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**Today's Middle Eastern Policy and the Role of Religion**

**“Governance of Religious Institutions in the Middle East: The  
role of Innovation”**

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It gives me a great pleasure to be here in Japan to present to you a topic I consider of great significance and importance. Being with you today to exchange views and opinions on this crucial topic is an opportunity I most certainly value and appreciate.

I have visited Japan several times in the past in my role as a member of the Egyptian Japanese Friendship Association. This however, is the first time I give a talk in Tokyo International University, and I sincerely hope it will not be the last.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) for their wonderful effort in making this exchange and collaboration in this academic project possible, and most notably I would like to thank Professor Shiojiri Kazuko for her role in leading this project.

The title of this academic project is “New Challenges and Roles of Religion in the Changing Islamic Society”. The significance of this project could not be more emphasized and its time could not be more urgent. As we witness the Global Events and challenges transpire, not only in the Middle East but also in the whole world, we realize the importance of this academic study. At the core of all these challenges, whether the conflict in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Libya, Palestine, Nigeria, or even the current immigration problem in Europe, is a religious dimension that we cannot ignore and which needs to be addressed.

Understanding Islam as a religion and the role Islamic Institutions play will provide us with a better understanding of the unique challenges that plague the Middle East, and the resulting geopolitical and social repercussions that are felt globally.

The title of my presentation is “Governance of Religious Institutions in the Middle East and the Role of Innovation”. All three monotheistic religions originated in the Middle East, and each religion contains many sects, while each single one of these sects has its separate religious institutions.

I would like to note that my presentation will focus primarily on Islam and specifically the Sunni sect. Much of the analysis and implications that I will discuss will equally apply to the other religions and sects

I will start with the word Islam, and the origin of the word. Islam comes from the word ‘Salam’. Salam as many of you know means peace, and “Salam Alaikum” which means “Peace be upon You” is the common greeting Muslims use to greet one another. The word Salam is one of the names of God in Islam, along with the “compassionate, the “Merciful”, the “Just”, etc.... and this is because Islam preaches peace between nations and people no matter what their religion, their beliefs or their origin or race.

According to verse 13<sup>1</sup> in the Quran it says in Arabic “ يا أيها الناس إنا خلقناكم من ذكر وأنثى وجعلناكم شعوباً وقبائل لتعارفوا إن أكرمكم عند الله أتقاكم إن الله على خبير” which means ‘We have created you male and female and formed you into tribes and nations so that you may know each other’. That is the bases for societies and nations to know each other is through exchanges and interactions, whether commercial or cultural.

Thus, one of the teachings of Islam is for people to know each other, to understand each other, and to exchange views and opinions in a peaceful and respectful manner with the aim of serving the common interests of all people.

Me being here and speaking before you, exchanging ideas, and sharing knowledge is an act preached and encouraged in Islam, as this understanding leads to the ultimate goal of tolerance, gaining knowledge, and Peace - another one of God’s names in Islam.

Unfortunately, the tragic events which unfold today, ranging from wars, terrorism, conflict, and the resulting adverse effects on societies are in stark contradiction to the essence of Islam and to what the Quran teaches.

The other important issue that I would like to clarify is that Islam is not the religion of Prophet Mohamed, but is the religion of God that was conveyed by his messenger Mohamed, and is the last of the Monotheistic religions. This religion was sent to all peoples and to all believers, and not only to Muslims. This is evident in the readings of Quran; Believers are people that believe, whether they are Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Shintoism...or any other beliefs. Believers are not only Muslims; as it has been clearly indicated in the Quran. This book is addressing all believers and believers are the ones

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<sup>1</sup> **Sourate Al-Hojorate verse 13:** O People! We have created you from male and female, and made you of nations and tribes, so that you socialize and know one another. Indeed the most honorable of you before God is the most pious, for indeed God is expertly All-Knowing

that submit to a higher power or authority. Thus Islam is a religion of Submission to a higher authority – to the creator (God).

Religion is much more than just submitting to a set of beliefs, values, compassion, love and dedication; the main role of religion extends to nurturing a culture of inclusion for the betterment and welfare of humanity.

No matter what type of religion we are talking about, all religions agree on the fact that the essence of religion is the submission to the creator who could be acknowledged differently (Allah, God, Dios, Jehovah, etc...).

The word Islam in its literal interpretation means to submit... Submission in effect acknowledges that we have limitations. Our physical bodies have limited abilities; we fall asleep, we exist one day and when we die we submit a to non-existence state.

The verse in Quran no 133<sup>2</sup> in Sourate Al-Baqarah says in Arabic, "أم كنتم شهداء إذ حضر يعقوب الموت إذ قال لبنيه ما تعبدون من بعدي قالوا نعبد إلهك وإله أبائك إبراهيم وإسماعيل وإسحق إلهاً واحداً ونحن له مسلمون" meaning that "where you witnesses when death came to Jacob when he asked his sons who will you worship after my death? They replied: We will worship your God and the God of your father and of Abraham, Ismail, and Is'haq to whom we are all Muslims..."

So while most people think that Islam means Mohamed, the verse is a clear statement that Islam came into existence long before Prophet Mohamed did. Islam is to submit to God through all the Messengers He has sent to humanity. God states in the Quran that 25 Messengers were sent to humanity. The Quran also tells us that there are other Messengers that God did not inform us about in the Quran, and whom we cannot deny.

Some Messengers were ordained with Holy Books to 'remind' people (and/or had miracles) ...the Quran clearly states that those different books were "reminders". Thus from the Muslim perspective, the Torah was a reminder, and the Gospel was a reminder. Those books were to guide people back to a proper and benevolent form of existence. These books were delivered to the Prophets through revelations.

All religions contain the same message, from the same God. Therefore Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are in essence one message sent through three messengers as teachings and reminders, and other messages where sent through other messengers that were not mentioned in the Quran. These messengers were revealed in different languages according to the language of the respective recipients.

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<sup>2</sup> **Sourate Al-Baqarah verse 133:** Or were you witnesses when death approached Jacob, and he said to his sons, What will you worship after Me? They said, "We will worship your God, and the God of your fathers, Ibrahim, Ishmael, and Isaac, One God; and to Him we submit"

The main premise of Islam is to create one world with different people of different beliefs and ethnicities to get along, to cooperate and to get to know each other, and to provide other guidelines for a better existence. These principles are clearly stated in Quranic verses.

Though Prophets carried their mission faithfully, overtime their respective followers failed to uphold and maintain their Prophets' teachings, and have even infused ideas and beliefs that contradicted God's teachings. This provides a partial explanation for the state of affairs that exist in the world from economic inequality, wars, poverty, social injustice, environmental damage, etc...

It must be noted that all religions share the same basic values and teachings. These enforce the principal that all these religions originated from the same source, though they vary in the way they were communicated. All believers thus, identify with the values and attributes of God's 99 names in Islam.

The question then is what are the main reasons that have led the followers of Islam to derail from its teaching?

In Management, the field I studied, we usually attribute the results and outcomes of people and organizations' performances to their Governance, and the way these organizations are being managed and led.

For a better understanding of why the message of Islam has derailed from its mission and from its original intentions, one has to conduct a special examination of the religious institutions, their leaders, capabilities and knowledge, and an assessment of how these institutions evolved over history, and how they were influenced and managed.

Currently, in the Middle East, and especially in the aftermath of the events that occurred in the last five years, there have been increasing calls for innovation in the Governance of religious institutions. These have elicited varying reactions from those who are for or against these initiatives. There is no doubt that a critical analysis of these institutions and their effectiveness in achieving their missions must be continuously monitored and examined. The capabilities of these institutions, their competencies, suitability to modern world and global affairs, and how they are governed, all require a close examination. In this presentation I will shed some light on these issues.

There are different Religions in the Middle East (Islam, Christianity, Judaism....), and there are different sects within each religion (Islam: Sunni, Shiite, Yazidi, Druze, Christianity: Catholics, Protestants... and others). Governance of each one of those religions and sects varies depending on its evolution. A study of history would shed more light on how religious governance has evolved over the centuries, both as a result

of internal, as well as external events. I will however, focus my discussion on the Governance of Islamic Institutions, and specifically Sunni religious institutions.

However, one should note that there are common denominators in the Governance of all religious institutions across all religions. There are shared challenges relating to the governance of these institutions, albeit, these challenges vary depending on the period and the corresponding historic events that prevailed at the time.

A good example of this is the principal of separation of religion and politics, and the secularization of religion. Similarly, the struggle between different sects of one religion, like the struggle between Catholics and Protestants, and the struggle between Shiites and Sunnis.

A full understanding of the Governance mechanism of each one of these religions and sects is beyond the scope of my discussion, and will require a much deeper analysis, one that is nonetheless needed and encouraged for a full grasp of the situation, its evolution, and reform.

Nonetheless, reform in Governance of any organization is a necessity. Change is the only constant in life. Innovation in this reform process can take different forms especially in this age of Globalization, and the resulting advancements in technology, communication, transportation, movement of people, and the availability of knowledge.

As the world faces more common threats that are not just limited to terrorism and security, but extend to other areas like economic, social, cultural, technological, environmental, and others. Societies must look for ways to manage these challenges.

Governance of Religious institutions is at the heart of this issue, especially with the significant role Religion plays in the Middle East now and will continue to play in the future.

There is a widespread tendency among Muslims to reject secularization and religious reformation as something that concerns non-Muslim countries; rejection of secular beliefs stems from the fact that the combination of the Quran and the Hadith positions Islam as a provider of clear guidelines to societies, and its institutions, on how to function and evolve efficiently.

It is important here to give a brief explanation of Hadith. What is Hadith: Historically, interpretation and teaching of the message of the Quran came from the Prophet directly as the Quran was revealed to him. Subsequently, the other source of religious teachings came from the Hadith, which are the collections of the reports purporting to quote what the Islamic Prophet said verbatim on any matter. The term comes from the Arabic meaning "report", "account" or "narrative".

Hadith is second only to the Quran in developing Islamic jurisprudence, and as such it is regarded as an important tool for understanding the Quran and its commentaries (tafsir). Many important elements of traditional Islam such as the five prayers are mentioned in Hadith but not in the Quran.

The Hadith literature is based on spoken reports that were in circulation in society after the death of Prophet Mohamed. Unlike the Quran, which was compiled under the official direction of the early Islamic State in Medinah, the Hadith reports were not compiled by a central authority. But rather, were evaluated and gathered into large collections during the 8th and 9th centuries; generations after the death of the Prophet.

Each Hadith is based on two parts, a chain of narrators reporting the hadith and the text itself). Individual Hadith is classified by Muslim clerics as *sahih* ("صحيح" which means "authentic"), *hasan* ("حسن" which means "good") or *da'if* ("ضعيف" which means "weak").

However, there is no overall consensus; different groups and different scholars may classify a Hadith differently. This in itself leads to different interpretations. Different branches of Islam (Sunni, Shiite, Druzi, Yazidi) refer to different collections of Hadith, while other followers reject outright the authority of the Hadith collections, opting instead to rely only on the Quran.

There have been calls for a serious evaluation of the Hadith, and to unify its various versions. Being a man-written account of historical quotations and precedents, Hadith is hence susceptible to mistakes, additions, distortion, and misquotations. These calls for evaluation however, have not resulted in any serious actions.

Many Muslims, scholars, have over time relied more on Hadith for explanations and direction, and without reverting to the original source, the Quran. The result has been a stark division of interpretations and conflicting edicts. Thus, one can immediately see the effect on society and its institutions as a result of these actions.

A simple example is what many quote from the Hadith regarding the duty of Jihad (translates into struggle). Many have understood this in a military sense; the obligation to use force when the circumstances necessitate, and as a reward, anyone who dies performing the Jihad will be rewarded Houries (virgins in Heaven). There is absolutely no reference of this in the Quran, and the meaning of Jihad as mentioned in the Quran means that one must struggle to tame and control ones urges. A big difference in interpretation! There are many other examples of such contradiction that have affected societies, and mostly the less learned ones.

A serious and immediate effort is thus needed to make the Hadith totally authentic by removing those versus that do not conform to the Quran.

Unlike what is practiced in the two other monotheistic religions, Islam stresses on the direct relationship between God and man, i.e. a person does not require an intermediary to connect to God, and therefore, Islam does not have clergy or religious authorities. The Quran provides a detailed guidance on every aspect of life, from marriage, to commerce, good governance, family relations, and even the conduct of war, among so many others. However, what is practiced in Muslim countries is the opposite, as numerous religious figures and groups attempt at regulating society through their own interpretations of Islam, and Hadith.

The role of religious scholars and institutions started as an effort to teach those in a society that cannot read and who need interpretations of complex issues. The role of religious scholars thus began to grow and to expand to the provision of sermons and community leadership, and to issuing fatwas.

So what is a fatwa? And what does fatwa mean?

The word "fatwa" has become well known around the world. People often hear that a Muslim cleric or scholar has issued a "fatwa". In some cases, this word has been associated with very negative things, such as a death sentence on a person or a severe punishment. The word "fatwa" has been made popular by media outlets looking for more sensational stories in order to capture the largest possible audience. In their pursuit of ratings, the media need to find an enemy that they can portray as evil and vicious, because such stories trigger fear in viewers and make them interested in following such stories in the media. Media outlets love to find words such as "fatwa" that they can use in their reports. This gives the report a more serious tone, and makes it appear as if the reporter is an expert on the subject, because no one knows what this word means and no one has heard it before. However, the media turns such a word into a keyword that catches the eye and the ear of the average person, all in the pursuit of more viewers and higher ratings.

So what does the word "fatwa" actually mean? It is an Arabic word, and it literally means "opinion". Related words in Arabic are "afta", which means to give an opinion, and "yastafti", which means to ask for an opinion. In fact, in Arabic countries, an opinion poll is called an "istifta", which is simply a different form of the same word. As you can see, there is nothing sinister or scary about the word itself. So why do media outlets not just say "opinion" so that everyone can understand what they are talking about? Would you care about the opinion of some cleric in Iran or Afghanistan? Probably not. But the use of a foreign sounding word such as "fatwa", along with all of the negative and evil

connotations that it carries, will catch the attention of a good number of people. This translates into more viewers, higher ratings and more advertising dollars.

This was the linguistic meaning of the word "fatwa". In a religious context, the word "fatwa" carries more meaning. This is because when a Muslim has a question that they need to be answered from an Islamic point of view, they ask an Islamic scholar this question, and the answer is known as a "fatwa". This "fatwa" carries more weight than just the random opinion of any person on the street. Muslim scholars are expected to give their "fatwa" based on religious evidence, not based on their personal opinions. Therefore, their "fatwa" is sometimes regarded as a religious ruling. Here is an example of a fatwa: As you know, Muslims are expected to pray five times every day at specific times during the day. A person who is going to be on a 12 hour flight may not be able to perform their prayers on time. So they might ask a Muslim scholar for a "fatwa" on what is the appropriate thing to do, or they might look up the answer in a book or on the internet. The scholar might advise them to perform the prayer to the best of their ability on the plane, or to delay their prayer until they land, for example. And they would support their opinion with evidence.

It is interesting to note that in Islam, there are four sources from which Muslim scholars extract religious law or rulings, and upon which they base their "fatwa". The first is the Quran, which is the Holy Book of Islam, and which is the direct and literal word of God, revealed to Prophet Mohammad. The second source is the Sunnah, which incorporates anything that the Prophet Mohammad said, did or approved of. The third source is the consensus of the scholars, meaning that if the scholars of a previous generation have all agreed on a certain issue, then this consensus is regarded as representing Islam. Finally, if no evidence is found regarding a specific question from the three first sources, then an Islamic scholar performs what is known as "ijtihad". This means that they use their own logic and reasoning to come up with the best answer according to the best of their ability.

It is also interesting to note that different scholars frequently have different opinions regarding any given question. This is why there is usually more than one "fatwa" regarding any one question. In fact, there are a number of methodologies for how to understand evidence gathered from the previously mentioned sources of Islamic law. Scholars who follow different methodologies will frequently arrive at different answers to the same question. It is well known that in Islam there are four "schools of thought: Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali", and each of them differ with respect to certain aspects. However, it is important to know that these differences are usually about minor issues. For example, in terms of beliefs, the vast majority of Muslims agree on most aspects of belief, most importantly the concept of monotheism, and belief in the angels, Prophets, Holy Books and the Day of Judgment.

Muslims believe that any given action that they perform in their lives falls into one of five categories:



1. Obligatory
2. Commendable
3. Permissible
4. Despised
5. Not Permitted

All actions fall into the "permissible" category, unless there is evidence from one of the four sources previously mentioned (Quran, Sunnah, Consensus, Ijtihad) that proves otherwise. Here are some examples:

- The five daily prayers are obligatory upon Muslims. Those who do not perform them are committing a sin, and they will be accountable for that on the day of judgment.
- Performing additional voluntary prayers is commendable. Those who perform them will be rewarded, but those who do not are not committing a sin.
- Driving a car is permissible, meaning that the action of driving is not good or bad in itself. There is no sin or reward attached to it. Most things fall under this category.
- Divorce is a despised action. Although there is no sin associated with it, it must only be considered as a last resort when all other means of solving the problems between the spouses have been exhausted.
- Drinking alcoholic drinks is not permitted. Those who do so are committing a sin, and will be held accountable for it on the Day of Judgment.

When someone asks a Muslim scholar about performing a specific action, the reply will be a "fatwa" explaining which of these five categories this action would fall under. So if you ask a Muslim scholar to give a fatwa about adultery, they would tell you that it is "Not Permitted". If you ask about fasting in Ramadan, they would answer that it is "Obligatory". Muslims are usually encouraged to ask for reasoning and evidence behind any fatwa, and should avoid blindly following the opinions of Muslim scholars without understanding the reasons behind them. This is because Muslims should always feel that they are practicing Islam to gain the pleasure of God, and not to gain the pleasure of acceptance of any human being.

As I mentioned, Islam is a religion that recognizes no authoritative source of doctrinal interpretation like the Pope. The lack of an authoritative source of doctrinal interpretation means that Islam lacks a hierarchical structure like the Catholic Church and (theoretically) anyone can interpret the Quran and other religious scriptures anyway they like.

This makes Islam more egalitarian and democratic in some ways but also makes it easier for Muslim extremists to gain influence and promulgate their views. It is also necessary to add that there is no accepted translation of the Arabic text of the Quran in any

language. Arabic is a rich and complex language, and often there tend to be dilutions of meanings or of ideas when translated.

In addition, and throughout history there has been the inevitable control of political systems over the recognized man-made religious institutions, which in turn influence societies. This control was and remains viewed as crucial in gaining legitimacy to rule. Consequently, these religious authorities look for the political establishments to obtain their legitimacy.

This relationship is evident in Egypt, for example. Al Azhar was first established as a mosque and seminary in the year 972 and has grown into a massive religious, bureaucratic and education institution that today employs tens of thousands of people across Egypt. Alazhar , is recognized in Article Seven of the Constitution of the Arab Republic of Egypt (2014) as the greatest and the most influential in the Sunni Islamic world) and is the main reference for religious science and Islamic affairs. The Post of Head of Al Azhar is however, a political appointment!

Under Al Azhar there are several bodies, including: 1. Educational institutions (consisting of over 8000 secondary, primary and high schools in which over 2 million students are enrolled), 2. Al Azhar university that employs over 11000 professors and 13000 staff members in 67 faculties across 16 of Egypt's governorates, 3.The Islamic Research Complex (issues fatwas and gives opinion on legislation upon request of the grand sheikh to ensure that the legislations do not contradict Islam), 4.The supreme council of Al Azhar (formulated Al Azhar public and Educational policies), manages Al- Azhar's private endowment, 5.Body of senior scholars (interprets Islamic law and elects the grand sheikh and state mufti, whose nominations are confirmed by the president.

Another significant religious institution is Dar Al Ifta led by the state Mufti. It issues non-legally binding Fatwas on behalf of the State and confirms death sentences for the Ministry of Justice.

And finally, we have the Ministry of Religious Endowments under the Prime Minister which manages the endowments of Egypt's mosques and certifies Imams, but it does not issue any Fatwas.

There are also other Sunni sub-sects, like Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, which is exerting its influence in a bid for local and regional authoritative control. The same exists in other Muslim countries, while Shia Islam has its religious authority in Najaf, and to a lesser extent in Qom.

This partnership between political systems and the man-made religious authorities have

resulted, among many other things, in social disturbances, and poor institutional performance and governance.

A critical examination of these institutions is necessary. In Management, a technique is used to evaluate the performance of institutions is called a SWOT analysis; one that entails identifying the main strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities and threats.

So, do we need innovation in the governance of Islamic religious institutions?

The answer is an emphatic yes. I must here discuss what some Western scholars have suggested in terms of solutions. Many in the West advocate the removal of verses from the Quran, and even re-writing some parts of it to suit what they claim are modern views. These claims are not possible as the Quran is a balanced book, and the problem lies somewhere else. What I and many scholars propose is serious research and understanding of what the Quran and Hadith teach as applies to our modern day lives. To look at these teachings with a modern approach, the Quran is a Holy Book that applies to all ages, and Allah (God) asked us to be both non-extremists in our views and to interpret the Quran in a manner which simplifies and improves our lives.

A new approach to religious institutions' management should include at the core an overdue involvement of the intelligentsia and religious scholars and a new understanding of the Quran, as it applies to our present age. The Muslim world must unite to reform the existing religious authorities and to establish a centralized accepted independent authority with the aim of unifying the interpretations and teachings of the Quran. These teachings should lead to peace, justice, and welfare of human beings.

This authority should be comprised of scholars in different fields that combine in depth knowledge of religion with knowledge of natural and social sciences.

While Al Azhar University offers education in other disciplines; however, and as prevalent in other public universities in the Middle East, the quality of education is below the desired level.

Currently, the majority of Imams and head of religious institutions graduate with degrees in Daawa (religious studies...) and without any specialization in any other field. We need to include doctors, engineers, scientist, artists, linguists, philosophers ...that complement their studies with an understanding of Quran and its Teachings. This way they will be able to evaluate facts from different perspectives, and to connect the day to day affairs of our time with the teaching of religion. This will also help in delving into the depths of the Quran in a continuous effort to bring our understanding to the modern age.

At present, many of the students that enter Al Azhar especially those who specialize in religious studies are the ones with the below average grades and those who failed to gain acceptance to other technical universities. In my opinion, the study of religion requires a certain level of maturity and intellect, and a strong background in other fields of study.

In the United States, the study of law or Medicine is achieved after a strong base is gained in other disciplines through a bachelor degree. I firmly believe the study of religion and its applications to the modern world should be conducted after a strong base is acquired in other academic disciplines.

Imams, Preachers, or any religious personalities should be a role model in many aspects. A role model in the way they conduct themselves, in their knowledge of worldly affairs, and in their ability to communicate effectively and in presenting themselves and their views.

Many Middle Eastern countries suffer from poor education, health, economic and cultural development. Religious institutions are no exception to this poor state of affairs, and this is naturally reflected on its institutions and on society as a whole.

The process of capacity building of religious institutes requires an honest and non-biased assessment of the capabilities of these organizations, their staff, and their proper knowledge of Islam and other relevant affairs.

An assessment should be followed by a program of training that is based on a needs assessment to all Imams, Sheikhs and administrators/leaders of religious institutes.

Technology and latest education modes of experiential learning, web based education, and computer programs should be utilized as support.

This is the first step in capacity building/development. At this stage, and after a SWOT analysis identifies all parameters, focus should be on understanding the obstacles that inhibit Islamic institutions from undergoing reform and realizing their developmental goals while enhancing the abilities that will allow them to achieve measurable and sustainable results. It would then be possible to work on strengthening the necessary skills, competencies, and abilities of all involved in the management of religious institutions.

Capacity building is a long term **continuous process** of development that involves all stakeholders; including not only religious leaders, but also government and local authorities, NGO's, local councils, professionals, and prominent community members, and media (among others). The goal of capacity building is to tackle problems related to policy and methods of development, while considering the potential, limits and needs of the religious institutions concerned. Here, there must be capacity building efforts on an individual level, institutional level, and the societal level;

**Individual Level** – Capacity building on an individual level requires the development of conditions that allow the Imams or preachers to build and enhance their knowledge and skills. It also calls for the establishment of conditions that allow these Imams to engage in the process of learning and adapting to change.

**Institutional Level** – Capacity building on an institutional level should involve aiding the existing religious institutions, through modernizing these institutions, and supporting them in forming sound policies, organizational structures, and effective methods of governance.

**Societal Level** – Capacity building at the societal level should support the establishment of more interactive religious administrations that learn equally from their actions and from feedback they receive from the population at large.

Capacity building must be used to develop religious administrators to be responsive and accountable.

In addition, an evaluation and monitoring mechanism must be set in place to ensure a continual long term adhering to the mission. This may include evaluation and monitoring on the institution's clarity of mission, leadership, learning (self-assessment), emphasis on on-the-job development and monitoring processes.

This rigorous albeit urgently needed process will serve to promote the main social values of religion, and will propel Islamic societies to a new age of stability and prosperity, and will eventually eradicate extremism and all social malaise inflicting these societies.

These social values are clearly mentioned in the Quran and Hadith and include:

- A just judicial system
- A market economy and a fair distribution of wealth
- A democratic political system
- Equal treatment of minorities

A recent study on Islam conducted by a U.S. based researcher showed that most Western countries practice these Islamic values, both on a micro and macro level, more than any Islamic country. As a result, the study shows that the 'Happiness Index' is the highest in those countries that score the highest in: **experiencing well-being, life expectancy, and the ecological footprint.** These countries include Costa Rica and Denmark at the top. These traits of happy countries/societies are precisely the reason why Islam and other religions came to all of humanity.

So the innovation here is in a breakthrough in a long overdue process of systemic evaluation of the current structure, and the inclusion of specialists in other disciplines, analyzing and studying the Quran and Hadith objectively and with a view on how it applies to us in this modern age, training those religious personnel who interact with the public and educate people, reforming the religious institutions entrusted with the interpretation and theology, and to tackle all future challenges relating both to institutional management and to theological topics.

As I mentioned earlier, I would also recommend the establishment of a supreme religious authority comprised of elected religious leaders of all sects, and augmented with advisory panels comprised of leaders in other disciplines, with the main aim of unifying all teachings across all sects, and to address areas of conflicting interpretations and current changes facing the globe.

In Muslim countries, the Quran is the main source of constitutional and other laws. A reformation of how the Middle East understands and applies the teachings of Islam will reflect positively on all aspects of their societies and will promote moral values, in addition to advancements in arts, literature, education, innovation, sciences, and peace.

The long term gradual decline in Religious understanding and tolerance has led to a steady social, economic, and political decline.

There is a deep yearning among the Muslim masses to revert back to the golden age of Islam when Muslim scholars of all disciplines left an indelible mark on the world stage.

From satellite-enabled GPS, to hi-tech medical procedures, much of today's modern science has been developed and understood through the work of scientists and thinkers across the ages and from around the world.

While the names of Newton, Galileo and Copernicus are well known, what is less well known is that these men were building on the work of great scientists who came before them.

Between the 9th and 14th centuries, Europe was living in the dark ages, but in the Islamic world there was a progressive scientific revolution taking place, as Arab rulers built illustrious centers of learning, where great scholars pioneered revolutionary new ideas; men like Ibn Sina, al-Kindi, or al-Razi, and many others, whose contributions to science are immense.

This Golden Age of Islamic Science presented ground breaking achievements: it was the era that "mathematized" all the sciences, created chemistry from alchemy and conceived the modern scientific method, amongst so much else.

This was possible when there was an accurate and truthful application of Islamic teachings. The positive results were felt in all aspects of life, from just and benevolent governance, freedom to express and innovate, to all other forms of social development and advancement.

Throughout history, every system, political, religious, or otherwise, undergoes peaks and troughs. The steady long term decline that prevails in the Middle East region can be minimized and ultimately reversed with a strong will in applying both innovation and far reaching reforms.

Religions exist to regulate and to improve the quality of our lives, both as communities and individuals. We cannot blame religion if the opposite conditions exist. But rather, our interpretations and applications of religious teachings, and the governance of Quranicthe religious institutions that are-to blame.

Thank you for patience and listening, and now I welcome your comments and inquiries.