

# In Defense of Islamic Religious Reform

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Brief Analysis

Without a doubt, we currently live at a time where powerful movements—international and regional bodies alike—are calling for religious reform. The call for religious reform is very real. It is a powerful expression of the feeling that there is a need to carry out review and self-criticism. Despite the enormous advancements in modern communication, today's Arab youth are in urgent need of a new offering of religious and moral beliefs and concepts so that they can move toward these changes and innovations, armed with the powerful weapons of knowledge and learning. It is no secret that the close-mindedness of traditional proselytization methods was a major reason that so many grew estranged from religious discourse—and has even been a factor in their move toward atheism.

Those interested in religious reform are seen as having fallen into traps laid by enemies of Islam. They have faced numerous accusations, including that they are serving the West at the expense of our religion and the interests of the Ummah.

It is true that [calls for reform \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/a-plea-for-moderate-islam\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/a-plea-for-moderate-islam) have in some cases come from the West. Notably, in the days following the events of September 11, many Western politicians and thinkers called for reforms because they viewed the idea of religious reform as an antidote to terrorism and violence. These figures have, among other things, called for changes to educational curricula, including at institutions for Islamic learning.

However, several Arab and Islamic governments have also [called for religious reform because of the violent acts \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/eliminating-radicalism-in-arab-and-islamic-world-education-before-prison-an\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/eliminating-radicalism-in-arab-and-islamic-world-education-before-prison-an) they face in their own countries. Non-religious movements by scholars and media figures have also called for developments in the structure of religious discourse.

Moreover, significant numbers of enlightened sharia scholars have also called for religious reform in a manner in accord with the novel concepts and circumstances produced by globalization and the great tools of the modern age, such as the Internet. These scholars have argued that reforms designed to keep pace with the massive developments occurring in terms of the amount and variety of information available are necessary, and that these reforms, particularly in the cultural sphere, make the time right for reform. It is prudent to heed these voices, especially with

the pace of modern life rapidly changing the needs and expectations of the religiously-minded public.

### **Crafting a Sensible Approach to Reform**

First, it is important to acknowledge that it is not correct from a rational or sharia perspective to abandon the development of our methods and concepts just because the West would want us to do so. What others say about us or criticize in us may sometimes be correct; as such, we should listen, judge, and reflect on criticisms. After undertaking this process, we should then decide whether to accept or reject this criticism—or whether to rectify some aspects and ignore other parts. However, to oppose the reform of religious discourse wholesale, simply because some of the calls for reform come from an oppositional standpoint, is neither rational nor in keeping with religion.

As a number of scholars have suggested, what worked for Muslims in the Second Century AH may not necessarily work for Muslim communities in the Fifteenth Century AH. Similarly, the way that the religious discourse of one era was crafted may not necessarily work for every era—a situation particularly visible in the current era.

Reform becomes necessary when we acknowledge a fundamental truth: the human mind grasps the facts of existence and the components of revival, change, and evolution gradually. Thus, without religious reform, it is not possible for Arab and Islamic nations (or any nation for that matter) to rise. Nor can our youth achieve their desired aims in terms of science, learning, creativity, and change.

This is because the status-quo has serious consequences for our society. We have seen how extremist discourse produces terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/Terrorism-Extremism-Coronavirus-ISIS-Al-Qaeda-Resurgence-COVID-19>). We have also seen how the Iranian regime traffics in religious matters in order to rule its people by addressing their passions and instincts in a manner that does not fully conform to the purposes of religion. We see how large states such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq brim with frustration due to the prevailing religious mentalities there.

The modern communications revolution has turned today's world into a small village. Accordingly, individuals now have new aspirations and concepts shaped by the unprecedented speed of transmission and awareness of the global plenitude of attitudes and opportunities. This awareness has imposed new priorities (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-futile-quest-for-moderate-islam>) in terms of values and behaviors.

If religious discourse does not change accordingly, it will end up on a different plane than the one that is seen, heard, and experienced by everyday people. If the public cannot see how religious discourse intersects with their lives, it will lose its importance and influence. Relying on capturing emotions is no longer enough—religious discourse must move in parallel with thought and reason. It must be nourished by contemporary scientific progress so that it can remain in harmony with it.

Not every religious discourse is at the same level of discipline in terms of the fundamentals of its approach, nor in terms of its capacity and quality. There are discourses characterized by superstition, fabricated Hadith, and strange stories. The use of these is meant to excite people's enthusiasm, admiration and emotions. There are also those whose discourse is dominated by concern for minutiae, who raise marginal issues, leading many people to feel that religious discourse does not fulfill their aspirations or accord with the demands of the times.

All of this should lead those who deploy religious discourse to exert more efforts to continuously develop this discourse so that it stays at the level necessary to meet the aspirations of young people and coming generations.

Religious people of all sorts have employed religion for political purposes and for the sake of worldly power and

gains, resulting in bloody conflicts between their followers. As such, religious reform is an urgent necessity for all religions, not just Islam, in order to eradicate all forms of religious bigotry and the hatred of others who differ in terms of religion, sect or ethnicity. However, this means that we must do our part to promote these reforms.

If Muslim societies—and other religious societies—are unable to do so, humanity will in all likelihood lose its battle to extremist calls and slogans and to the puritanism which dominates the space and rhetoric of religious figures. We are already living in a remarkable time; there may be an important shift in people's religious lives as many look for something to fill the spiritual void after losing loved ones to the virus. They will also look for sources of inspiration to restore their hope and to motivate them to return back to work after the pandemic. The time is ripe for reformers to present a new message to those who are searching—or else risk the public turning to the status quo. ❖

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