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Global Religious Terrorism, A Troubling Phenomenon

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Abstract- Terrorism is an ancient phenomenon, as it comes from classical Antiquity. However, its global version only started in the last decades of the 19th century, after the fall of Paris Commune and the murder of the Russian czar, Alexander the second. Global terrorism is a phenomenon in which, according to Rapoport, we can consider four waves, with religious one as its present phase. This essay accepts the existence of several periods of global terrorism, but it seeks to prove that the designations «religious terrorism» and «Islamic terrorism» are not entirely correct and they represent myths. Besides, it shows that these myths are based on two fallacies– the clash of civilizations, and the unity of Islam world – and they are the origin of serious problems, not only in the western world but also in the Islamic countries refusing to follow the Islamic law. It is a ubiquitous problem because when a terrorist group is defeated it continues “to shift away from a centralized command and control structure toward a more diffused model” This strategy represents a severe threat because some terrorists choose a new battlefield while others return to the West but as radicalized as they were when they joined ISIS or any other terrorist group. The world is facing a troubling phenomenon, and its de-construction is essential for controlling a problem also related to identity.

Keywords: global terrorism, religious terrorism, myths, islamic law, and identity.

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Global Religious Terrorism, A Troubling Phenomenon

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I. INTRODUCTION

Myths are human constructions trying to explain the phenomena, and there are plenty of definitions of this concept. Mircea Eliade (1963, pp. 16-17) emphasizes the eruption of the supernatural or of the sacred, but there is another sense because we can see the myth as an idea resulting from the common sense. Concerning terrorism, Stohl (2008, p. 5) revisited ten old myths². Social scientists

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have already overcome some of these myths, but some of them are still ongoing.

¹ According to the *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017*, this happened, for example, “as ISIS lost territory.” Available in <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/283100.pdf>

² “Political terrorism is exclusively the activity of non-governmental actors. All terrorists are madmen. All terrorists are criminals. One person’s terrorist is another’s freedom fighter. All insurgent violence is political terrorism. The purpose of terrorism is the production of chaos. Governments always oppose non-governmental terrorism. Political terrorism is exclusively a problem relating to internal political conditions. The source of contemporary political terrorism may be found in the evil of one or two major actors. Political terrorism is a strategy of futility.”

Stohl’s list does not include specific myths about the current wave of terrorism. The present essay identifies and deconstructs some new myths. At first, it is important to emphasize that terrorism is not a goal, but a means to an end. According to David Rapoport (2001), global terrorism began in the last decades of the nineteenth century and lasted till date. In this phenomenon, the author considers four waves: anarchist, anti-colonialist, revolutionary new left and religious terrorism. Each of these phases has its own goal, and due to this objective, presents different features.

Anarchist terrorism intended to destroy and not only to change the political system, mainly through individual assassination, while anti-colonialists fought against the empires, to achieve independence, and they refused the anathema of terrorists. As regards the terrorism carried by the revolutionary new left, its goal was to destroy the organs that represented capitalist society. Finally, common sense considers that the actual phase is at the service of the Islamic religion.

In this fourth wave, Gerges (2014, p. 341) mentioned three phases. The first period lasted till the final of the decade of 1990, and its preeminent representative was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Then, Osama Bin Laden led the second phase, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi the third one. The fall of the ISIS Caliphate opened space to the actual stage, but in 2017, ISIL was still the most active group, as it carried out 1,321 attacks provoking 7.120 deaths³.

Rapoport’s proposal is not the only one. For example, Tom Parker & Nick Sitter (2015) do not accept the word «waves». They prefer «strains» because “the notion of waves suggests distinct iterations of terrorist violence driven by successive broad historical trends” while “the concept of strains and contagion emphasizes how terrorist groups draw on both contemporary and historical lessons in the development of their tactics, strategies, and goals”. Their typology counts on four distinct strains: socialist, nationalist, religious, and exclusionist.

Returning to Rapoport’s typology, political scientists usually accept 1979 as the first moment of the actual phase of global terrorism due to three events.

³ «Twenty most active perpetrator groups.2017». Source: The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). University of Maryland, August 2018.

First, it was the year of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Second, it was the initial year of a new Islamic century. Third, Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in Iran. Social scientists consider it as a global phenomenon in the sense that it spread all over the world and as this phase started with a Shi'ite Revolution, they tend to describe it as religious terrorism due to the replacement of the Shah with religious authority.

However, according to Moreira (2001, p. 143), there is a big difference between the cultural conflict due to religious differences and the political struggle using religious elements in the ideology of the State or other political forces. This essay accepts that the Iranian Revolution belongs to the second group of events and aims at proving that nowadays religious motivations are still used to achieve political interests, that is to say, the terrorist groups instrumentalize religion for political purposes. There are unquestionable examples of this situation in many countries – Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Afghanistan – where soldiers believe that they are fighting in the name of Allah and obeying His orders.

According to this point of view, religious terrorism is just a myth. Furthermore, the reference to Allah represents a new myth or the second face of the initial one. So, this essay starts proving that the designation of Islamic terrorism is not suitable for describing a phenomenon provoking the death of a large number of Muslims.

II. DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTH OF ISLAMIC TERRORISM

It is usual, but not scientifically right to identify Islam with terrorism. It is a double error because Islam is far from representing a monolith, and many Islamic believers do not support terrorism. There are two principal Islamic groups – Shi'ite and Sunni – and Duarte (2015) mentions three forms of Islamism but only one of them appealing for armed violence.

Moreover, it is crucial to recognize the difference between two types of jihad: *al-jihad al-Akbar* and *al-jihad al-Kashgar*⁴. The first jihad is seen as the fight against man's faults or defects and as an attempt towards personal development. The second one accepts and promotes violence as a spiritual action executed in response to a theological imperative or a *fatwa*. So, only a small part of the Islamic Community – *Umma* – is involved in terrorism as the agent, though many Muslim members become victims of terrorist

attacks. The analysis of the *Country Reports on Terrorism 2017* does not leave any doubts.

According to the report, "more than half of all attacks took place in four countries: Iraq (23%), Afghanistan (13%), India (9%), and Pakistan (7%)". These data show that the attacks were mainly carried out in Islamic countries, and we come to the same conclusion verifying that "more than half of all deaths took place in three countries: Iraq (24%), Afghanistan (23%), and Syria (8%)".

These data do not match the western idea of the phenomenon due to the coverage made by the media. Indeed, the western media do not report or give little attention to terrorist attacks carried out «further away from the US» (Jetter, 2014, p. 4) or other western countries. However, when there is an outrage in the West, the images and the news are abundantly broadcasted. This media coverage of the events has a broad effect on citizens' perception of terrorism, as we will see later. This idea is corroborated by Edward Said (2005, p. 31) when he affirms that, after September 11th, 2001, the fear of terrorism has been imposed upon the public with an incredible insistence. It is a State devised strategy, but it ends up serving the interests of terrorism because when someone is afraid of terrorist attacks a person tends to lose confidence in the organizations, and that is literally how terrorism affects large sections of the society.

The data are not deceiving: Muslims represent the majority of the victims murdered by those who kill crying out: *Allahu Akbar*. It is undeniable that all the religions legitimize violence in some specific situations, and, as Hannah Arendt (2014, p. 18) affirms, nobody can ignore the role played by violence in human affairs. It is a timeless problematic. A quick flashback at the Middle Age is enough to remember the Christian holy war that the crusaders considered a just war and a way to get to heaven. The sword was seen as the guarantee of salvation, thanks to the words of God's representatives on earth, those who claimed to speak for the divine. As Amin Maalouf (2013) states, according to Muslim point of view, the reading was entirely different. However, regardless of religion, violence reaches a high intensity because terrorists are unconstrained by moral barriers, as they see themselves as fulfilling the divine will.

Likewise, in the present, it looks highly unlikely that Allah and the Prophet agree that Muslims should murder other Muslims because Qur'an does not allow attacking the enemies near the holy mosque unless the initiative comes from the enemies. Moreover, Rasha Abdulla (2007, p. 1063) analyzed "the contents of three of the most popular Arabic-language online message boards regarding the attacks of September 11, 2001" and concluded that "although terrorists claimed that the attacks were committed in the name of Islam, those who posted messages on all three forums rejected this

⁴ Barber (1995) uses the word jihad as opposite of McWorld. In this sense, jihad refers "not only to the religious factions with which the word is most commonly associated, but also to ethnic groups, such as those in conflict in Somalia and the former Yugoslavia, and even to movements with no aspirations to independent governance, such as the militias in Michigan" (Metzl, 1996, p. 566). It is a broad sense and not a new type of jihad.

claim”, and considered it “as a political, rather than a religious, issue”. It is an important study, although neither all Arabs are Muslims, nor all Muslims are Arabs.

Concerning this myth, it is still important to say that the Islamic unity is a fallacy because there are cases of self-called Islamic terrorist groups that murder not only Muslims who belong to a different Islamic community but also Muslims who are part of the same religious community. For example, ISIS, a Sunni terrorist group, murders Sunni people who do not follow the group’s ideal. ISIS assassinates all those who refuse to support it, irrespective of religion, and when they are spared, it is because ISIS wants to take advantage of them.

Indeed, ISIS recovered an ancient tradition – *saby* – and it treats as slaves the women captured during the war. The sexual slavery that ISIS imposed upon Yazidi women represents an example of this ignominy, as it was proved by lots of reports, including a case-study conducted in post-ISIS camps in the North of Iraq and Kurdistan, during February-March 2017, involving 108 resettled female Yazidi captives⁵.

The researchers wanted to measure post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD), and they came to the following results: “fifty-five (50.9%) women had probable CPTSD, while 23 (20.0%) had probable PTSD”. As the data prove, Yazidi women had lived hell on earth. It is a terrible situation corroborated by testimonials collected by Amnesty International⁶ and Human Rights Council⁷.

Returning to the myth, it is worthwhile to recognize that its persistence feeds another myth, namely one based on the conviction that the *Umma* is conducting a defensive war against the West. This myth is partially connected to the feeling that Muslims “are part of a proud and ancient community” but “the outside world doesn’t respect” them as Muslims (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 68). It is a myth with enormous consequences both in the western world and in the Islamic one, as we will see in the next point, because it is a pull factor to terrorism, mainly among young Muslims.

III. A NEW FALLACY REQUIRING DECONSTRUCTION

Many scholars have already written about the motivations that push people, mainly young people, towards terrorist groups. Some of them conducted their researches only among citizens of a country or a region, but the majority studied the phenomenon as a whole. Some of them were concerned just about female participation in terrorism. Others preferred to study terrorists of both sexes. For example, Eric Mietz (2016) only investigated the causes that led Balkan women to join ISIS, Audrey Alexander (2016) researched about 25 American female terrorists, and Scott Atran & Nafees Hamid (2016)⁸, Mia Bloom (2001), Marne Suttan (2009), Saltman & Smith (2015) researched mainly about female motivations.

Saltman & Smith (2015) talked about pull⁹ and push¹⁰ factors and this typology points to the influence of the cultural environment. It is an influence that we can find both in western and Islamic countries. In the western case, it is necessary to understand the reasons that led western female citizens to reject the model in which they have been educated. Common sense places particular emphasis on the feeling of non-belonging. Fukuyama (2018, p. 68), affirms that the identity problem is “particularly acute for young second-generation Muslims growing up in immigrant communities in Western Europe”, and explains that these Muslims “are living in largely secular societies with Christian roots that do not provide public support for their religious values or practices”.

However, a survey carried out by the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) in 2016, and involving 10.527 Muslims living in 15 countries of the European Union, proved that “the vast majority of Muslims in the EU have a high sense of trust in democratic institutions”, and that 76% of the sample had a strong linkage with the country where it lived, even considering that “31% of those seeking work felt discriminated against over the last five years”¹¹. This last group constitutes a potential source for terrorist recruitment, as several social researchers have pointed.

⁸ It is available in the site <https://artisiinternational.org/comment-devient-on-djihadiste-by-scott-atran-and-nafees-hamid/>.

⁹ “an idealistic goal of fulfilling a «religious duty», the will to build the utopian «Caliphate state», as well as reasons that appear more typically feminine and more specific to the female universe: the need to recover a sense of belonging through sisterhood with other women travelling to Syria, as well as a certain «romanticisation» of the migration experience.”

¹⁰ “a feeling of social and cultural isolation, in the rejection of Western culture, in the perception that the international Muslim community is persecuted and in a frustration over the lack of action in response to this perceived persecution.”

¹¹ It is available in the site <http://fra.europa.eu/en/press-release/2017/muslims-eu-high-levels-trust-despite-pervasive-discrimination>.

⁵ The study is «Complex PTSD and its correlates among female Yazidi victims of sexual slavery living in post-ISIS camps», and Yaakov S.G. Hoffman, Ephraim S. Grossman, Amit Shrir, Mordechai Kedar, Menachem Ben-Ezra, Mirza Dinnayi, Lee Koren, Rassul Bayan, Yuval Palgi, and Ari Z. Zivotofsk have conducted it. The study is available in <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5775139/>.

⁶ *Escape from hell Torture and sexual slavery in Islamic State captivity in Iraq*, available in https://www.amnesty.org.uk/files/escape_from_hell_torture_and_sexual_slavery_in_islamic_state_captivity_in_iraq_-_english_2.pdf

⁷ *They came to destroy: ISIS crimes against the Yazidis*, available in https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf

The data show that the motivations for rejecting a model and becoming a terrorist lie in three factors: rational, psychological and cultural (Whittaker, 2003, p. 19). It is a complex subject, even considering that according to José Sanmartín, nobody is born a terrorist. That is why Tore Bjørgo (2005, pp. 3-4) considers structural causes, facilitator (or accelerator) causes, motivational causes, and triggering causes.

The data allow returning to the myth that the *Umma* is facing a defensive war against the West. It is a fallacy guaranteeing an enormous recruitment basis for terrorist groups because they broadcast the image that they are fulfilling a duty. They present themselves as Sayyid Qutb did when he wrote *Milestones* and assumed that he had been a jihadist for 15 years before he “earned this Shahadah (martyrdom)”. Now as then, the death is seen as redemption. It should be pointed out that Mia Bloom (2001) explained the female affiliation to terrorism through the 4Rs Theory – revenge, redemption, relationship, and respect.

It is a good theory to explain the affiliation of women living in Islamic countries where the cultural pattern is very vigorous. The relationship with family members involved in terrorism allows a subtle ideological inculcation and this mental construction results in the acceptance that the western model is the devil that must be defeated. That is why woman accepts that revenge against the west is the only way to earn the respect of her community.

This acceptance explains not only the participation in terrorist attacks but also the support to an educational model that the majority of western Islamic women considers out-of-date. The reading of a pamphlet on education published in 2015 by the female militia of the group can be pointed as proof of the differences between two incompatible models. The Islamic model accepts that a nine years old girl is prepared to get married after finishing the first cycle of studies, even though many of them decide to marry only after attending the three levels, that is to say when they are fifteen. In this regard, we must point out that most of the 12 worst countries concerning freedom are ruled according to the *sharia*¹².

Returning to the jihadists who left the west, this myth can partially explain their increasing number. Many of them were newly converted, and they believed that they were necessary to build the Caliphate, a new world where believers could live according to the right model, a process in which it is fundamental to recognize the role played by media. Bloom affirms that when someone clicks on a statement supporting ISIS, this person

immediately gets 500 new followers in tweeter and 500 new friends in Facebook. It is a welcome process followed by a second step: the change to more private platforms, such as Kik, WhatsApp or Telegram, because it is fundamental to avoid the anti-terrorism authorities. As the terrorist group was prepared to deal with all the phases of the process, it would care about the journey of the western jihadists to Iraq or Syria.

After a period when ISIS ruled over a caliphate, the defeat came thanks to the non-cooperation of Russia with the US-led coalition. This defeat was followed by the dispersion of the terrorists, despite the attempt of some of them trying to remain in the area. Those who decided to join other terrorist groups have a broad spectrum of choice. Indeed, the North American list of terrorist organizations includes 65 groups and the majority of them accepts the myth of fighting to defend Islam. Moreover, ISIS controls several identified and active branches: Isis-Greater Sahara (ISIS-GS), ISIS-Western Africa, ISIS-Philippines, and ISIS-Bangladesh. However, the dispersion of terrorists can represent a threat to the West, as the next point will prove.

IV. THE WEST AND THE RETURNING JIHADISTS

The return of western jihadists poses a lot of problems because they are far from homogenous concerning the terrorist experience. It is not easy to distinguish between those who are disappointed with their experience abroad and those who maintain a link to the terrorist ideal. Moreover, the returning group is composed not only by male and female jihadists but also their children whose birth took place in Iraq or Syria. These children have the right to their parents' nationality, in spite of being born abroad. The *jus sanguinis* prevails over the *jus solis* in many European countries.

The governments of the western countries are forced to define politics and to take measures to guarantee the security of their citizens, depending upon the number of returning jihadists. However, the data vary according to the source, and this does not allow a clear vision of the real dimension of the problem. Indeed, when national or international security faces danger, the governments fear to release information that can be useful for terrorists and do not want to alarm the public opinion. That is the reason why they “do not release official estimates of the number of their citizens who have gone to Syria and Iraq, and those that do, whether formally or informally, do not reveal their methodology and may struggle to achieve accuracy”¹³.

¹² The list counts on 49 countries and the 12 worst are the following: Syria, South Sudan, Eritrea, North Korea, Turkmenistan, Equatorial Guinea, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Uzbekistan, Sudan, Central African Republic, and Libya. Available in <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>.

¹³ *Foreign Fighters the Soufan Group December 2015 June 2014. An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*, available in http://www.soufangroup.com/wpcontent/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate_FINAL3.pdf

However, it is possible to present a snapshot of reality. So, according to the previous source, concerning the European Union, we could calculate 1.700 French jihadists who had left for Syria and Iraq and 250 returnees; the United Kingdom had 760 officially recognized jihadists and 350 returnees; Germany counted 760 jihadists and more than 200 returnees; Belgium had 470 combatants and 118 returnees; Sweden accounted for 300 jihadists and 115 returnees; Austria had 300 combatants according to official sources or 233 for non-official sources, and 70 returnees; The Netherlands had 220 or 210 jihadists according to the previous criterion and 40 returnees; Spain had 133 or 250 returnees....

It is a long list with 66 countries, and a troubling situation, especially taking into account the high number of returnees that we did not mention above, mainly more than 625 Tunisians, more than 600 Turkish, 162 Indonesians, and 40 citizens of the United States of America. These ancient jihadists are a melting pot because some of them are in hiding despite the arrest warrant, others are already arrested or under surveillance, and some of them are attending de-radicalization programs. This strategy follows the example of the DDR programs led in Indonesia, Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. They are programs trying demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration of terrorist members of Al Qaeda and its affiliates, such as Jemaah Islamiyah.

It will be a long process. While some of the terrorist actions are “low cost” (Nolen, 2015, p. 30), these programs will be expensive because they will require several social expertise. This point allows us to come back to the deconstruction of the previous myths.

V. REINTEGRATION THROUGH THE DECONSTRUCTION OF THE MYTH

Islamic community plays a decisive role in many of the western countries. In some of these countries, the average of the Islamic population is increasing, not only due to the religious conversion but also because of the high birth rate among the Muslim communities. The last reason suggests that Muslims “will increase their overall proportion in the population in the next generation” (Fukuyama, 2006, p. 6). According to the Pew Research Center, Muslims made up 4.9% of Europe’s population in 2016, and “even if all migrations into Europe were to immediately and permanently stop – a “zero migration” scenario – the Muslim population of Europe still would be expected to rise from the current level of 4.9% to 7.4% by the year 2050”¹⁴.

If the previous myths– Islamic religious terrorism and defensive war against the West – persist, the

western world will face an enormous threat, as western countries will have domestic and external enemies. The clash of civilizations will become a real possibility. It is a scenario to be avoided, and the deconstruction of myths represents a necessary step for respecting the identity and learning to live together.

Islam phobia is increasing in western countries because nationalism started to identify Muslims with terrorists or, at least, to blame the Muslim Community for everyday problems. Said (2005) defends that this feeling is the consequence of the axis of evil created by George Bush and of two postulates, namely one based on the deep opposition between Islam and Western civilization. I believe that these reactions represent the other face of the same coin of the two myths or the emergence of a new myth after the specters of the negro, the mulatto, the Jew, and so on.

This is a reason for deconstructing the myths. The majority of the Islamic community is peaceful, and it does not support a fake holy war, but it wants its identity recognized and respected. That is why many Muslims “do not like to be called ‘moderates’ for fear of being seen as pro-Western” (Schmid, 2017). However, this community is indispensable to avoid or, at least, limit radicalization and to promote reintegration. In this regard, it is important to note that there is a deep difference between western Islamic communities and those living in other cultural environments, despite their common faith. The western biblical separation between God and Cesar causes adjustments in the mental schemes.

In 2017, a survey¹⁵ found that “most U.S. Muslims (65%)” said that there was “no conflict between Islam and democracy”, and only “three-in-ten” recognized the existence of a conflict.

Moreover, the survey showed that three-in-ten US Muslims described themselves as politically liberal, and almost four-in-ten as moderate. There is no doubt that many conservatives minds will consider that this transformation represents a worrying situation resulting from the influence of the western model. For them, as Torres (2018, p. 33) affirms, the real “homo islamicus” is the one who accepts the total submission to God, to the sacred precepts and a “mutilated religiosity”. As Fukuyama (2006. p.5) advices, “the Muslim world is dysfunctional in many ways”, and we must take this reality very seriously. For conservative Islamic people, it is questionable whether those who continue to profess Islamic faith but accept a new political vision are on the right side of history.

We will need time to understand the real dimension of the change. A concept can take different nuances depending on the societies, and this discrepancy helps to explain why “more than four-in-ten

¹⁴ Available in <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/29/europes-growing-muslim-population/>.

¹⁵ Available in <http://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/political-and-social-views/>.

Americans (44%)” denounce the existence of “a natural conflict between the teachings of Islam and democracy”, a clear mark of mistrust. The clash of civilizations is a dangerous theory, but the alliance of civilizations will require dialogue and time. As Fukuyama (2018, p. 165) defends, “the logic of identity politics is to divide societies into ever smaller, self-regarding groups”, but I agree with Fukuyama that the real solution to the present crisis is “to create identities that are broader and more integrative”.

VI. CONCLUSION

This essay proved that the actual phase of terrorism is not religious, despite the use of religious motivations, neither Islamic. It is not a rhetorical question either. The terrorist groups are motivated by political goals, and they do not respect Allah’s teachings. Besides, the essay showed that the world is not facing a clash of civilizations, but a globalized terrorist fight aiming to destroy a model of society based on the western concept of freedom.

Some centuries ago, Marx and Engels launched an appeal: proletarians of the world unite! Nowadays the called Islamic terrorists fight, not to spread Qur’an, but to destroy the western way of life and to oblige moderate Muslim governments to accept the model recommended by *sharia*.

The data help to break the myths resulting from the present wave of terrorism, even considering that some of them must be carefully analyzed because they do not tell the whole truth. However, this constraint does not challenge the main argument of the essay.

Finally, as it was easy to foresee in the title, terrorism represents a serious global threat. It is a dream to expect a world without political violence, but it is possible – and desirable – to join forces for controlling terrorism. Fukuyama (2018, p. 175) says that “the EU as a whole needs to be able to control its external borders better than it does. However, this essay proved that controlling frontiers is not enough to stop terrorism. The problem lies not so much in the borders as in several decades of a potentially conflicting relationship.

Parker & Sitter (2015) defend that “terrorists learn first and foremost from their immediate rivals and other like-minded groups”. Western governments and the Islamic moderate countries should learn from the recent painful experience, and accept that they need to place their expertise at the service of a model based on freedom and respect for Human Rights.

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