda is particularly helpful.

What is populism?

"Populists may be militarists, pacifists, admirers of Che Guevara or of Ayn Rand; they may be tree-hugging pipeline opponents or drill-baby-drill climate-change deniers"; pointing at this variety, the *Economist* (2016) wonders what makes them all "populists" and whether the word actually means anything at all. This bewilderment is shared by academic writers like Jan-Werner Müller (2017), who points out there is no theory of populism, and we seem to lack coherent criteria to define what populism is and what it is not. The term has even been considered an "empty signifier" (Alvares & Dahlgreen, 2016).

Ernesto Laclau (2005) addresses this situation by affirming that the definition of populism does not embody any particular political program or issue. It can be conceived as a type of political dynamic, a tone, an attitude, a discursive frame (Aslanidis 2016), rather than the manifestation of a coherent set of ideas.

But a certain inner political and psychological logic unifies these movements, and can serve as a basis to understand how they could be transplanted to the Arab context.

The first, most obvious, idea is that populism has its roots in a feeling of **frustration** and perception of injustice. As Müller (2017) points out, these are predominantly emotional reactions, but they carry with them a degree of rational elaboration, either formulated by the individual or adopted from a framework of explanation, what Max Fisher (2017) calls an "architecture of grievances."

From here, it is easy to take the logical and psychological step of searching for an "Other" who is responsible for the situation. Distrust of existing institutions and more generally **anti-elitism,** is the obvious answer. Müller identifies the core of the populist message as an exclusive claim to represent a morally pure and fully unified people betrayed by elites who are deemed morally inferior.

This an extremely powerful political message. It is well known that Carl Schmitt argues that just as other spheres of human life are defined through oppositions (beautiful and ugly for aesthetics, good and bad for morality, etc.), the distinction between friend and enemy is the essence of politics.

In this context, John Judis (2016) differentiates between a "dyadic populism," generally associated with the left, that opposes the people with the elites, and a triadic populism, that includes three ideological players: the people, the elite, and the "Other" (foreigners, immigrants, the West) to whom the elite has sold the people out. Triadic populism is potentially more antagonistic and can be at the basis of xenophobic movements.

This leads to a sometimes neglected aspect of populism, the fact that it is not focused exclusively on socio-economic demands, but carries with it an important component of **identity**. Populism is always a form of identity politics.

> ## Populism is always a form of identity politics.

Timothy Garton Ash (2018) has made a very compelling case of this aspect, emphasizing that the origin of resentment is not (only) an unfair distribution of revenues, but also of opportunities, of attention, and even of respect. He analyses the profile of Alternative fuer Deutschland (AfD) voters in Germany, mostly belonging to middle and upper classes and living in regions with fewer migrants that the average, to conclude that the key issue at stake is the defense of *Kultur (culture)*, local identity, as opposed to liberal, cosmopolitan *Zivilisation (civilization)*.

The populist mindset also includes the perception that the situation is so grave that the rules of the game are not valid anymore, and a **radical alternative** must be found. Populists are structural innovators (*The Economist,* 2018-2) who propose a different model of politics, formulated generally in simplistic terms in which a unique solution (expel migrants, go back to the

sources of Islam, etc.) would address all existing problems, setting aside the complications of democratic procedures. As Ralf Dahrendorf explains, whereas democracy is complex, populism is simple.

As a corollary to all these factors, populism tends to **ignore the value of pluralism**, replacing it with a majoritarian vision of democracy that emphasizes the need for unity of purpose. In this, it represents a fracture with Western political philosophy after the Second World War. The experiences of Fascism and Communism led Democracies to abandon the idea of societies as common projects, emphasizing the role of politics as the management of diversity. The aspirations to a simpler and culturally integrated society can endanger pluralism and eventually lead to totalitarianism.

Populism in the Arab World

Populism in the Arab world is identified predominantly with the regime of Egyptian President **Nasser**. The concept of populism in this case, although it shares many of the features mentioned above, refers largely to a legitimacy based on popular support, but without the procedures, institutions or guarantees of a full-fledged democracy.

The Egyptian President, who—in practical terms—became a leader of the entire region, personified the period of optimism that followed the Second World War (Nedelcu 2016). His ideology of Socialism and Nationalism provided the Arab world with a mindset that satisfied the collective yearning for identity, independence, unity, and modernity.

Nasser (Source: Time Magazine)
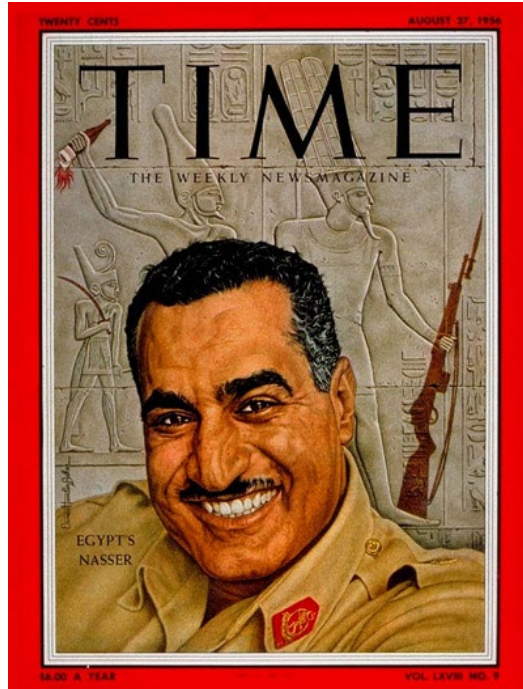
The military defeat of 1967 against Israel demonstrated to Arab populations the notion that their countries were weak and poor, and eroded the prestige not only of authorities, but also of the ideologies that had supported and legitimized them. The center of gravity of identity was now, after the failure of nationalism and socialism, occupied by Islam.

Thus, the perception of an unresolved opposition between identity and modernity led to a feeling of collective failure that debilitated progress, including in the political arena. While populations in Latin America, Asia, Southern and Eastern Europe and Africa moved towards democracy, Arabs continued to be largely absent from the political evolution of their own countries, with the exception of isolated protests due to price increases or similar issues.

This changed with the successive attempted **Arab revolutions** of 2011. These movements were more a *cri de coeur* from Arab societies overwhelmed by despair than organized political movements. The lack of leadership, ideology, and political structures left the movements open to those who were in a position to capitalize or control them. In some cases, it was organized political parties; in others, men with guns and foreign

agendas; in other cases, governments, local or foreign, who re-imposed control by force or persuasion.

These upheavals shared some of the features that define populism. But in the particular context of the Arab countries at the time, the natural translation for those demands was an increase of democracy; not necessarily a democracy identical to the one existing in the Western world, but certainly a political model that would increase the participation of people in the public arena. Studies on non-Western forms of Democracy can shed some light on different options available (Youngs 2015).

It is impossible to analyze each case in this context, and excellent works with the necessary perspective are now available. Suffice it to say for the purposes of this paper that these movements signaled the irruption, probably irreversible, of populations in Arab politics.

This brief examination of populist trends in the Arab world would not be complete without a reference to **extremism**. Islamist extremism, in particular, in its Salafi Jihadist manifestation, is the clearest current example of political movements that use the internal logic and the arguments of populism in the Arab world.

It builds on popular frustration with current regimes and promotes resentment against authorities and the West. David Kilcullen (2016) describes the business model of Al Qaeda as the exploitation and manipulation of others' grievances, aggregating their effects into a global whole.

The centrality of identity is also a common feature with populism. As Thomas Hegghammer (2017) points out in his study of Jihadi Culture, Jihadism is a form of identity politics. The defense of Islam against what is presented as Western aggressions forms the center of gravity of an internally consistent and powerful discourse that transforms the feelings of humiliation and injustice into a call for action that ultimately justifies violence and terror.

Extremism proposes a radical alternative to the current situation, a return to the initial times of Islam and to religion as the sole guiding principle,

implying that this would solve all the problems of the region. "Islam is the solution" is one of the traditional Islamist slogans that captures this mentality. It also aims at a monolithic society, based on religion, in which non-Muslims would have to accept a subordinate role.

There are, of course, significant differences between Jihadism and other populist movements. Its doctrine of Salafi Jihadism has been described in detail by Shiraz Maher (2016) and includes a soteriological and millenarian perspective that sets it apart from other more mundane movements. This ideology endorses a world vision that justifies all sort of violence and brutality and is not aimed at the general public, but, at least for the time being, at a small minority of full time devotees.

Jihadism is not the only imaginable expression of extremism or, indeed, of populism in the Arab world. A grey area between mainstream political movements and violent extremism is largely a vast *terra nullius* waiting to be colonized. New actors may establish themselves in this political space in order to exploit frustration and build a political identity based on Islam and defined in opposition to the West.

Very different shades of grey are possible, from political movements that promote a democratic opening and use popular dissatisfaction, religious language and criticism of the West as catalyzers for change, to public organizations that see themselves as the political arm of terrorist groups.

> A grey area between mainstream political movements and violent extremism is largely a vast *terra nullius* waiting to be colonized.

Given the dramatic situation in many parts of the Arab world, the potential for the development of these movements is significant. There is a serious risk that extremists of all sorts may become the most successful regional

investors in what Pankaj Mishra (2017) pointedly calls "the flourishing international economy of disaffection."

In order to understand how frustration can find a political expression in the Arab world, we need to examine the roles of Islam and of anti-Western sentiments, as well as their framing in propaganda terms by extremist groups.

The role of Islam

Religion plays a central role in the political life of Arab societies. This is true in the more conservative as well as in the more open countries in the region. Even in those regimes that have been built on the rejection of political Islam, religion is present and clearly visible in the public sphere.

Table 3 (Source: United Nations 2016)

Religion is an important part of your daily life (% of respondents saying yes)

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Algeria	...	...	...	...	94	93	92	...	...	...
Bahrain	...	...	...	96	96	94	...	...	...	...
Comoros	...	...	...	96	99	99	97	...	...	...
Djibouti	...	...	98	98	97	91	...	...	...	...
Egypt	98	98	100	98	97	98	98	97	98	...
Iraq	...	...	81	86	85	79	84	87	90	...
Jordan	92	96	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...
Kuwait	84	...	...	93	97	...	...	...	...	...
Lebanon	88	88	86	89	87	84	85	80	84	...
Mauritania	...	95	97	98	99	99	99	98	92	99
Morocco	...	...	...	...	93	94	99	96	...	...
Palestine	88	90	89	93	95	94	95	93	98	...
Qatar	...	...	92	95	...	98	...	...	...	...
Saudi Arabia	98	98	96	94	...	...	...	...	...	...
Somalia	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	95	...
Sudan	...	...	...	95	97	92	95	...	...	...
Syria	...	...	84	88	83	78	82	75	...	...
Tunisia	...	...	...	95	93	93	96	89	88	91
UAE	98	...	...	91	95	...	...	...	...	...
Yemen	96	...	...	96	96	98	98	100	99	...

Source: Gallup 2015.
Note: ... = not available.

Its complex and multidimensional role needs to be deconstructed in order to determine its components.

Functions of Islam in public life

First, Islam is a powerful means of communication, a **political language** that reaches populations with terms that are meaningful in their culture and world vision. Ideas and grievances are often expressed in religious terms, even when they are not of a religious nature, sometimes because religious discussion is the only one allowed in public.

The egalitarian nature of Islam provides operative categories to address social issues, as Sayid Qutb clearly identified when he published one of the main works on political Islam, "Social Justice in Islam."

Second, Islam is also an **identity**, not necessarily in strictly religious terms. There is a well-known Lebanese joke, in which a person claiming to be an atheist must clarify whether he is a Christian Atheist or a Muslim Atheist.

Islam provides a compelling meta-narrative, a consistent worldview that integrates identity, tradition, cultural references, political theories, personal life choices and current events in a single logical continuum that offers cognitive and psychological certainty, as well as sense of belonging and of purpose. This dimension of Islam is key and defines the social perception of many Arabs and Muslims, including non-religious individuals, and their position in relation to the rest of the world.

Third, Islam is the ultimate source of **legitimacy**, and Arab leaders, including the most secular, have tried to take advantage of this in order to maintain or reinforce their power.

The then-called Umm al-Ma'arik ("Mother of All Battles") Mosque in Baghdad, April 2004
(Source: SPC Jeffrey Allan Backowski II)

Saddam Hussein provides the clearest examples; in 1991, when the international coalition was about to respond to the invasion of Kuwait, he decided to insert the Takbir ("God is Greatest") in Iraq's flag to attract religious favor. Later, in 2001, also under foreign pressure, he inaugurated the 'Mother of All Battles' mosque, with minarets in the shape of assault rifles and missiles. It contained a Qur'an written out by hand in three pints of Saddam's own blood.

Islam and Social Change

The centrality of religion in Muslim societies makes Islam a powerful force for political and social renovation, maybe the only effective one in the current context. This in fact is happening, both in terms of religious doctrine and of religiosity.

As far as **doctrine** is concerned, Islam disposes of the theological and interpretative resources to embrace an open approach to politics and to social issues without violating its essence, and several authors have described the

modernization process Islam experienced during the 19th and 20th Century (Bellaigue 2017).

Widely held beliefs in the Muslim world, often lost in translation, favor a pragmatic and innovative approach to current issues from a religious perspective. Rumee Ahmed (2018) describes the constant and traditional practice of *hacking* Islamic Law in order to adapt it to the needs and circumstances of each time and place.

Some examples of interpretative tools in Islam that can open the door to innovation, among others:

- The centrality and flexibility of Ijma,' the consensus of the community, third source of Islamic Law after the Quran and the Sunna. This is particularly important in the absence of a shared religious hierarchy.

- The Quranic principle that necessity permits what is prohibited.

- The practical distinction between religion and political power, which can clearly be extracted from the Quran (the Surah of the Princes, for example) and numerous Islamic Traditions.

- The jurisprudence of priorities (fiqh al-awlawiyyat) which denounces the pursuit of minutiae through the extreme literalism of Salafi approaches.

- The principle of consultation as a basis for democracy and the fact that each of the first four Khalifas was chosen by a different method.

- The recognition that large parts of the Quran do not lend themselves to a clear cut natural reading and allow for interpretation.

- The extended critics to corporal punishments, considering that they have to be considered limits (hudud), and not compulsory sentences.

- The notion of Irja' (postponement); it defends that only God should judge on certain aspects of religion, and prevents Muslims from taking these decisions.

- The interpretation, proposed by Mahmoud Mohammed Taha, that the Surahs of Medina (that contain the most aggressive language on Jihad and other issues) cannot be considered as a law valid for all times.

> The centrality of religion in Muslim societies makes Islam a powerful force for political and social renovation.

One clear example of doctrinal evolution is the abolition of slavery in all modern Arab societies, contravening a basic theological principle that man cannot forbid what the Quran authorizes or authorize what the Quran forbids. A similar argument can be made about Islamic banking and its imaginative ways to go round the prohibition of lending with interest, or to the compromises that are necessary for Muslims living as a minority in a non-Muslim society.

Many other practical examples can be found that explain the dynamics at play. The interaction between Islam and coffee as described by Juma (2016) is particularly revealing, because historical doubts about its legality were as much due to its stimulating nature (similar to alcohol) as to the fact that people met at coffee shops to discuss politics and criticize authorities. The same ambiguous character can be identified in the prohibition of the use of the printing press, with religious reasoning used to underpin the defense of the interests of certain professional groups. More recently, Rumee Ahmed (2018) highlights that in the 1980s the legitimacy of photography was a widely disputed issue in Islamic circles; these doubts seem now remote if we look at the webpages of even the most conservative clerics.

The lack of a central authority in Islam can obscure this evolution, in particular when more publicity is given to the most extremist opinions, irrespective of the number of followers or the authority of the source.

Evolution is even more visible in terms of **religiosity**, or how faith is lived in practice by individuals and groups. Millennial's attitudes show that support for the idea that religion is a private, spiritual affair is greater than support for the idea that it is only laws and beliefs. Their defense of an increase of the role for women in society and in religion, of freedom of expression or of religious freedom are not considered opposed to Islam,

but as a way to live democracy in a Muslim context and Islam in a democratic context (Tabah Foundation 2016).

According to Michael Robbins, an American who heads Arab Barometer, society is driving change, with much of the region growing less religious (*The Economist* 2017-1). Although the figures need to be studied with some perspective, it seems that Egyptians are praying less (see Table 4), with a decrease of piety over time and these shifts most visible among the youngest generations. To quote another example, in Iran, despite a law adopted after 1979 that allows girls to marry from nine years old, the average age is now 25.

Table 4 (Source: Economist 2017-1)


Prayer retreat
Egypt, Muslims who pray daily, % of age group

Source: Arab Barometer

Even in the Gulf, the situation seems to be opening up, with the Emirati Ambassador to the U.S. speaking openly of the aspiration for a more secular government in his country and Saudi Arabia putting in place an exercise in moderation without representation.

Islam and Politics

These changes have a very direct impact in the rendering of Islam in political life.

The fist remark must be that the immense majority of Muslims **do not see their religion as incompatible with democracy**. In a poll by the Arab Center in 2016, 77 percent of respondents considered democracy to be the most appropriate system of government for their countries, and a small majority (53 percent, 23 strongly) thought it was better to separate religion from politics.

A Gallup Center poll released in June 2011 found that 92 percent of Egyptians would include free speech as a part of the new constitution, 67 percent said the same regarding freedom of religion, and 55 percent about freedom of assembly. In a different poll, 83 percent said they prefer applying the spirit of Sharia but with adaptation to modern times. (Telhami 2013)

> This data provide us with a clear but complex image of an Arab population who wants democracy and liberty but maintaining a special relationship with religion.

This data provide us with a clear but complex image of an Arab population who wants democracy and liberty but maintaining a special relation with religion. We should not forget that in an Arab context the notion of secularism is associated with colonialism and foreign domination, not with liberty.

The second remark is that there is **not a single strand that represents political Islam**. According to Abeer AlNajjar (2016) *Islamism* is increasingly becoming an umbrella for many diverse groups who differ in their approach to the interpretation of the Islamic reference. This pluralism,

based on the diversification and individualization of the religious field, and even the de-construction of Islam, will most probably imply, as Oliver Roy (2012) indicates, that Islamists, including Salafists, will become reluctant agents of democratization.

This is particularly important because the option for a significant number of Arab citizens, in particular among the younger generation, is not *whether* Islamism, but rather, *which* Islamism. Avi Spiegel (2015) describes a vibrant scene of political religious movements in Morocco, in which Islamism is seen as a means of personal empowerment, a way to work for your country and your community. In this context, the Slogan "Islam is the solution" no longer means that Islam encapsulates the solution; rather, it wants to express the hope that there is a solution out there.

The Way Forward

The process of *Aggiornamento* (religious update) in mainstream Muslim societies is compatible with the presence of a minority of Extremists. Those who embrace violence must be fought by security forces with the instruments of law enforcement.

In political terms, the priority is to prevent extremist groups, including non-violent ones, from garnering support among ordinary Arab populations. Their gravitational pull derives from the tragic situation in the region and the lack of options for a significant part of the population, in particular for young people. As Oliver Roy points out, what is happening in many cases is not the radicalization of Islam but the Islamization of radicalism.

The West risks making the situation worse, by isolating potential actors of positive change due to a lack of understanding of their aspirations and their expressions, for example by identifying all signs of religion as fanaticism.

> Islam may need a Martin Luther King Jr. more than a Martin Luther.

This brings us to the discussion on whether Islam needs a Reformation. We should not forget that Reformation in Christianity was followed by long-lasting and bloody conflicts.

What the Arab world may need is not a religious leader but rather a social leader; not someone who wants to reform religion, but who wants to reform society; not someone who opposes religious establishment, but who opposes injustice; one who uses the popular legitimacy and the authority of religion to promote social and political change. Islam may need a Martin Luther King Jr. more than a Martin Luther.

The Role of Anti-Western Sentiments

A significant part of the Arab world feel and believe that there is an open opposition between the West and Islam. Often left unmentioned in polite conversations, this mindset has deep consequences in bilateral relationships, and ignoring it will not make it disappear.

> **The Arab conventionally accepted grand narrative of recent history focuses on the deliberate efforts of the West to keep the Arab– Islamic world weak and divided.**
>
> A very brief approach to these received ideas could read as follows:
>
> • Britain (i.e. the West) was a traditional ally of the Ottoman Caliphate in order to protect its colonial trade routes in Asia. During the First World War the Caliphate's backing of Germany forced Britain to abandon this alliance and seek an alternative to control Islam; it decided to support the Sharif of Mecca, and Arabs in general, as a bulwark against Turkey.
>
> • At the same time, aware of the potential strength of the Arab people, it negotiated a secret treaty with France to divide this region, which resulted in the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which still defines today's borders in the Middle East. This was done in a rushed and clumsy way, utterly ignoring the opinions and interests of local populations. (The zig-zag shape of the border between Jordan and Saudi Arabia is known as "Winston's hiccup" and attributed to Churchill's trembling pulse after a lavish lunch).
>
> • The "divide and rule" approach also applied to oil producing areas, creating the separate entities of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran and Iraq. The imposition of the State of Israel was a further demonstration of the powerlessness of the Arab world.
>
> • This arrangement was put into question by Nasser and his pan–Arabism. The West used different means to counter this ideology, including by supporting its most powerful political and ideological competitor, Islamism. The backing of radical Islamist groups around the world in the '80s and the establishment of what the media labelled 'Londonistan' through the 1990s are examples of this trend.
>
> • The invasion of Iraq in 2003 is the logical continuation of this long-term policy of preventing any Arab country from becoming too powerful or too independent and keeping the Arab Islamic world in a subordinate role to the West.

Opinion polls clearly confirm this mistrust. A survey conducted in 2017 concluded that overall, 61% of Arabs have a negative or somewhat negative

attitude toward US policy in the Arab world (Arab Center 2017). The real figures could be significantly more negative, considering that refusals to answer the questions were surprisingly high, compared to surveys conducted in previous years; on average, 40% of those contacted declined to participate in the survey. The highest refusal rates (over 50%) were in countries whose leaders have good relations with the US.

The situation becomes even bleaker when we approach public opinion in a more detailed manner. According to the 2016 survey (Arab Center 2016), looking at specific U.S. foreign policy areas, vast majorities of Arabs had negative views of U.S. policy toward Palestine (80 percent), Syria (77 percent), Iraq (78 percent), Yemen (71 percent), and Libya (72 percent).

Fernando Bryce, The Book of Needs. (Source: Harvard Art Museums)

Indirect approaches also confirm this deeply felt sentiment. When asked about most valued foreign leaders, public opinion has historically favored those that clearly opposed Israel and the US, including, in different years, former French President Jacques Chirac, after he stood up to George W. Bush on Iraq in 2003; Hassan Nasrallah of Hezbollah after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war; Venezuelan leader Hugo Chavez, after his support of Hamas in the 2008–09 war; and President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, following his 2009 confrontation with Israeli leader Shimon Peres at the World Economic Forum. (Telhami 2013)

The existence of a deep distrust seems clear. In order to address it we need to understand its roots and its contents.

Policies or values?

A widespread perception remains that the discrepancy is predominantly about values. In the aftermath of 9/11, President Bush declared that "they hate our liberties" and this was interpreted by some as an indictment against Muslims in general and not only about extremists.

Referring again to public polls it seems clear that the main discrepancies are not values- but policy-based. When asked about their general views of the United States, almost half of the Arab public surveyed expressed positive views (48 percent) and only 25 percent expressed negative or somewhat negative views of the American people. (Arab Center 2017). More to the point, according to Telhami (2013), on average, roughly 75 percent of the population rejected American policies while only 10 percent rejected American values.

If we look at the general context, we see that this is consistent with other answers, like support for democracy or the consideration of Europe and the United States as attractive places to live and to study. When asked to identify places where they thought there was most freedom and democracy for their own people, the overwhelming majorities of Arabs repeatedly identified Western countries.

In the same sense, John Esposito (2010) remembers that according to an older survey 66% of Kuwaitis had unfavorable views of the United States, but only 3% shared the same perception about Canada, that can be considered the equivalent of America without its foreign policy.

Dabiq Magazine (Source: Clarion Project)
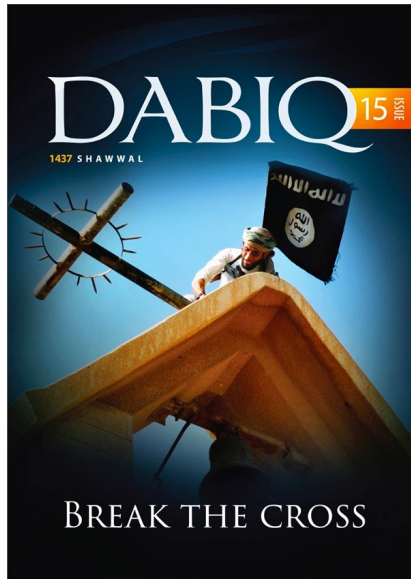
Extremists want to impose the opposite view. Islamic State addresses this question in an article of its official publication Dabiq (2016) entitled "Why we hate you & why we fight you." It enumerates six reasons, with four of them having to do with values (disbelief, secularism, atheism, crimes against Islam) and two related to policies (crimes against Muslims and invasion of Arab lands). But it insists emphatically that values are the main issue: "The fact is, even if you were to stop bombing us, imprisoning us, torturing us, vilifying us, and usurping our lands, we would continue to hate you because our primary reason for hating you will not cease to exist until you embrace Islam."

It would seem clear that in principle, mainstream Islam rejects Western policies, while extremists focus on Western values. But a rational disagreement on policies does not quite explain the intensity and omnipresence of this sentiment, or its centrality in the communication strategies of extremist groups. It is not evident why opposition against the West is such an effective propaganda tool, even in cases where the presence of Western actors is limited.

A representative example is the case of Yemen, where the rebel Houthis motto surprisingly promotes hostility against Israel and America, even though local or regional issues unrelated to the West are clearly at the root of the conflict. The same could be said about Nigeria, where the

most pressing concern of local population is not the containment of Western Education, as the name of its most violent group, "Boko Haram," seems to indicate.

Visible and Invisible Layers

In order to fully understand this sentiment, we need to dig deeper, go beyond what is explicit in the polls, and distinguish the different layers of a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. There may be three main components to be considered and addressed separately: rejection of Western policies; perception of Western hostility against Islam; and identification between the West and a certain type of modernity.

The first layer is indeed the **rejection of Western policies**. This layer includes three separate but interrelated aspects: the support for existing regimes, the imposition of a regional order in the Middle East and the indifference towards the suffering of Arabs and Muslims.

First, traditional Western backing of the economic and political status quo and support of existing governments means that, in the words of Shibley Telhami, for large sectors of the population the United States is an anchor of a political order they do not like. This approach was put into question in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, when the United States refused to uphold the Egyptian regime and accepted the election of a representative of the Muslim Brotherhood as President; but for the time being this has not changed the general perception of the US in the region.

Second, Arab public opinion is clearly opposed to Western policies in the Middle East, in particular its approach to Palestine, the prism of pain through which Arabs look at the world, to use another meaningful expression by Telhami. The invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the presence of American military in the region are additional irritants.

Third, indifference to Arab suffering is often resented by Arab populations, and can be at the root of painful misunderstandings. Abu Hafs Al Muritani, former Al Qaeda mufti and opposed to violence against civilians,

explained in an interview with *Al Jazeera* (2015) that many Muslims could not understand that they were expected to be outraged by terrorist attacks in Paris when the same was happening in Syria and Palestine for years without apparent reaction from the West. The treatment of Syrian and Libyan refugees and the increased visibility of Islamophobic political movements have significantly added to this feeling of abandonment.

Beyond the opposition to Western policies, the second and often implicit layer of anti-Western sentiments is the perception of **hostility against Islam**, that is, the feeling that the Arab-Islamic world is collectively and deliberately marginalized in the international arena (Ranstorp 2016). The identity as Arabs and Muslims is built at least partially in opposition to the West as a stronger rival. This sense of exclusion as a community should not be underestimated.

A series of U.S. State Department surveys conducted across 10 Muslim-majority countries in 2003 found that the primary driver of anti-American sentiment was the perception of United States' hostility towards Islam (Nisbet 2011). Similarly, an enquiry on Jihadist recruitment in Africa (UNDP 2017) confirmed that the feeling that 'religion is under threat' was a powerful driver in the journey to extremism of many young people.

This is an extremely dangerous situation. Framing of a narrative of defensive war between the West and Islam is a very powerful message that defines the worldview of extremists and risks spreading among mainstream Arabs and Muslims around the world. The defense of Islam, unifying the protection of one's religion, one's identity and one's community is the core message of these groups.

Underneath these two considerations lies a third deeper and more intangible layer: the identification of the West with a certain type of Modernity; **fear of modernity** is not exclusive of the Arab-Islamic world, but takes a particular importance in this context, due to the vision of the West as opposed to traditional societies. The preservation of collective and individual identities can create a solid socio-political base, as easy to overlook as to manipulate. Combined with religion, it can become an extremely powerful political force.

The explicit and implicit use of these three levels shape an internally consistent narrative in which Arab peoples are presented in opposition with the West writ large. The main risk is the **amalgamation of all these arguments in a comprehensive civilizational struggle**, in which political disagreements are explained as a defense of tradition and identity against foreign influence, and framed in terms of a religious duty of resistance: the more Western, the less Arabic / Islamic.

The Role of Extremist Propaganda

We should not underestimate the importance of perceptions. Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri explained in a letter to the Emir of this organization in Iraq, leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, in 2004 that a media campaign was part of his group's list of strategic priorities because "more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media" (Winkler and Dauber 2014).

Zarqawi's group started to videotape its operations and to use them for publicity and recruiting purposes. But Islamic State was the first organization to understand the potential of social media to manage perceptions by communicating directly with millions or people, as well as the need to adapt to a new language and new working methods.

The quality and quantity of its messages and its effectiveness sets it apart from other precedents and offers an excellent example of strategic communication, that is, a set of propaganda tools that are integrated in a consistent and focused effort to multiply power and reinforce political and military activities.

ISIS disposes of a vast publicity network from the Sahel to Afghanistan, reinforcing the Caliphate brand in more than 20 languages, using a transmedia framework that includes videos, memes, tweets and other social media postings, ISIS exploits the full potential of the different platforms to promote its interests. It uses all options available to weaponize the organization's ideas, whether that is radio, pamphlets, DVDs, or YouTube,

managing to put forward its message in what Farah Pandith (2017) describes as "surround sound."

This activism translates in very intense public interest (Abdel Bari Atwan, Director of the widely followed electronic daily Rai Alyoum reckons that articles about Islamic State attract up to ten times the readership of any others) and the recruitment of more than 42,000 foreign fighters from 120 countries for the war in Syria and Iraq.

According to Vaughan Philips (2017) ISIS is best understood—and therefore defeated—by considering it as a new form of insurgency that pivots around strategic communication.

ISIS / DAESH has been so effective in terms of communication that it has been able to largely define the public conversation. Messages of resentment against the West and its presentation as an enemy of Islam fall on fertile ground beyond the extremist fringe, due to the depressing situation in large regions of the Arab world. If this dynamic continues, they may consolidate as a significant component of mainstream Arab world vision.

> Messages of resentment against the West and its presentation as an enemy of Islam fall on fertile ground beyond the extremist fringe due to the depressing situation in many parts of the Arab world.

To understand why things happen we need to understand how they happen. This section will first identify the different themes addressed by ISIS/DAESH propaganda; then it will describe their presentation, integrating current events with well-known religious and cultural references, emphasizing emotions and the organization's use of the toolbox provided by social media. It will also study a concrete case, the murder of Jordanian Pilot Al-Kasasbeh, to recognize how these tools are put into practice.

Themes

In its report 'The Virtual Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy' (Winter 2015) the Quilliam Foundation has studied in depth the different themes that are addressed in the communications of Daesh and grouped them into six large clusters: Utopia, Belonging, Victimhood, Mercy, War, and Brutality.

It is significant that, despite the fact that Islam is present in many of these communications, religion as such is not identified as a separate theme. It would seem that the promise of a new social and political order is a more effective marketing tool than religious devotion.

This list exemplifies the different, seemingly contradictory, messages that are necessary to shape the brand of the Islamic State. Extreme violence and the construction of an idyllical society play paradoxically complementary roles, sometimes aiming at different persons or groups, sometimes addressed at the same individuals but with different objectives. These apparent contradictions often serve the objective of elimination of moderation, in particular the "Grey Zone" of moderate Islam, forcing individuals to take sides fully for or against them.

Over half of the propaganda presents life in territories under ISIS control, with a strong focus on **Utopia**. Daesh presents a new social contract for a community ruled by Islam, with emphasis in social justice, security, the rule of law and prosperity. This cult of statehood around the Islamic State Caliphate is an integral part of the identity of this organization, and in a way replaces the personality cult of other organizations (Slovo 2016).

The innovative character of Daesh's state-building, institutional and legal project (Revkin 2016) is a significant part of its brand image. The attraction to the organization was reinforced by the lack of governance alternatives in Iraq and Syria for Sunnis, in the context of politics of exclusion that tended to benefit Shi'as in some cases, and Kurds in others. The imposition of law and order was a key factor in this effort, as was the case in Afghanistan with the Taliban (Kaplan 2008), seemingly demonstrating that in some

cases terrorists and criminals can govern better than governments (Hamid et al. 2018).

Daesh schoolbooks (Source: Lesaca 2018)

The notion of **Belonging** is linked to this utopia, and caters to the need for identity and collective empowerment that is an integral part of popular frustration in the Arab world. Replacing national and ethnic identities by a religious one is a powerful message of integration for individuals who feel humiliated individually and collectively. It represents a new insurgent model that corroborates the "New Wars" thesis (Kaldor 2007), in which developments in mass communications are used to exploit identity politics and wars are not fought for strategic interests or political ideologies. The role of Jihadism as a type of identity politics is reinforced in this context.

Victimhood refers mostly to the notion of the war of the West against Islam, which is an integral part of the extremist mindset, and used to justify brutality and violence as legitimate. The whole discourse builds on the basic idea that Islam, both as a religion and as an identity, is under attack and its defense by all means available is not only necessary, but compulsory for all Muslims. The mental leap to proclaim the inevitability of the victory of Islam against its enemies and the imposition of a universal Islamic society flows naturally from the rhetoric of self-defense.

War and Brutality, in combination with Mercy, are the most immediately instrumental themes, and aim at presenting military efforts as victorious and unstoppable, creating fear in enemies and incentives to join for those still undecided. This plays an important role in recruiting and maintaining fighters, and reinforces the need for permanent activity.

Framing of the Message

Emotions

It is important to emphasize that Daesh communications are not focused on ideas, but mostly on emotions. This is compatible with the existence of a distinct Jihadist ideology, formulated generally in terms of Salafi-Jihadism (Maher 2016). But, as Thomas Hegghammer (2017) points out in his book about Jihadi culture, "ideology" is really two different things: doctrine and aesthetics.

Daesh has become extremely effective at manipulating emotions to promote its objectives, rapidly understanding the new rules of the game imposed by social media, in particular the utility of transforming its messages in cultural and entertainment products that aim at seducing and not at convincing the audience.

Daesh has won the battle of aesthetics in social media. It has transformed terror into an attractive cultural product (Lesaca 2017) using professional production and edition and borrowing resources and ideas from video games and films to appeal to different audiences. This plays a major role in terms of recruitment, with many more young people attracted to Jihad by videos and tweets that present life in the frontlines as a combination of Jihad and NGO work than through doctrinal or religious programs and documents.

> Daesh has won the battle of aesthetics in social media. It has transformed terror into an attractive cultural product.

The use of music is widespread in this context and, despite resistance by the more traditional thinkers, Anasheed, (religious songs) have been become one of the most powerful and utilized tools to set the scene of videos and motivate combatants, including in particular suicide bombers.

It is interesting to point out that in order to make themselves more attractive to audiences, propaganda has forced Salafist groups to become more open to culture (for example, in the use of music) and adopt some of the traditional practices of Sufi Islam.

Narratives

Steven Corman (2016) has identified and described thirteen master narratives of lslamist extremism, based on stories from the Qur'an (The Battle of Badr), early Islamic History (Kerbala), ancient History (the Crusades) or more recent events (the abolition of the caliphate, the creation of Israel, the 1967 war) (See table).

These narratives offer a framework of understanding that allows an intuitive integration of complex processes, with a focus on the need for Muslims to protect their identity and religion.

Corman summarizes the arguments of Master Narratives as follows:

1. Islam is under general attack by the unbelieving West aided by local apostates and turncoats;

2. The actions of believers against Islam's enemies near and far are just, proportional, and sanctified;

3. It is the duty of good Muslims to fight or to support those who fight;

4. The reward for their sacrifices will be a tangible utopia embodied by the establishment of a Caliphate. (This fourth message is an addition of the Islamic State's narrative)

The references to the Crusades, the Nakba, the abolition of the caliphate and others are presented also as a "failure by Muslims to be vigilant against religious decline" explaining their weaknesses as a direct consequence of

the refusal to follow the example of the first generations of Muslims, whose fervor was rewarded by political and military success.

These master narratives are trans-historical, incorporating themes and stories that are widely known in a culture, frequently invoked, told, and retold over time. They are vertically integrated with local narratives, that 'ground' the master narrative in contemporary events, thus allowing individuals to visualize how their individual stories cohere with that of the larger culture (Philips 2017).

Table 5 (Source: Corman 2016)

Table 2. Percentage of 5,239 Islamist Extremist Texts in the CSC Collection that Voiced Various Master Narratives

Master Narrative	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	Avg
Crusaders/Colonization	0	19.2	13.6	33.9	23.8	36	44.7	43.9	41.8	35	18.6	14.9	19.6	15.4	10.7	24.74
Nakba (Palestine)	15.4	34.6	40.9	25.8	31	18	44.7	40.9	15.8	17	14.4	11.3	9.89	2.48	5.08	21.81
Pharaoh	3.85	3.85	11.4	12.9	7.14	28	14.9	28.8	12.7	13.6	10.6	14.7	12.4	7.61	14.2	13.10
Jahiliyya	7.69	0	9.09	9.68	9.52	16	23.4	19.7	3.8	9.46	4.31	6.4	5.02	3.01	5.58	8.84
Badr	0	0	6.82	8.06	7.14	18	17	15.2	7.59	7.89	5.12	6.4	4.56	2.83	6.6	7.55
Shaytan's Handiwork	0	3.85	2.27	8.06	9.52	14	10.6	19.7	5.06	5.99	3.14	4.32	3.73	2.83	7.11	6.68
Hypocrites (Munafiqun)	0	11.5	4.55	9.68	14.3	14	10.6	7.58	3.8	6.31	2.51	3.6	2.66	1.06	5.58	6.52
72 Virgins (Houris)	3.85	3.85	6.82	4.84	9.52	14	6.38	15.2	5.7	4.73	3.14	3.42	4.26	2.48	4.57	6.18
Yusuf bin Tashfin	3.85	0	0	6.45	0	4	6.38	4.55	3.16	1.89	1.17	1.53	2.66	1.77	0	2.49
1967 (Six-Day War)	0	3.85	0	0	0	0	2.13	4.55	3.16	6.31	4.4	2.97	3.88	1.24	3.05	2.37
Khaybar	0	3.85	2.27	1.61	2.38	2	0	3.03	6.33	2.21	1.35	1.71	1.83	1.24	0.51	2.02
Tariq ibn Ziyad	0	0	0	0	0	2	4.26	6.06	3.16	2.84	1.26	0.72	0.84	1.59	0	1.52
Mahdi	0	0	0	0	4.76	2	2.13	1.52	1.9	1.89	0.99	2.07	1.44	0.88	0	1.31
Karbala	3.85	0	2.27	0	2.38	0	0	3.03	0.63	0.95	1.17	0.99	1.29	0.18	1.02	1.18
Musaylimah	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	1.52	3.16	0.32	0.27	0.36	0	0	0	0.51
Tatars (Taftars/Mongols)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3.03	1.27	0.63	0.18	0.27	0.53	0.35	0	0.42
1924 (Caliphate)	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0.95	0.18	0.45	0.53	0	0	0.27
Uqbah bin Nafi	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.63	0.32	0.45	0.45	0.08	0	0	0.13

Cultural References

Cultural resonance has been recognized since Robert Entman as one of the key elements to reinforce the effectiveness of a message.

Daesh uses these mechanisms extensively to establish the continuity between themselves and the earlier times of Islam. The setting of the Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi's proclamation of Islamic Caliphate and its implicit references to Prophet Mohamed (in terms of dressing, the slow tempo, the use

of a *Miswak* to clean his teeth etc.) have been widely studied and analyzed (for example, Warrick 2015).

It has also exploited widespread millenarian beliefs, using the black flags associated with the end of times and dedicating considerable effort to the conquest of Dabiq, a small village near the border with Syria considered by some hadiths as playing a key role in the final apocalyptical battle. This reference was reinforced when it used the name of this location as the title of its official publication.

References to popular Arab culture are also present, in particular linking Jihadists with the stereotype of the holy warrior (Wright 2016), a popular heroic character in the Muslim world like the samurai in Japan or the cowboy in America.

The use of Western culture is also key to the framing of the message, and particularly useful for recruiting purposes. Daesh uses settings and aesthetics derived from videogames and films popular among millennials and younger populations to attract them to its products, blur the distinction between reality and fiction and limit the impact of the suffering of victims as individuals, thus lowering the emotional and ideological opposition to violence. Susan Sontag's "Regarding the Pain of Others" (2004) offers some insights of this complex psychological issue.

Propaganda of the Deed

Daesh's concrete actions are integrated into the narratives and symbols of the messaging, reinforcing the internal consistency and providing examples of practical achievements that are received by their followers as a confirmation of the success of their initiatives.

One of the best-known examples is the destruction of an embankment on the Iraqi Syrian border with a bulldozer to proclaim the end of the Sykes-Picot Agreement (Philips 2017). This is a powerful symbol of the abolition of the order imposed by the West in the region. Its replacement by a Muslim Caliphate signals the unification of all of the Ummah, the Muslim community, under a single flag.

Terrorist attacks, murders, kidnappings and other actions are also designed to align themselves consistently with the themes, narratives and symbols of the general mindset. They are framed as part of a wider project in military, political, cultural or religious terms, and presented as a legitimate defense against an aggression against Islam, so that its barbarism can be explained and justified in this exceptional context.

Bulldozer destroys berm at Syria-Iraq border (Source: www.vice.com)

Brand Integration

The strength of ISIS' communication effort does not lie in the individual components mentioned above, but in the amalgamation of these efforts into a consistent and powerful vision that forms a continuum of cultural, religious, ideological and personal frameworks.

By using well-known cultural references and inserting the activities of the organization in this trans-historical context, the messages are not only immediately and intuitively understood at a very deep personal level, but are clearly perceived as a call to a certain behavior.

The success of this integration is the transformation of the recognition of a pre-defined narrative pattern into the motivation to act in a certain way.

All this explains the effectiveness of Daesh's communication strategy at an individual and psychological level; but it does not clarify how it was able to reach millions of individuals in such a short period of time. Its deep understanding of the functioning of social media is a necessary component of this success. It has mastered the viral lift of their communications, circulating and formulating them in a manner that will achieve the maximum dissemination by their own means, sympathizers and third parties.

They exploit the potential and comparative advantages of different platforms by using them simultaneously and playing with their interaction in an exercise that has received the name of Transmedia terrorism (Lesaca 2017). This was used for example during the Paris attacks, with "live broadcast" from different accounts with hashtags like #Paris_On_Fire or #FranceUnderAttack in different social media outlets. The same tools have been used to generate interest in other terrorist attacks.

Moreover, in order to reach to larger audiences, they also took advantage of major current events, like the Scottish Independence Referendum, to use hashtags, (#VoteNo and #VoteYes) that would push their messages to individuals who had never shown any interest for this cause.

Case Study: Murder of Jordanian pilot Al-Kasasbeh

Muath Safi Yousef Al-Kasasbeh was a Jordanian military pilot captured and burnt to death by Daesh after his plane crashed in Syria. This savage and hateful murder generated a strong military reaction and unanimous condemnation from all sides, including from religious scholars who qualified Daesh as satanic. Why and how such a brutal murder could be used as propaganda deserves some explanation and can help explain some of the features that make ISIS communication so effective.

Although Al-Kasasbeh was killed shortly after his capture, ISIS organized a double media campaign to reinforce public interest in the case, on the one hand proposing to exchange him for terrorist prisoners in Jordanian jails, on the other launching a vile internet campaign under the hashtag #SuggestAWayToKillTheJordanianPilotPig. This lasted for a month, after which a revolting video showing his murder was published.

The 20 minute long video ("Healing of the Believers' Chests") included political messages as well as several humorous appearances from British comic actor Rowan Atkinson (Mr. Bean) and characters from children programs. The setting of the execution itself was an imitation of a well-known scene from the horror movie franchise "Saw," in which a brutal justice maker kills his victims in gruesome and imaginative ways. It is considered a cult series for millennials, the main target audience of the video. Images are accompanied by the rhythm of a very well-known and hypnotic nasheed (song) entitled "Qariban, Qariban, Tarawna al-' Ajiba" (Soon, Soon, You Shall See Something Wondrous).

There are several considerations to this approach worth mentioning. The first is that its use of entertainment aesthetics and tools such as suspense-generation attracts a sector of the population who would otherwise not be interested in politics or religion. Moreover, its presentation as fiction helps downplay the horror of what is being displayed, blurring the identification of the victim as a real person.

The narrative frame of reference is particularly relevant. By presenting the scene in terms of a brutal but just reaction to past sins (the story behind the movie series "Saw"), the authors are appealing to a sense of injustice and humiliation, particularly intense for many Arab and Muslims in the context of the Syrian War.

This message is reinforced by the assassination of the pilot by fire and then burying him in rubble, a clear reference to the thousands of victims of air bombing campaigns seen every day in news programs around the Arab world. Although most of these operations were carried out by the Syrian regime, the video implicitly accuses the West and Arab regimes of these attacks to justify the brutal murder as a retribution.

Finally, the pilot is seen wearing an orange jumpsuit that brings to mind the prisoners of Guantanamo and, above all, Abu Ghraib for Arab audiences. The tortures of Abu Ghraib were not only brutal; they were also particularly humiliating for Muslims (sexual abuse, use of dogs, etc.), giving the widespread impression that prisoners were tortured not as prisoners but specifically as Muslims.

All these unconscious messages reinforce each other and fall in line with the main argument of Daesh: its actions, however violent, are a just reaction to the war against Islam and the humiliation of Arabs and Muslims by the West.

3. What is do be done?

General Approach

The West finds itself in a paradoxical situation: it cannot address the main underlying causes for popular frustration in the region by itself, in particular concerning political and social aspirations, but it is widely perceived as a key actor and will doubtlessly be affected by events in the region.

The first step to address this situation is to become fully aware that there are **no quick fixes**. The crisis of the region is larger than the sum of its already very significant components, and overcoming it demands major progress in every aspect of human development.

Of course, concrete proposals and actions need to emerge to address and resolve some key individual concerns, in particular crises and conflicts; and policy options to improve the socio-economic situation, including job-creation, need to be formulated and implemented. Yet, with respect to the general state of the region and its deep underlying social, political and economic challenges it will take, in the best of cases, several very difficult decades to change the current state of affairs.

The second step is to recognize that **the West is not necessarily the first responder**. Historical and ideological considerations help explain the over-zealous attitude of the West in the last decades. Since the 1970s, political evolution around the world has aimed at achieving Western democracy and way of life. It was true in Latin America, in the Balkans, in Eastern Europe, in Asia, in Africa. There was a widespread belief that the Arab

world would follow suit and that this inevitable process could be accelerated from outside.

> In cases of disagreement between terrain and maps, terrain always wins.

But in cases of disagreement between terrain and maps, terrain always wins. Individuals and societies do not seem to care much about historical inevitabilities. External intervention in the region has proven ineffective or counterproductive, both in terms of practical results and of respect for Western values and principles.

These two considerations should not lead to despair or to a belief that the West has no role in turning the situation around. The third step is the **acceptance of the very important and yet not central role of the West**. The way the West handles its relations with the region can and should make a significant difference. What it does and says will be key; what it does not do and does not say will be equally important. How it acts, or not, and speaks up or remains silent will define its position and determine its effectiveness.

This has been the traditional role of diplomats for centuries: working in uncertain environments that can be influenced, but not radically changed, in situations that cannot be resolved, but need to be carefully managed, defending the values and interests of their own country, but without following a pre-ordained plan or even thinking of imposing an end state. Diplomacy can in this context be compared to jazz, where emphasis is placed in the performance, and not in the original composition.

New Mindset

The West does not only need a new strategy; it must create a new mindset for relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds.

A good point of departure would be to assess the wisdom and effectiveness of our approach since 2001. According to Pankaj Mishra (2017), it is now clear that the post-9/11 policies of preemptive war, massive retaliation, regime change, nation building and reforming Islam have catastrophically failed, while the dirty war against the West's own enlightenment has been a wild success.

> The War on Terror has inadvertently transformed the way the West deals with the rest of world.

The War on Terror has become a long war, even a forever war, that has inadvertently transformed the way the West deals with the rest of world, in particular with Arab countries and, to a certain extent, with Islam itself.

In retrospect, it seems clear that a more limited reaction would have served our collective interests better. Global war is not the most effective response to an initially very limited group of violent fighters, even if at some point they are able to reach different areas in the world (the immense majority of them in Muslim countries) and provoke significant casualties.

This reaction was aggravated by the widely held, although often implicit, perception that evolution towards Western liberal democracy was inevitable around the world and the solution to the antagonism with the Arab world was the imposition of democracy.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was the clearest example of this mentality. David Kilcullen (2016) considers the invasion to be the "greatest strategic

screw-up since Hitler's invasion of Russia." It not only detracted efforts from Afghanistan at a time where they were badly needed and could have made an irreversible impact. It also devastated a country that was key for the balance of the region, exported Jihadism, favored the creation and reinforcement of extremist movements, unleashed sectarian violence, extended instability to its neighbors, weakened multilateral institutions and the unity of Western democracies, and increased the distrust of Arab populations towards the regimes that supported military intervention.

Osama bin Laden's 9/11 strategy of dragging the West in general and the United States in particular towards confrontation with the Arab world was successful beyond his wildest dreams.

A new approach should be based on a better understanding of the situation, respect for the decisions of Arab peoples, more open and effective communication, and political will to support the region and improve governance and human development.

The following pages will not try to propose political solutions to the heart-breaking conflicts on the ground or engage on technical propositions to promote investment and create jobs in the region, or other similar key practical questions. The definition of policies and the formulation of strategies fall beyond the scope of this exercise. This paper's more modest aim is to try to offer some actionable guidance for practitioners to better understand the situation and communicate better.

Better Understanding

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The West is disoriented, in its literal and etymological sense.

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The West is disoriented, in its literal and etymological sense. The confusion and perplexity about what is happening in the Arab world is so deep that it is difficult to identify what the problems, let alone the solutions, are. Western governments and agencies, as well as many academic and non-profit organizations, have been institutionally unable to come to terms with the complex social and political reality of the Arab and Muslim world.

With attention to the region greatly reinforced after 2001, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the focus of the West has been narrowly fixated on security and its interaction with extremism.

This approach has buried the perspective of what is really happening in Arab societies, blurring the big picture and crowding out a wider reflection on the intricate social and political dynamics and forces at play, precisely at a time when changes in the region can alter the Arab world as we know it. At the same time, this tunnel vision has proved self-defeating to understand extremism as such, because a social phenomenon cannot be studied in isolation from the societies and cultures in which it appears.

Changes after 9/11, Nantucket Ferry 2018 (Source: Author)

It is important to remember that the widespread study of Arab politics is relatively new in the West. Until 2001, it was a comparatively peripheral concern for most Western governments, focusing mostly on the Arab-Israeli conflict. The same can be said about academia: according to Lawrence Freedman (2017), more books were published on Islam and war in the aftermath of 2001 than had been published in all prior human history. Some 80 per cent of scholarly articles on the topic ever published also came after 9/11. Surveys of public opinion in the region were very limited, as Shibley Telhami (2013) remembers in his book "The World through Arab Eyes."

This lack of information was obvious in particular in the planning and implementation of military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Lawrence Freedman points out that the U.S. Counterinsurgency Field Manual demanded, among other things, an ability to "decipher cultural narratives" worthy of a trained ethnographer, and an ability to manipulate these narratives worthy of Plato. But many accounts of the interventions (Woodward 2010, Jaffe 2010, Kilcullen 2016, among others) insist on the fundamental lack of understanding of the social environment, the enemy or the mission.

The West now has the experience to curb enthusiasm for military interventions, as well as a significant corpus of political analysis and academic research, and a reasonable amount of polls and surveys. But it still lacks the deep contextual understanding that can help identify and assess dynamics, events, and actors.

The superimposition of very diverse layers of social engagement (religious, cultural, ideological, political, social, psychological, national, tribal, etc.) and the centrality and difficulty of measuring emotions make polls and isolated data only relatively meaningful: Are all those who admire Osama Bin Laden potential terrorists? When is a very conservative religious movement detrimental to the stability of a given country? How far can gender issues advance in a specified society without provoking a backlash? What is socially acceptable in terms of religious openness at a precise time and place? The questions are extremely complex and their number practically infinite.

Dunes near Chinguetti, Mauritania (Source : Author)

Yet, these issues are addressed regularly and effectively in Western societies. Western policy-makers need to look in particular to instruments consistently used in times of elections that provide reliable and actionable information on social attitudes.

Toolbox

To understand and address the reality of the Arab world as Western practitioners, it is necessary to go beyond traditional political analysis, based on meetings with politicians, activists and journalists, beyond opinion polls, journalistic information and academic literature, in order to embark on an innovative approach that will result in a more granular and textured perception.

Social sciences offer a number of tools that can be useful as a first step, including focus groups, risk and conflict assessment, stakeholder analysis, power maps, case studies and many others. These tools can provide policy-makers with a practical basis to structure available information.

But this knowledge needs to be applied to reality. It is essential to retain a multidisciplinary approach, that includes not only the study of politics *strictu sensu*, but also all factors that may contribute to define social processes in terms of culture, entertainment, religion, gender, and many others. As Farah Pandith (2017) explains, we must be "Cultural Listeners" to understand underlying processes.

This implies not only taking in the ideas and values that are explicitly recognized, but also reaching out for feelings and emotions like fear, hate or insecurity, that may be unconscious or hidden, but can play a defining role in political attitudes, as we have recently seen in Western societies.

Techniques to identify and assess socially and politically relevant sentiments are available, and used extensively in the political life of Western Democracies, in particular during elections. Campaign managers exhaustively scrutinize the ideas, emotions, motivations and concerns of potential voters in order to understand real, sometimes hidden, trends and define what messages can be more effective. According to Chuck Todd (2017), a combination of massive technological power and endlessly detailed voter information allows campaigns to micro-target supporters, identifying the interests and messages that are more relevant and effective for them.

Some of these tools are far too detailed to be used by political scientists or practitioners to draw a realistic social and political landscape of a specific country; but the logic behind them can offer new insights to have a better situational awareness and define effective policy and communication activities.

In this context, it is important to be aware of the potential of big data and machine learning. All aspects of human interaction can be scrutinized by exponentially increasing the use available information and our ability to analyze and interpret it. This is already in use in many aspects of life.

Some examples of the potential of big data and machine learning:

Open Source Indicators Programs analyze publicly available data to detect or anticipate significant societal events, such as political crises, humanitarian crises, mass violence, riots, mass migrations, disease outbreaks, economic instability, resource shortages, and responses to natural disasters (IARPA 2017).

One illustration of this phenomenon is how Big Data can support the early detection of disease outbreaks by combining data from absenteeism (fewer mobile phones moving during commute hours), internet searches on symptoms, social media messages, increased demand at pharmacies and hospitals, and other related indicators. Systems that have been trained on historical outbreaks in order to identify patterns of behavior can indicate whether an epidemic could be starting, and are now able to detect them several weeks before medical surveillance (Matheny 2018). Google Trends also managed a similar program specifically on flu and dengue fever.

These algorithms can integrate internet searches, social media, GPS locations, use of mobile phones, credit card payments, shopping activities, phases of the moon, sporting events and countless other elements to predict online protest participation (Ranganath et al. 2015), terrorist attacks (Strohm 2016), suicide bombers (The Economist 2017-2), violent crimes (The Economist 2018-5), cyber Attacks (Werner et al. 2017), credit card fraud (The Economist 2017-6), or to elaborate reliable counterfactuals (IARPA 2017 -2).

The Syria Tracker Crisis Map offers another impressive example of using social media and large quantities of individual contributions to understand reality on the ground in extremely complex circumstances; by crowdsourcing data on human rights violations and atrocities, it provides valuable information on the evolution of the conflict and the number of casualties.

It seems clear that relevant data to better understand the current social and political situation in the Arab world is available and the technical tools to analyze it effectively exist. As political practitioners, the main challenge may be to understand the potential of these tools and to identify the areas where its use would be more effective. At the very least, the aim could be, to have the same level of information on political and social issues as we now have on the economy.

> It seems clear that relevant data to better understand the current social and political situation in the Arab world is available and the technical tools to analyze it effectively exist

A better, deeper understanding of frustration, for example, would be a constructive contribution to assess the situation. That would include being able to follow its evolution, its geographical and demographical distribution, its roots, the triggers that catalyze it and the events that lower it and its practical effects. Other applications could be to assess feelings about

sectarianism, identity, religion or anti-Western sentiments, in order to identify effective ways to address these issues.

The scope for collaboration between academia and practitioners is wide and will need to be explored. The Belfer Center has published a very interesting paper on "Machine Learning for Policy Makers" (Buchanan 2017) that can offer some guidance.

Input from the field will be necessary to make sure that the conclusions are realistic and address the main issues. The aim of these tools is to complement and give greater precision to human expertise on the ground, not to replace it.

A caveat is in order at this point. Melvin Kranzberg formulated the six laws that define the relation between technology and society as early as three decades ago. The first one is particularly relevant: Technology in itself is not positive or negative, but it is not neutral and can significantly affect social relations. We need to understand the interaction to benefit from its potential, but also to avoid its abuse.

The example of the "Heart of Texas Campaign" can serve as an alert (Michel 2017): the Facebook page of what was ostensibly a Texan secessionist movement incited its followers to a protest against Muslim influence, at the same time and place as another Facebook page, United Muslims of America, called to demonstrate to defend Islamic knowledge. Protesters from both groups showed up and verbal attacks were exchanged. It was later revealed that both pages had been financed and managed from Russia with the apparent intention of generating conflict and tension.

There are sensitive political and ethical issues involved, in terms of the sheer potential for disruption put in the hands of individuals, of privacy, and of foreign governments' involvement in this sort of research and activities. Those concerns will need to be addressed.

Better Communication

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

—The Second Coming,
William Butler Yeats

As we have seen, the West faces a major challenge in its communication with the Arab world. The propaganda of Daesh is the most extreme manifestation of a world vision that considers the West as an enemy. Although the immense majority of Muslims reject violence, some of the arguments made by this organization, in particular the perception of hostility of the West towards Islam, find a certain level of acceptance in significant sectors of Arab societies.

The grey area of those who do not support violence but understand some of the grievances or agree with some of the aims of terrorist organizations is the main arena in terms of outreach and communication. An effort to reach out to these groups and prevent them from moving in the direction of extremism (not necessarily violent) must be one of the key components of a new Western approach towards the Arab World.

This is as important as it is difficult.

The first difficulty is that when these mindsets are internalized they **become part of the identity of the individual and the community**, mental structures that are not questioned and form the basis upon which the world is perceived and interpreted. Partial narratives cannot compete against identities. There is no room for cognitive dissonance, and apparent contradictions are absorbed by the comprehensive worldview. "Everything makes sense when you are inside," says a character from the theater play "Another World" by Gillian Slovo.

A second difficulty is that **emotions play a very significant role**, arguably more powerful than ideas themselves. Many first person accounts of radicalization (Callimachi 2018, UNDP 2017, Slovo 2016, for example) focus on reactions to personal or social events more than on rational, ideological or religious choices. Empathy with fellow Muslims, as well as feelings of individual or collective humiliation and outrage are at the root of many of these attitudes.

Internal consistency, its inclusion as part a commonly shared identity and emotional investment shape an extremely powerful cultural and ideological combination, a watertight mindset largely impervious to refutation.

How can the West improve the effectiveness of its communication? It is necessary to focus not only on the messages themselves, but also in the way they are presented and received.

Content

As for the content of the messages, former President Obama's 2009 speech at the University of Cairo can be considered the gold standard. He addressed all major issues in an open and respectful way, acknowledging the challenges, declaring specifically that a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world was needed and that America was not and would never be at war with Islam. He did not evade contentious issues, like the Palestinian situation, the compatibility between Islam and democracy, religious freedom or the situation of women.

The credibility of this message was reinforced shortly thereafter, when Washington accepted the election of Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia after the fall of Egyptian President Mubarak, a traditional US ally.

Still, this effort did not have a lasting impact in the perception of America in the Arab world (Telhami 2013) and a study cited by Tim Aistrope (2016) mentions that the Digital Outreach Team who was tasked with diffusing democratic ideas in the region found mostly negative comments about their activity.

These reactions are consistent with the lack of effectiveness of President Obama's calls for tolerance after the Daesh inspired killing in the US-city of San Bernardino in 2015. An analysis of internet searches after his declarations published by the *New York Times* (Soltas & Stephens 2015) reveal that most of his appeals were useless or counterproductive. But one particular mention proved positive in improving the image of Muslims: "Muslim Americans are our friends and our neighbors, our co-workers, our sports heroes and yes, they are our men and women in uniform, who are willing to die in defense of our country."

This experience shows that some messages are effective and others, although relevant and positive, are not, and that how they are presented is decisive in order to have a real impact. The question, then, is how to elaborate a communication strategy that can have an impact in the way Arab populations perceive the West and understand their relations with it, taking into account the audience, avoiding mistakes of the past, understanding the role of Islam, going beyond counter-narratives, rational ideas, calls for moderation and official institutions, and using the potential of traditional media and social media

Audience

It is important to identify the target audience, and not try to find all-encompassing messages that fit all ages, social situations and ideologies simultaneously.

Political communication and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) tactics are different and separate exercises. They must include effective messages that address the concerns of those who feel hopeless and humiliated and find no alternative in traditional politics, in order to prevent them from gliding towards extremism, even if it does not imply the use of violence.

Even within this group, sensibilities can be different, and different ways to address these groups will be necessary. As we have seen, Daesh's propaganda contains apparently contradictory messages that serve different purposes. Variation and differentiation will be key to success.

It seems clear that the policies pursued since 2001 have not contributed to the improvement of relations between the West and the Arab world. The new mindset must have a translation in new policies and new ways of communication.

One of the main priorities would be to acknowledge Arab grievances and avoid the perception that the West is trying to impose a political model. Western support to popular uprisings was a positive step in this direction that has not had the popular impact among Arabs it deserves.

Expressions that may give the impression that there is an ongoing struggle between Islam and the West are extremely unhelpful and need to be carefully avoided. Not only the unfortunate rhetoric about Crusades, Infinite Justice and the like that were present in the first years after 9/11, but also current mentions of Islamic terrorism, or the distinction between Islamic and Islamist, which is lost on all but the more sophisticated.

It is also worth mentioning that Muslims are the main victims of extremists, and the often-heard call for moderate Muslims to publicly reject attacks sounds as if they were somehow singled out as responsible for these deeds. Blogger Daniel Haqiqatjou (2015) proposed as a joke the creation of an iCondemn app that would make it easier for Muslims to condemn everything for which they could ever be held accountable.

"iCondemn" App (Source: www.muslimmatters.org)

Another important lesson learned would be the need to avoid overreactions that play into the hands of terrorists. As Salman Rushdie points out, the best defense against terrorism is not to be terrorized.

Role of Islam

As mentioned, Islam plays a multifaceted role in the politics of the region. It cannot be ignored and can have positive impact for its stability and progress.

In terms of communication, it is important to start by treating the presence of religion in the public sphere as a natural phenomenon, and avoid the reflex of considering that secularism is a precondition for democracy. The Arab Spring showed a positive attitude in this field, by treating Islamism as any other political movement and avoiding a specific policy on this issue.

A more textured understanding of the role religion plays will be key to making communication relevant and effective. Islam cannot be considered only a religion; religious movements often offer young people the only path to enter the public arena, to contribute to improving their own society and to build a professional career. They also deliver education, provide health, and support families and individuals in need. Religious leaders are often role models. Assessing them uniquely from the perspective of whether they are moderate or not is too one-dimensional and makes analysis irrelevant.

There is an urgent need for the West to engage with religious movements, not only political, and not only so-called moderate ones. Western societies tend to shy away from this interaction, considering that religious issues are only for Muslims to address. But it is important to remember that many issues that are not religious in nature are addressed in religious terms.

Western official institutions are ill equipped to work in this context and navigate what Nathan Brown (2017) calls the simultaneously murky and stormy waters of religious movements in the Arab world. Foreign Ministries do not need theology departments, but being part of this conversation is key. If the West does not engage in this discussion, it will be blind, deaf and mute to a political phenomenon that can define the views of hundreds of millions of Arabs in the coming years.

This engagement can also help the West play a positive role in the de-escalation of sectarianism, one of the main threats to the stability of the region.

Counter narratives are not enough

As we have seen, narratives are very powerful communication tools in the hands of extremist groups not because they are convincing in themselves, but because they are fully integrated in a consistent world vision that includes religion, identity, current events and personal experiences and gives a unified sense to all these components.

> Narratives are very powerful communication tools in the hands of Extremist Groups not because they are convincing in themselves, but because they are fully integrated in a consistent world vision.

Narratives as presented by these groups have obvious defects that can be identified and discussed in rational ways, and efforts have been deployed to explain the lack of religious basis of some of the claims. For example, an open letter signed by 175 religious leaders in 2014 identifies some of these errors, such as selective Quranic quotations, an oversimplification of Shari'a rules, declaration of a Caliphate without consensus, etc.

Yet, this exercise is largely useless against a well-established mindset that can absorb contradictions, de-legitimize opponents and ignore facts that are inconvenient. The dismissal of moderate Imams by Belgian extremists calling them *"Bisounours"* (Care Bears) may be weak from a rational point of view, but extremely powerful for those that are already convinced (Gonzalez-Quijano 2014).

An alternative narrative could have better chances. Richard LeBaron, the first director of the State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, proposed to tell our own 'compelling story' instead of trying to refute the narratives of others (Quilliam 2015).

But this does not seem the best moment in history for the West to promote itself as a political model to be followed, with intense internal debate about the future of liberalism and the open critics of populism.

In any case, it is unlikely that merely changing the conversation will be enough to dissipate the anger and frustration that are at the root of these movements.

Moderation is not enough

We need a more sophisticated view of Arab religious and political movements, and to stop classifying them solely as either moderate or extremists. Promoting moderation and the conservation of status quo is not the most attractive banner under which to rally popular enthusiasm. It cannot compete in terms of mobilization capacity with the calls to heroism and glory launched by extremist groups, in particular at a time where almost everybody would agree that the old order is not worth preserving.

In this sense, the situation in the Arab world is not different from the one in Western countries. As Adrien Abecassis (2017) points out, the kiss of death today is to be assimilated within the establishment. In French politics, President Emmanuel Macron won against the populism of Marine Le Pen, not with forbearance and moderation, but by answering the quest for radicalism with a different brand of radicalism.

Recruitment advertisment for Anctartic expedition (Source: Shackelton Foundation)

This is not a new perspective. William James wondered in 1906 how to propose a Moral Equivalent of War, a substitute for combat that may serve common good but at the same time fulfill the wishes for "hardihood, meaning, belonging and discipline" that have historically come to the front at times of conflict. He thought that pacifists ought to enter more deeply into the aesthetical and ethical point of view of their opponents in order to propose alternatives and avoid propositions that are "too weak and too tame to touch the military minded."

This advice could also be useful in this context. The alternative to extremism may not be moderation, but a different type of radicalism, like the one provided by the Arab Spring, in which popular mobilizations united whole countries in their desire for change and their readiness to pay a high price for it. Dignity remains a key mobilizing word.

Ideas are not enough

One of the main factors to explain the effectiveness of the propaganda of Daesh was its use of emotions. Working with cultural references, music and other tools, it reaches its audience at a personal level and attracts them in a way that reasoning is not able to achieve. Messages for moderation have too often remained rational discourses that explain but do not convince.

These resources are used in different contexts and with different objectives in the contemporary Arab world. Saudi Arabia and Qatar deployed what was called a "War of Singers" in the summer of 2017, using the most famous artists of the region and beyond to attack the other side.

The use of emotion and cultural references could also be a powerful tool against extremism. For example, the message that Daesh is not only un-Islamic but satanic, launched by several clerics after the murder of the Jordanian pilot Al-Kasasbeh, could be presented in a compelling way using a gif or a meme of a Muslim spitting three times to his left (a traditional way to drive away the Devil) at the mention of any symbol of the terrorist group.

The West should also be in a position to effectively exploit the symbolic potential of entertainment sagas and Myth creation. Star Wars, superheroes and many other Hollywood blockbusters use the basic notion of what Joseph Campbell, an American comparative mythologist outlined as the "monomyth" structure, from Homer to Han Solo, in which a hero answers a call, is assisted by a mentor figure, voyages to another world, survives various trials and emerges triumphant (*The Economist* 2015). It is not a coincidence if it sounds familiar with the narrative of Extremist groups as described above.

Governments are not enough

Governments should not be the main players in this game. Attempts to intervene in the sphere of culture should rely mostly on third parties that have the credibility, flexibility, creativity and drive to compete successfully with extremist groups in their own terms.

Official institutions may play a role, but by their very nature a certain distrust on the side of the public is inevitable.

Some examples of official initiatives to improve communication:

Al Hurra TV and Radio Sawa are quasi-official US media that aim at playing a role in the MENA region similar to the Voice of America in other geographical areas. Its clear association with the official position of the US government has reduced its impact.

United States, NATO and EU have all set up Strategic Communication Units that provide useful advice and elements in the fight against Terrorist Propaganda, Radicalization and Recruitment.

Official institutions in the Arab world have also deployed communication efforts to counter the arguments of extremist organizations. The most relevant is the Amman Message, issued by the King of Jordan with the participation of 200 Muslim Scholars from 50 countries, including the practical totality of the most prestigious experts form the different Islamic currents. The main points include the validity of all Sunni and Shi'a legal schools, the prohibition of Takfir (Ex-communication) and the conditions to issue Fatwas.

The United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Initiative has the advantage of uniting the West and Muslim countries in an effort to address the roots of polarization between societies and cultures today. Its programs promote intercultural dialogue and peacebuilding and work actively with media institutions to fight hate speech.

These initiatives must be complemented by the input from civil society itself, both in the West and in the Arab world. Farah Pandith (2017) has put forward the idea of "Open Power" to address the issue of extremism through peer-to-peer exploration, collaboration and ownership.

There is a vibrant community of young Arab Muslims that have successfully integrated in their lives the pride of being Muslims with the advantages of modernity. Their presence in the web is very significant, and can be seen in the increase of internet traffic in Arabic. They offer credible and creative alternatives to extremism. Shelina Janmohamed (2016) explores the beliefs and attitudes of a 'Generation M' of individuals who feel comfortable in their own skin as Muslims who shape modernity instead of fighting it.

> There is a vibrant community of young Arab Muslims that have successfully integrated in their lives the pride of being Muslims with the advantages of modernity.

The aesthetics, content and popularity of Islamic memes can also offer some insights as to the potential of this community (Ahmed 2016).

Traditional Media

One of the defining aspects of the Arab world today is how integrated it is in terms of information and media. This is a trend that began decades ago with the acquisition of pan-Arab dailies such as Ash Sharq al Awsat or Al Quds al Arabi by Gulf Monarchies. The launch of Qatari TV Channel Al Jazeera in 1996 and of al Arabiya in 2003 introduced a new era, in which most Arabs obtained their information from sources not controlled by their own government—but controlled by other governments in the region.

The role of Al Jazeera and other regional networks in the formation of Arab opinion was apparent during the Egyptian revolution and its aftermath. The ousting of President Morsi was presented in very different terms by the two main news channels in the region. While Al Jazeera and other media sympathetic with the Muslim Brotherhood portrayed it as a coup, al Arabiya showed it as a second revolution, representing the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. The choice of images, language, events to be reported, etc. were completely different and contributed to present reality according to the editorial line of the chain. (Alnajjar 2016)

Entertainment is also a powerful tool for opinion-making. Remarkably, the majority of the Arab population demands programs from their own culture and region, with less interest in Western shows (Everett et al. 2016). A case in point is the relevance of Ramadan mini-series, that are able to address sensitive social issues like the life of women under ISIS, unemployment or the justice system. According to Christa Salamandra (2016), some of

the Arab world's leading intellectuals have become TV drama creators, see themselves as vanguard of a modernizing, secularizing project, and believe in the transformative potential of mass culture.

Islam is also an important part of the media landscape of the Arab world, with thematic religious channels and very popular programs about religion in generalist networks; historically the most important of them is Sharia and Life, hosted by Yussuf Alqaradawi, with tens of millions of viewers around the Arab world. TV is popularly recognized as one of the most important sources of religious doctrine in several countries.

It may seem that the business model and the structure of TV channels in the region renders it off-limits for Western political messaging, and the success of separate TV channels like AlHurra has been relative. But there are options that may be explored with creativity: an example from a different part of the world may be the cameo by then- President Obama on "Pánfilo," a popular comedy show in Cuba, as a preparation for his visit to the island and the project of normalizing relations.

Internet and Social Media

Internet penetration is rising dramatically, and reaches almost 100% for the segment of those aged between 18 and 24 in the six Arab countries analyzed by a survey from Northwestern University in Qatar (Everett et al. 2017). It has become the most significant source of soft power, and its actors and rules are significantly different from other media.

A number of influential news outlets exist only in electronic form and can be read around the Arab world without control from national authorities. Rai alYaum, directed by well-known Palestinian political commentator Abdel Bari Atwan, is one of the most influential. His twitter account boasts over 2 million followers and he broadcasts weekly political commentaries on YouTube with tens of thousands of views. Following these sites is an important tool to gauge the opinions of the better informed segments of the population, who may not express their opinions on a regular basis through other media controlled by States.

Social media offer the possibility of communicating directly with millions of people; this is extremely relevant at a time when populations are becoming real and effective political actors. In the past it may have been enough to engage with political and economic elites, but the current state of the Arab world makes it necessary to connect with different populations, in particular with young people. The West needs to have its own voice in this conversation and not outsource its identity.

There have been some isolated successful experiences of Western communication in the region, such as the ones described by Tom Fletcher (2016), former UK Ambassador to Lebanon, but in general the West's communication record in social media is far from satisfactory. Additional efforts must be made, both from official sources and from civil society, including Muslims in the West.

At the same time, the interactive nature and the data generated by these media can ascertain what works and what does not. This is not something intuitive, as pointed out when analyzing public reactions to the different aspects of President Obama's speeches.

Examples of this activity have been under close public scrutiny in the last few months. The 'Leave' campaign in Britain's 2016 Brexit referendum put these tools to powerful use, with around 1 billion targeted digital advertisements launched and studies carried out to determine which ones had more impact. The Trump Presidential campaign played the same game at a larger scale: on an average day, it fed Facebook between 50,000 and 60,000 different versions of its advertisements in order to select the most effective ones, according to Brad Parscale, its digital director. (*The Economist* 2017-5)

Serious work needs to be carried out to make sure that the West's communication efforts serve the purpose for which they were designed and do not backfire due to lack of cultural awareness or manipulation by others.

Conclusion

*And to the colleagues who march
towards the sound of gunfire,
in order to try to stop it.*

—Tom Fletcher,
Dedication of his book "Naked Diplomacy"

In her essay "The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam" (1985), Barbara Tuchman describes how—with surprising frequency—**governments pursue policies contrary to their own best interests**. One of the main factors that explains this attitude is the self-deception that consists in assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs.

More than 15 years after 9/11 the time may have come to recognize that the policies pursued in the name of fighting terrorism have not accomplished their goal and the side effects in terms of relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds have brought more harm than good.

Tunnel vision on security and extremism, amalgamated with the belief that Western democracy was the only imaginable way of government, have blinded the West to the internal dynamics and political evolution of the region. They have also provoked a backlash in a population suffering from a long lasting deep social and political crisis.

The result is that a significant proportion of the population of the Arab world now believe that the West is hostile towards them and their religion, and Islamophobia in the West can reciprocate and reinforce the feelings of fear and distrust. Extremists from both sides exploit these mindsets in a way that the "**Clash of Civilizations" is starting to resemble a self-fulfilling prophecy**.

It is fitting that the reflection on the March of Folly comes from a historian of the First World War, a conflict she considers unnecessary, meaningless and stupid. Its outbreak has been qualified as a tragedy, not a crime,

because so many characters had a role in its inception, and because *how* it happened is easier to describe than *why* it happened. The bottom line is that each of the participants followed their pre-defined role, despite the fact that it was entirely predictable that by acting that way "some damn foolish thing in the Balkans" would lead to open conflict.

In his book "The Sleepwalkers" Christopher Clark describes in detail how the options for peace were ignored with petty indifference and the road to war was inexorably pursued. According to the author, "the protagonists of 1914 were sleepwalkers, watchful but unseeing, haunted by dreams, yet blind to the reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world." This lack of vision, of imagination and of leadership caused more than 15 million victims.

To overcome the current situation in the relations between the West and the Arab world **a new mindset** is needed. It is necessary to take a step back and try to understand the social and political evolution of the region in its own terms, without imposing Western ideological categories and refraining from designing a road map based on those good intentions that are said to pave the way to hell.

It is also essential to **improve communication**. Extremists have come to dominate public dialogue and use it to promote their interests. Countering this discourse is urgent not only because of its impact on recruiting and terrorism, but also because this quasi-monopoly can solidify as the only publicly discussed model of relations between Islam and the West and some of its ideas can spread to wider swathes of Arab populations. Conflicts, unemployment, identity issues and the dismal political and social situation in many of the countries form a rich breeding ground for this propaganda.

Of course, communication by itself will not solve the extremely serious underlying problems of the Arab world. New and effective policies are needed, and most of them can only be decided, planned and implemented by Arab actors. The center of gravity will be governance and the design of a **new Social Contract**, including political participation, provision of basic services, job creation and the fight against corruption. Moreover, steps

must be taken to solve existing crises, in particular Palestine and Syria. No credible improvement of the situation of the region can happen without progress in these areas.

The West can accompany these processes and contribute to improving relations. The basic and obvious, but often neglected, principle is "First, Do No Harm," that includes maintaining a conflict-sensitive approach in our relations with the different actors of the region. The West should also, directly and through multilateral institutions, play an active role to address conflicts and contribute to improve governance and the economic situation.

But partial solutions will not disentangle the exceptionally complex situation. **A New Deal is needed** inside the Arab world and between the Arabs and the rest of the world.

Looking at the heartbreaking situation of the region, the increasing misperceptions between the West and Arab populations and the effectiveness of the communication strategies of extremists, **the situation may seem all but hopeless.** But humans have proved once and again our prodigious capacity to abandon negative policies, overcome mistrust and open new pages of cooperation.

It happens, in significantly more tragic circumstances, after civil wars. Rwanda has successfully set up a Reconciliation Barometer that measures the recovery of the social tissue after the horrific genocide that caused more than 1 million victims in 100 days. Among other examples, Guatemala has also carried out a similar exercise and currently Colombia is doing the same thing.

In the Middle East, President Anwar Sadat took the courageous first step of visiting Israel in 1977. It is worth remembering that distrust was so deep that sharpshooters were stationed on the rooftops of the terminal buildings when the Egyptian Presidential plane arrived, in case terrorists suddenly emerged rather than Sadat himself (Wright 2014). This visit paved the way to the Camp David Peace process of 1978, in which President Carter used his determination as negotiator and mediator, as well as his political capital, to force a bilateral deal.

But maybe the best example is the creation of the European Union. We tend to forget that until 1945 the notion of Franco-German enmity was one of the defining features of European history, and that every generation prior to that had seen an armed conflict with France and Germany fighting each other. The European Union was created to prevent war and make it not only impossible, but unthinkable.

The circumstances are fortunately different, but the philosophy and attitudes behind these **decisions that changed the course of history in order to avoid its seemingly pre-determined flow** can be of use to approach current relations between the West and the Arab world.

The stakes could hardly be higher. If ongoing dynamics continue their course, misperceptions, misrepresentations and manipulations may end up defining the world vision of a significant proportion of the 400 million Arabs and, indirectly, of the 1.8 billion Muslims in the world. Extremists can transform frustration from different sources into resentment against the West and impose a global geopolitical scenario of mistrust and hostility of unpredictable but potentially disastrous consequences.

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