



Toward a More Moderate and Tolerant Islam

Transcript of a conversation with H.E. Mohammad Al-Issa, Secretary-General of the Muslim World League

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On May 3, Dr. Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute, interviewed Dr. Mohammad Al-Issa at the gala dinner of the Barbi Weinberg Founders Conference. The following is a full transcript of their exchange, edited for clarity.

Satloff: Dr. Al-Issa, we just heard that yesterday you visited the Holocaust Museum. Can I ask what your reaction was to that visit?

Al-Issa: Thank you. I would like to express to you, in this meeting, my happiness with my presence among you, my happiness in this meeting, which brings together cultures and civilizations, ideas towards understanding, harmony and commonalities that we all agree upon—and they are many. We have always pointed out that just 10 per cent of these humanitarian commonalities would be sufficient to bring peace and global harmony. I am very happy to be in this meeting and I was pleased and honored with the friendship of Mr. Rob [Satloff], one of our best friends in the intellectual, political analysis field. There were mutual exchanges [between us], and I learned about the anniversary commemoration of the Holocaust.

My friend, Mr. Rob [Satloff], told me about this [Holocaust] episode, and reminded me of its annual commemoration. Indeed, we studied this painful event at a young age, and our study was objective and fair. We were looking at this issue from a documentary point of view that chronicles history. Since childhood, we had historical facts about this human tragedy that shook the human being and hit humanity with great shame. The truth is that this is a stain that continued among those who still deny this episode, or underestimate it. I wrote the letter that my colleague and friend Mr. Rob [Satloff] mentioned to the Director of the Holocaust Museum, Ms. Sara [Bloomfield], expressing my feelings. This message had great repercussions in the Islamic world, because of the significance and importance of our Islamic institution, and [since] it is widely listened to in the Islamic world. We begin from the facts and do not look at any considerations or any contexts that may adversely affect the truth or telling the truth or the straightforward logic of the subject.

This letter was far from any semantic, political, or any other [extraneous] considerations. It was humane in every sense of humanity. I have also seen many documents and films about this painful historical tragedy, which I consider to be unprecedented in human history. This painful human tragedy reminds us that when human beings are deprived of moral values, they become human monsters. When the measure of humanity is race, such a human tragedy occurs. When people reach leadership and control the human psyche, or perhaps I say, when the world is threatened by people who are incompetent leaders, have a racist vision, do not have any ethical or behavioral values, or experienced psychological shocks in their

lives, then the results are what we have seen in this human tragedy. What we mentioned in this letter is a fact we believe in, and I believe in as a Muslim. We must tell the truth and talk about this subject, about this human tragedy, in the name of the Muslim World League.

We talked in some details about this subject. Yesterday we visited the Holocaust Museum and we were acquainted with more and more historical documents. I was also pleased that in this museum there is another human interest which indicates impartiality and is indicative of what all human values mean. I found a special section that deals with the methods of extermination practiced by the Syrian regime against children in Syria, and I also received with interest a leaflet about ethnic cleansing in Myanmar that was printed and given to us. The truth is that these are images of human solidarity that we must appreciate. Humanity will live at the height of its potential the way we want them to be, will live in its peace, will live in the values desired to us by the Great Creator, when we are free from hatred, when we make truth and justice our logic, and move away from any contexts that would deviate our ideas or distort our conscience from the word of truth.

Satloff: Thank you. Thank you very much. So, if I can just ask you, in your letter to the Director of the Holocaust Museum you wrote that the Holocaust was “a horror that cannot be denied or underrated by any fair minded or peace-loving person,” and then you wrote “who in his right mind would accept, sympathize or diminish the extent of this brutal crime.” Based on these sentiments, what would you say to someone who suggests that the Jews killed during the Holocaust with themselves responsible for their own killing? What would you say to someone who suggests that the Jews somehow brought it on themselves?

Al-Issa: We always deal with this human tragedy according to its criminal characterization. But if we underestimate this tragedy on any pretext that would deter us from condemning this calamity, in my opinion, it contributes to deviation from the historical context and distorts the criminal characterization of this crime against humanity. What Hitler did with his Nazi crime was an extension of his attempt to burn the entire world. Hitler was never a peace advocate, but raised his Aryan racial motto. He did not want [any race] on Germany’s land but his race; this psychological deceit [may have] caused him [to think] that he could burn the Creator’s values on this earth. [Eventually] Hitler was stopped, his crimes ended, history recorded this challenge and human dignity endured.

History continues to narrate these tragedies and learn lessons from them. But some people do not want history to write these lessons or to record these episodes. I always said that Hitler’s behavior in this regard and in the nature of his self-glorification, his racism and his abandonment of all values and crimes that shook humanity, totally remind us of the heinous crimes committed by Pharaoh—the first Hitler. When we listen to hate speech, to a racist speech, and move away from describing the truth, we will drift away and get out of the context of justice and truth-telling.

Satloff: Thank you very much. Let’s broaden the discussion, Dr. Al-Issa. In Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman has said he would like to return his country to an era of “a moderate Islam, open to the world and open to all religions.” So, let us look at each half of this sentence. First, moderate Islam. There was a time when Muslim leaders would reject the very phrase moderate Islam, saying there is no moderate Islam, there is only Islam. So, what in your view is moderate Islam, and how does it differ from extremist Islam?

Al-Issa: This is a question from an expert in Islamic thought! We can say there is indeed moderate Islam. Because there are some who raise the banner of Islam and are extremists, and some who raise the name of Islam and speak in the name of Islam, and are terrorists. Since this person is of Islamic origin

and speaks with his extreme concepts of texts, then, I cannot say that he is not of the Islamic environment or Islamic origin, but he speaks of Islam in accordance with his point of view; the Islam whose truth he hijacked with his extremist ideology.

Moderate Islam is the true Islam. It is the one that coexists with everyone; moderate Islam tolerates everyone, believes in difference, diversity and pluralism as a norm and part of the nature of creation. Moderate Islam believes in the right of others to believe [in their faith] and cannot impose its beliefs, its convictions or its ideas on others. Moderate Islam understands the differences and diversity in religions, sects, ideas, and cultures. Otherwise all people on this earth would have had one thought, one religion, and one culture.

Islam is moderate in origin, and the description of moderation in Islam is an authentic description of Islam. But I am patient about this moderation, so that I can warn the person who raises the slogan of Islam, while he does not have any connection to the meanings and concepts of Islam. When I do not separate moderate Islam from those slogans, I am causing distraction. For over 1400 years, Islam coexisted with all religions. But I would like to point out that there is a falsification of history and there are events that were recorded by some historians that are unrelated to Islam. You know that history is written by people and also perhaps it was slanted across the span of time. History is not a divine text protected from forgery. But we remember the religious texts in Islam. I specialize in Islamic law and studied these texts and I am a religious person and know the truth of these texts and what they aim at. All Islamic texts respect everyone, respect diversity. In Islam there is a Quranic text that says: "There is no compulsion in religion." And another Quranic text that calls for tolerance and beneficence with all Muslims and non-Muslims. It is a clear one. We cannot find extremists who inquire about this text; they do not mention it or do not want it. As the holy saying goes: "Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes – from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly". Also there is a mercy in Islam. The Prophet of God (Peace Be Upon Him) says: "I was sent to uphold and complement ethical values."

The Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) coexisted with everyone, in Mecca and Medina. There were pagans and there were also Jews, and he coexisted with them. His neighbor was a Jew, even while he was the head of the Islamic State. If he had wanted, he could have lived in a palace surrounded by thousands of guards, but he did not do so, while his neighbor was a Jew. And when his neighbor was sick, the Prophet Muhammad visited him. This is a fact. It's not from an article that I have read, and it's not fake history; it is attested by the Islamic texts transmitted to us. He [the Prophet] dealt with everyone. He dealt with Muslims and non-Muslims. He especially dealt—as we are in this meeting—with Jews. There were business transactions with them. He died while his shield was loaned to a Jew. This is Islam's perspective. When there are other perspectives mentioned in history, they are far from appreciating Islam or understanding Islam in terms of its outlook towards the existence of religions. Islam has never taken a position of rejecting the existence of any religion at all, neither Christianity, nor Judaism nor other religions. Rather, the Prophet Muhammad said that whoever killed the ally, the non-Muslim who is present among the Muslims, that person who kills him will not enter Paradise. Furthermore, the Prophet was sitting one day while a funeral of a Jew was taking place. The Prophet stood up when the funeral was passing by. He said this is a human soul that he respects and appreciates. These are not my words, but from religious texts. The Prophet coexisted with everyone, he loved everyone, and was tolerant toward everyone—and I would like to point out that the historical situations may get either wrongly understood, forged, or contain specific contexts and conditions beyond the fact that this was a Jew or a Christian.

Satloff: You just quoted a line from the Quran about not killing people from other faiths. Can you tell us your views on the idea of targeting civilians, of suicide bombings against civilians? Is purposely killing civilians ever acceptable under Islam?

Al-Issa: To start with, Islam has never called for a fight. There is no confrontation in Islamic history, except if it was imposed on Islam. According to Islamic history, Islam has never been an aggressor. Islam forbids assaulting civilians and peaceful people, and therefore suicide attacks against them are considered crimes in Islamic texts. I would also like to point out that the interpretations issued and spoken about by terrorist extremism have been rejected. The Muslim World League has confronted this extremist ideology, and its theories have been dismantled; these theories are weak and fragile, yet they have expanded in the past years, because they were not confronted by getting into their ideological details. The Muslim World League has confronted these theories which are fragile and very weak, as I mentioned. As the saying goes: they were “knocked out in the first round.”

Satloff: Does your view on prohibiting or criminalizing attacks against innocent civilians apply everywhere, from Cairo to Tel Aviv to New York to Paris?

Al-Issa: About Islam, I would like to say, a general rule is that Islam is against attacks on civilians; it criminalizes attacks on civilians anywhere in this world.

Satloff: Thank you. When we were chatting earlier, you said to me, “Rob, when there is peace we will meet together in Jerusalem.” I am not going to ask you a political question. I have respect that the Muslim World League is a non-political organization. So, I want to ask you a question about faith, about belief. If you and I meet in Jerusalem, is that a mark of respect that Jews, Christians and Muslims all recognize and are all legitimate in recognizing Jerusalem as a holy city?

Al-Issa: I believe that an Arab plan was submitted to solve the issue in all its aspects, for a fair, just and comprehensive solution. We all look forward to this solution; it is absolutely necessary as it provides justice for all. When this solution takes place, we will go together to bless this peace there, and we look forward to see it happening soon. Everyone is looking forward to this peace. It will be a comprehensive one that gives all sides their rights in all fairness. It is a plan that was submitted years ago, we look forward to the time when it will be achieved in order to stop this clash and this conflict, which is becoming more painful; its bleeding is growing every day. We will not be satisfied at all as we see the killing of innocent civilians, and we will not be comfortable, since we see that this issue can be solved when we put the interest of everyone first and provide wisdom and move away from any proposal that may lead to further separation and conflict. I think that the protraction of this matter without a solution will increase the bleeding, and all those involved will suffer from it. There is no doubt that there are those among all parties who may benefit from the protraction of this issue, but the living conscience, the wise people, always seek to end each conflict, and we hope this will be soon.

Satloff: Thank you. If you look on the website of the Muslim World League, I saw recently that you did issue a statement about a very important political event. You condemned the chemical weapons attack by the Syrian regime in Duma, calling it a war crime and a crime against humanity. Why did you do that?

Al-Issa: There is no doubt that this episode is also a criminal one. In criminal doctrine or in international criminal law, it is called a crime of genocide against humanity. These chemical weapons used against children are also considered a stain on humanity and it is the duty of international justice to stand firmly against these crimes because they besmirch the international community.

Satloff: Very good. Thank you. Let's talk for a moment about the Muslim World League itself. There is a great competition to be the source of authority for Muslims around the world, especially for young Muslims. What does the MWL offer young Muslims today? In other words, why should young Muslims listen to you?

Al-Issa: The League directs its message to Muslim youths and to everyone, even to non-young people. Of course, it focuses on young people because they are the future. It also directs its message to young and non-young non-Muslims. Our message is global and focuses on working to clarify the truth of tolerance, coexistence, and love in Islam. The League's discourse also confronts messages of extremism, whether they are from inside the Islamic community or outside it. There are voices of hatred emanating from extremists affiliated with Muslims as well as from extremists from outside the Islamic framework around the world, whether this extremism comes from at home or abroad, and is directed towards Muslims or non-Muslims. We do not want the voices of hatred at all. There are theories of hatred recited by some thinkers who try to build upon such theories, and confirm that humanity is in constant conflict. We are against this. The Creator, the Most High, did not create mankind to be in a perpetual struggle. God Almighty cannot command the impossible, and does not demand from people something that cannot be achieved. A person has his doctrinal conviction, his religious conviction, his intellectual conviction, his cultural conviction, his social, political, economic conviction, but he must understand the conviction of others—and not necessarily to be convinced by it, but to understand it, and then we will be at a level of awareness. When we respect others, we will then respect ourselves, and make others respect us. The methods of ethnic hatred, rejection of the other, and exclusion, these methods were tried by people before us throughout human history and they did not but cause wars, whether armed wars or cold wars.

Satloff: Dr. Muhammad, I think you know that critics have accused the Muslim World League of supporting institutions—mosques, madrasas—that have not taught the sort of moderate Islam that you advocate but rather an intolerant version. It wasn't too long ago that the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia actually said: "We have succeeded to a large extent in reducing extremism in our religious institutions; we used to have about 60% extremists, 40% moderates, now we have just 10% extremists, and the rest are moderate open-minded, enlightened people." So what can you say about what the organization has done in the past and what it is supporting now? Is it accurate to say that the League no longer funds any institutions or schools that advocate extremist Islam?

Al-Issa: The Muslim World League is a confederation of global organizations of Islamic peoples. It also communicates with non-Muslims for the purpose of cooperation to achieve the commonalities we all aspire to, foremost among them the establishment of peace, human harmony, the spread of tolerance, and amity, understanding the Creator's way of difference, diversity and pluralism. The Muslim World League is a strong association, with a great significance and weight in the Islamic world. When the League speaks, the Islamic world listens to it, for several reasons, first among them: It is the only global organization of Islamic peoples [that has been in existence] for 60 years, and because it speaks to the Islamic world from the Muslim Qiblah [the direction faced in prayer] which is the holy city of Mecca. When the League speaks, it is said that Mecca has spoken. In addition, its Supreme Council consists of sixty of the leading scholars of the Islamic world from throughout the Islamic countries. The Supreme Council also includes former heads of government from Islamic countries. When the Muslim World League lectures anywhere in Islamic countries, it is welcomed at the highest levels, and its conferences even get sponsored by heads of states and kings; it is also welcomed and appreciated by all non-Muslim countries. The Muslim World League has such weight and such importance and this holds us more responsible.

I would mention that when we spoke on Holocaust Remembrance Day and published our letter to the Museum's director, Ms. Sara Bloomfield, I received many letters of support from the leading scholars of the Muslim world. The Muslim World League did not receive a single message denouncing it or criticizing it for sending the letter, because everyone knows that when the Muslim World League speaks, it speaks on the basis of a wealth of information and a wealth of conviction. It does not improvise its message or the opinions it provides.

Fighting extremist ideas brings us back to the reality of Islam. We have studied Islam and religious texts, we are Muslim scholars, we believe in these ideas with conviction and with a wealth of religious texts; we understand them as the true Islam should be understood. If this religion wasn't tolerant and didn't coexist with all, it would have been extinct after its first century, as is the norm of the Almighty Creator, with all the opposition, antagonism and collisions in the nature of life. Whoever collides and opposes the nature of life would be finished. This religion could not have survived 1400 years, and increased its strength, presence and respect of others. We have learned Islam, and studied religious texts; we are Muslim scholars, we believe in these ideas with conviction and a wealth of religious texts; we understand them the way true Islam should be understood.

Satloff: I have two more questions Dr. Muhammad. You are here in Washington, a faith leader in a very political city. Is there a useful role you would like to see the United States play in countering extremism? Is there a role for the United States government in fighting against extremism or is this something that we should leave to people like you and to Muslim religious institutions? Is it only a matter of faith or is there also a role for government?

Al-Issa: America and other non-Muslim countries have a big role to play, especially for the United States, because of its size and strength, its global influence, its international weight and its civilized logic in the global civilizational system. This role cannot be focused on the interpretation of religious texts, with America coming to say that the meaning of this religious text is such and such and the interpretation of Islam is such and such—this can only come from within Islam. But non-Muslim states, and specifically the United States, are also required to face the voices of extremism that breed hatred and support terror organizations that benefit from the voices of hatred. The first to welcome Islamophobia and to cheer Islamophobia is ISIS, because it would get more followers. Therefore, the voices of hatred against Islam, or against religions in general, are completely unacceptable. The conviction of others must be respected. If some followers of religions committed an error, it is not right to have the whole religion bear the consequences of this error. Throughout history, how many slogans were raised in the name of the Lord, how much blood was spilled because of them, and human massacres with political aims were committed. The Lord abhors those people with great wrath, and everyone curses them, as they falsely raised the Lord's banner. How many souls were killed in charges of heresy, and in the name of confronting religious texts! , Enlightenment and human civilization were impeded in the name of religion, while true religion is innocent of all of this. You know the wars that broke out throughout history, in both the East and in the West. Blood was shed, millions were killed and religious banners were raised in those wars. Did the Creator call for these wars as the forgers and the liars claim? So, we must not blame religion, nor curse religion, nor be afraid of religion, if some of the followers of religion have sinned against religion and violated its provisions. We fight [evil] individuals; we do not fight religions.

Satloff: Given that you just noted how many innocent people have died because of religion, would you be willing to share a document with a Christian leader, with a Jewish leader, with leaders of other religions that says: No to killing in the name of God, that there is no justification for killing in the name of God? Would you be willing to support a statement that rejects all killings in the name of God? As you

said, there are extremists in the Muslim faith and in other faiths who say God is their reason for killing. Would you be willing to say “no—if you have a political dispute that’s one thing, but God is not the reason for killing”?

Al-Issa: The closest way to convince people is the spiritual path. Many people—and I won’t say most of them—are religious or respectful of religions. So if a politician, who has no values, has a political plan and can use religion to facilitate his plan, or to overcome obstacles, he would not hesitate to exploit such propaganda to influence people’s minds. Hitler used propaganda. There is also a parallel religious use. Religions were exploited to achieve political and material goals. There is a saying that: “Religion is like a hawk; whoever sends it, can hunt”; and therefore some politicians send this tool that affects the minds, the consciences and the souls by exploiting religion. According to the Muslim World League’s statistics, religion has been used in 70% of all human wars. It is a dangerous, ugly and disturbing number. Whoever has a political goal, and we know about his goal, and religion is innocent of that goal, we must say to him: Do not exploit religion, and we are serious about this, regardless of what entity he is using for this goal: ISIS, al-Qaeda, or any extremist organization that uses religion around the world. There are also certain slogans that turned into sectarian ones; there are people that we know have no real religion, and they entered politics; their practices and personal history are known. They raise sectarian and religious slogans in international platforms, and get applauded by the masses.

Satloff: Last question: Dr. Al-Issa, when you complete your service as head of the Muslim World League, what would you like to be able to say to your four children that you accomplished? What would you like to be able to say, to your children, was your greatest achievement?

Al-Issa: If I achieve my goal of reaching the level of human harmony and world peace that I aspire to, through the strength we have, through the Muslim World League, then I will be happy, proud, delighted, relaxed and joyful about the level that I have achieved, whenever it gets achieved. I think that this is what every human being can do. Our goal and my goal is to remove hatred, remove psychological barriers and make people live in peace. Each one of us gets informed, reads, and chooses what he is convinced of, and is responsible for his choice. But we must not fight and there should be no hatred. We should respect the others; we should respect the dignity and freedoms of the others. The logic of justice and truth must prevail. This is the biggest achievement anyone can hope for in this world.

Satloff: Peace, coexistence, respect, and dignity. Dr. Muhammad Al-Issa, thank you very much for joining us at The Washington Institute.