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Issues Facing Interfaith Dialogue: Separating Fact from Fiction

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Let me first Thank Prof. Shiojiri for inviting me to participate in this symposium on Interfaith Dialogue, I want to thank also all those who have contributed to organizing this symposium. A special word of thanks is due to Mr. Kenji Nakamura.

As a Muslim scholar I want to address the common stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam, and in the process I would like to separate fact from fiction hoping that this may help enriching the understanding of religious diversity in the global era.

I intend to shed light first on Tokyo governor Mr. Inose's remark on Islam and I am sure you know about it. I will also talk about the Boston bombing accident and the Algerian terrorism, trying to explain the background of the Tokyo governor's remark on Islam and the reason of the accidents in Boston and Algeria. In the second part of my presentation, I shall try to explain how interfaith dialogue

can help not only Muslims but all the people around the world.

1- Mr. Inose's remarks on Islam

In an interview appearing in The New York Times on April 26, Tokyo Governor Naoki Inose stated that for Islamic countries, such as Turkey, “the only thing they share in common is Allah and they are fighting with each other, and they have classes.” After the article came out, he tried to retract the content by claiming that Japanese is a unique language impossible to translate but The New York Times answered that the two reporters who conducted the interview were fluent in Japanese, and that besides, the governor had his own translator along with him. Later Mr. Inose apologized!(1) Mr. Inose, a former journalist, historian and social critic, was considered more moderate than ex- governor Mr. Shintaro Ishihara. In my opinion, Mr. Inose is innocent! What he stated in his interview to the New York Times was what he had learned a long time ago about Islam. Last month I asked one of my university students: “what do you know about Islam?” He answered: “I know that Muslims will have a special knife or a kind of sword, that is all!” This will take me to post-war Japan, when the Japanese officials intended to build Kaaba in Singapore to help Muslims making Hajj there instead of having trouble travelling to Makkah, and if Japanese scholars did not explain the matter to the Japanese authority those days we might have seen today a Japanese-built Kaaba in Singapore !

There are many other examples which showed that Japanese scholars played a good role in explaining Islam inside and outside Japan, Japanese officials and politicians do care about Islam and Muslim countries if there are political or economic necessities such as oil crises. We can see many examples in the history of Japan and Middle East relationship, ex-foreign minister Mr. Kono calling for Japan Muslim Dialogue is a clear example. (2) Unfortunately, the Japan Muslim Dialogue which continued for a decade was over in December last year (2012).(3) I appreciate the role which Japanese scholars are playing nowadays to explain about Islam and Islamic culture inside and outside Japan.

2- Boston Marathon bombing accident

Now I talk about the United States, where an Egyptian American who grew up in San Diego and attended junior high school wrote about his experience while learning Islamic History: “The teacher showed a slide and it showed a camel. The slide read "Muslims believe that God has 99 Names, and only the camel knows the 100th."(4) The Egyptian American wrote: “The students turned to me, with a confused look in their eyes; confusion that I too felt, having never heard this before I told them that we have no belief regarding a camel like that. The class moved on. I didn't like my religion and people being portrayed as something strange and irrational. This wasn't a presentation the teacher prepared; rather it was prepared for him. This is how Islam was taught.”

The April 15 Boston Marathon bombing killed three people and injured more than 260 others near the marathon's finish line.

Taimurlang Tsarnaev, 26, and his younger brother, Jouhar Tsarnaev, 19, ethnic Chechens from Russia came to the United States about a decade ago. After the bombing, Taimurlang was shot and Jouhar was caught by the police. The news said that the government would need to prove Tsarnaev was linked to Al Qaeda or an Al Qaeda-linked group. Investigators have said it appears that Tsarnnaevs acted on their own and weren't connected to any Islamic terrorist group.

Obama said: we know who did it, we want to know why? Mother of Tsarnaev said: her sons are innocent, and she regrets moving the family to the US. She said that sending her sons to a very far away village on a mountain was better for them than sending them to the US. Someone may ask a question: why did Taimurlang and his younger brother choose Boston instead of Moscow? They are ethnic Chechens; they know that Vladimir Putin has wiped Grozny and its suburbs, and before that Stalin transferred all Chechens outside their country. Does the Boston Marathon mean something special for them? The answer is not easy. Gouhar came to the US when he was 9 years old and his elder brother came when he was 16 years old. People around them could not understand them, and they separated them from society. Police were watching them all the time because they are MUSLIMS and they might have been linked to Al Qaeda or an Al Qaeda-linked group.

They lived in the US for 10 years where there have been 43 mass shootings in 25 states over the past four years (5)

I do not want to go through the profile of the violence and the crime rates in the United States, but I want to say that the Tsarnaev brothers were themselves victims of the US society. Here I remember the mass shootings like the one that tore through Sandy Hook Elementary School last December. The Department of Homeland Security released its study looking at the profile of mass shooters since 1999, they tended to be young males acting alone, so if we link this fact with the way of teaching Islam in the United States and prejudice towards Muslims there we may get answers to the questions I raised before.

One cannot help but assume that America is more violent now than it has been in the past; it seems that American violence has taken on a new form. Crime has become an epidemic that affects every age group, every ethnic group, and every person in a different way.

Thousands of Americans die in gun violence every year. The same day of the marathon bombing in Boston, 11 Americans were murdered by guns. Americans seemingly place an inordinate fear on violence that is random and unexplainable and can be blamed on "others" – jihadists, terrorists, evil-doers etc. But killing 14 Americans every single day – this is just accepted as part of life, the price of freedom. (6)

Boston Marathon bombing accident and Japan:

Japanese media covered the accident with few comments. I was attracted by the “personal message” sent by famous Japanese Author Haruki Murakami to the victims of the bombing. He said he felt personally wounded by the attack on his favorite race. Murakami recalled the time he interviewed survivors and family members of those killed in the 1995 sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway for his book “Underground.”

I wonder why Murakami linked the attack of the Japanese religious group Omushinrikyo in 1995 with the attack on Boston Marathon 2013. (7)

3- Algerian terrorism, Algerian Amenas gas plant terror

The January’s deadly attack on an Algerian gas plant and murder of dozens of hostages raised fears in the west that the Arab Spring has been a rallying call for extremists. Hundreds of Westerners joined the fighting in the Middle East and North Africa and some may have subsequently joined violent groups abroad or terror gangs back home.

Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb has denied responsibility for the attack but called all the Muslims to target France and its interests and subjects inside and outside France until it withdraws the last soldier from the land of the Muslims. The armed group carried out the attack as retaliation against Algeria which opened its airspace for French jet fighters to raid armed groups in Northern Mali, so the attack has a clear connection with the French military intervention in Mali.

French presence in Africa has a strategic importance. France needs the wealth of North and West African countries, because any defect in African supply will greatly hurt the French weak economy. France is compelled to exercise its control firmly in North and West African countries which play a big role in French policy and strategy. France occupied African countries, and then withdrew, but divided those countries as follows: Morocco for fruits, vegetables and phosphate, and the Ivory Coast for cocoa, Guinea-Bissau, Mali and the Great Lakes for gold and precious metals, the Niger for uranium, Algeria and Nigeria for oil, and Tunisia for some secondary industries such as textiles, and Mauritania for fishing and throwing toxic waste, Senegal and Chad for a human tank of the French army. **(8)**

In Algeria, security operations usually remain secret and details about them are usually provided after a period of time, while sometimes no detail is provided at all, the rush of the Special Forces to raid the gas facility was criticized by many countries, but Algerian authorities declared that the Special Forces had raided the gas facility in order to prevent the militants from running away with the hostages for the purpose of getting ransoms to purchase more arms. Jeremy Keenan, School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, suspected a kind of relation between the terrorists and Algerian security forces.**(9)**

It is well known that Algerian people lived in their country under the direct French occupation for a long period of time; they had sacrificed more than a million martyrs (shahid) to liberate their country and won

independence. After independence, the Algerian government imposed a kind of dictatorship so that the people could not exercise their political and social role and restore their own culture. When Islamists won the municipal elections, Algerians were accused by western countries as fundamentalists and extremists. Encouraged by the West, the army cancelled the election results. Also, Islamic organizations were banned and their leaders were arrested. Western countries condemn Islamic movements without condemnation of the practice of the military dictatorship. Can the condemnation of the reaction of the people in Algeria or any other Islamic country solve any problem in this country? The condemnation of the reaction without condemning the act itself is a kind of extremism; in each case it does not solve the problem of fundamentalism in any form. In general and away from the Algerian accident, the classification of extremism by extremist religious affiliations, and not according to the truth so that the Christian extremism, or Jewish extremism or Buddhism extremism or Hindu extremism is acceptable and Muslims extremism in their reaction rejected, such classification would not solve the problem of extremism and fundamentalism in any form but rather complicates it. The mind and logic invite us to deal with the act so that we can tackle the reaction. The solution is not to encourage the military to eradicate the members of the Islamic movements but is to put an end to the military suppression of these movements and give the opportunity to conduct dialogue and respect the opinion of the majority of the people to adopt real democracy. In western countries there is justification for these events under the name of the end of

history or the clash of civilizations. There are those who explain the fundamentalism and justified it under the name “The End of History,” denying any existence of nations and peoples, cultures and civilizations of others outside the framework of capitalism as an economic system; or under the name “Clash of civilizations” and the western civilization is the model for the other civilizations

4- Interfaith Dialogue and New Orientalism

Orientalism was one of the leading intellectual phenomena that have defined the relations between West and East. Orientalism has positive and negative aspects, for example :(10)

- Transport problems of the Western canon to Islamic theology, and explanation of Islam as a heresy and Islamic law (Sharia) as an Arab image of Roman law.
- Inflation of the size of the Muslim sects and doctrines and Spreading ethnic nationalism among the peoples of Muslim countries to create conflicts within the Muslim world.
- The secularization of law to isolate Islamic Sharia and establish the Roman law and Spreading secularism among Muslim intellectuals and political circles.

The modern Orientalist structuring Islam was a rather substantial improvement on the earlier conceptions (despotic, backward, undeveloped, tribal, irrational and mysterious). Some of these conceptions are to be seen on a day-to-day basis in Western media while Orientalism remains to be an important chapter in the history of Islam and the West. New modes of approaching Islam, ranging from dialogue and critical understanding to confrontation

and rejection, continue to make their appearance in various forms and arenas. The identification of Islam with violence and militancy is now a very powerful image; therefore it becomes necessary to address the question of religious violence in relation to the current perceptions of Islam. In recent decades, many academics, policymakers, the so-called experts repeatedly claimed that Islam is the only religion that encourages and produces religious violence and terrorism on a consistent basis.

It is crucial to note that the long journey of the Islamic world in the last two centuries cannot be understood properly without paying attention to the legacy of colonialism to which the Muslim world responded in different ways which have had two major results. The first is the deep impact they have on Muslim perceptions of the West as a colonialist power and as a secular civilization, so the memory of colonialism is still alive in the Islamic world and it breeds the anti-western sentiments in the Muslim World. The secular character of modern western civilization is seen as a threat for the Muslim world which remains religious and traditional than any other part of the world. The obvious cases of violence are picked out from the Islamic world to bolster the image of Islam as a militant threat to the west in spite of the fact that such acts of violence committed in the name of Islam are rejected by the majority of Muslims. The lack of knowledge that had obstructed the study of Islam for centuries during the middle Ages continues till today. **(11)**

Let us have a look on western critical actions towards Islam in the last five years: In 2006 Vatican Pope expressed

his fears that Europe will become part of the Dar al-Islam in the twenty-first century. As a result, in May 2009, the European political Right Movements became active and several European conferences were held under the slogan: NO FOR THE ISLAMIZATION OF EUROPE. On 29 November 2009, was the Swiss referendum on banning the construction of minarets of mosques! On 3rd. December 2009 in France, 48% voted against the construction of minarets, and 41% voted against the building of mosques! And in May 2010 in France, the wearing of the veil had been prohibited; headscarves in schools and government institutions had been forbidden before. In the same month, Denmark held a new contest for drawing the cartoon insulting the Prophet Muhammad. On September 11, 2010, one of the churches of America called to have an international day for the burning of the Quran. In October 2010, the Zionist settlers continued a series of burning of mosques in the West Bank along with copies of the Quran. In the same year, Israel annexed the number of Islamic holy sites to the Jewish heritage, including the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron and Bilal Mosque in the city of Bethlehem, despite the objection by UNESCO. In November 2010, Israel demolished a mosque in a village in the Negev and in the same month, demolished a Palestinian village in the Jordan Valley. The story of American occupation in Iraq is well known. Within 8 years of occupation, Iraq was destroyed as a state and the social fabric of the country was torn by encouraging sectarianism and racism and chasing and murdering scientists, experts, and Muslim scholars (ULAMA). As an example, in the city of Fallujah, Americans have destroyed 40 mosques out of

the 70 mosques of the city using internationally prohibited weapons worse than the atomic bombs used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The tragedy of the American War on Iraq is the tragedy of the twenty-first century. Iraqi refugees have approached ten million or one third of total Iraqi population. The story of the war in Afghanistan is well known. The United States has begun withdrawing troops from Afghanistan after the longest war in American history. So far, the conflict has cost about \$600 billion, led to the deaths of 2,205 American troops and injured 18,462. About 16,725 Afghan civilians also have been killed.

Can the call for interfaith dialogue flourish and give fruits in the age of the War on Terror? In America and Western Europe Islam and Muslims have been focused and leftist-liberal politicians and pundits have expressed serious misgivings about Muslim presence in Europe. The September 11th attacks, the civil unrest in France, the London bombings, the Danish cartoon etc. are taken by these politicians and pundits as evidence of The Clash of Civilizations. **(12)**

While Muslim countries call for interfaith dialogue and dialogue among civilizations, the United States and western countries call for clash of civilizations, creating the so-called Islamophobia. In general, interfaith dialogue is essential to understand the various religions and cultures and strengthen cooperation among peoples. In such dialogue, we have to look at the things that unite us, most importantly the faith in God and noble values and morals that represent the basis of all religions. Dialogue should be based on tolerance, freedom and openness to strengthen

mutual understanding, respect and shared values among different peoples, cultures and civilizations to counter the influence of groups' fermenting extremism, and the threat to world peace and stability posed by extremism.

Interfaith dialogue or dialogue among civilizations has become an international necessity. It is exercised by different institutions with a view to realizing security and coexistence among peoples and nations and avoiding conflicts and wars. But it is noticed that some of those who are willing to engage in dialogue race have no coordination. Islamic Institutions and the institutions of other religions should coordinate their efforts so that dialogue may yield fruits and draw a bright picture of a more secure future for all humans. Finding common grounds between Muslims, Christians, Jews and people of other religions and cultures is not simply a matter of polite dialogue between selected religious leaders. Politicians and policy makers should be involved in the interfaith dialogue, and we should accept our differences. Our differences should not cause hatred. We should live with each other in righteousness and good will and we should respect each other and be fair, just and kind to one another and live in sincere peace, harmony and mutual good-will. The world is in need of religious values, and it is the duty of all religious leaders, scholars, and politicians to present common values to guide the march of civilization.

In the era of globalization, interfaith dialogue should be a two-way process that allows each culture to benefit and get enriched by the other. In this area, Islamic culture has a lot to offer. Take, for example, the principle that holds no person responsible for the action of another, regardless of

how closely related they are. A universal application of this principle would, for one thing, stop the punishment of, or sanctions against, all the citizens of a country by a power that has some conflict of interests with the government of that country. Another principle is that which forbids measuring with two different scales. A universal adoption of this would mean that human rights would always be the same for all people everywhere and would not be used as a weapon against some countries and not others. It would mean that a human life has the same worth, which signifies that no one is allowed to condone the mass killing of innocent civilians in one place while lamenting the death of a few in another. It would mean efforts to prevent violence, whether committed by fanatics or disturbed individuals or by racist states. It would mean that the security of all nations should be respected and protected, and that the violation by one country of the security of all its neighbors on the pretext of protecting its own security shall not be accepted.

Islamic values would add a call for justice to the advocacy of peace, they would add meaning to the call for democracy, and they will replace the current wars waged under various flimsy excuses with an unceasing war against poverty and disease throughout the world. What the world needs is a type of interfaith dialogue that would make the world a better place to live in for all people. It does not need the dialogue that promotes only new dialogue and inviting more leaders of religions and cultures. In Islam, “universality” is the image of a civilizations forum. All faiths, creeds and philosophies, and cultures share the

membership of this forum equally. They share and interact in the human culture inheritance and represent human knowledge while retaining privacy in every religion and civilization, values and morals, customs and traditions. In this forum of civilizations nations and peoples coexist and try to know one another.(13) God Almighty said: (O Mankind! Indeed, we have created you from a male and female, and have made you into nations and tribes that you may know one another – Al-Hujurat: 13). This Islamic concept of universality is based on the fact that pluralism and diversity are the rule and that interaction with other civilizations and cultures and religions is a middle course between isolation and subordination.

Thank you

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