Transforming the Middle East: Why Christ-Like Leadership is the Key to Regional Change

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The Middle East is one of the most politically volatile regions on the planet. The eyes of the world have become increasingly fixed on this corner of the world as its continued instability threatens the oil wells that fuel the modern era. Furthermore, since the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York City, the U.S. declared war on terror, and the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, Western media has given a great deal of coverage to the subcontinent. It is true that it is sometimes difficult to filter media sensationalism over the "clash of cultures" from the actual condition of the Middle Eastern societies. Nonetheless, it is clear that there is a need for political and social reform within various parts of the Middle East to increase regional stability, humanitarian justice, and international peace. The key to such reformations rests in the development of effective leaders who model Christ-like leadership—citizens of Middle Eastern countries with a passion to change their nations from the inside out. This article explores this concept in five sections: 1) the underpinnings of Middle Eastern instability, 2) the inadequacy of Middle Eastern style leadership, 3) the inadequacy of Western style leadership, 4) Christ-like leadership as the alternative, and 5) an imperative conclusion.

Before diving in to these sections, however, it is important to discuss the danger of over-generalizing the concepts laid forth in this article. Contrary to the sweeping stereotypes of the Middle Eastern world presented frequently in the media of pop culture, the Middle East is not a socially monochromatic region represented by a unitary culture. Smith, Achoui, and Harb, for example, demonstrated this in their research finding that "there is substantial diversity in managerial styles"[i] throughout the Arab world. There is undoubtedly variation amongst the leadership style of leaders within the Middle East due to 1) normal personality and situational variables and 2) differences between the nations, religious sects, and ethnicities that constitute the region. The latter point is critical to note; not all Middle Eastern people are Arabs, not all Arabs are Muslim, not all Muslims are Sunni—consider the Christian Copts whose presence in Egypt predates the arrival of Islam, the Persian cultures in Afghanistan and Iran, the Turks in Turkey, etc. Nonetheless, regional studies have found a significant degree of generalization across the Middle Eastern world, and especially throughout the Arab nations. The purpose of this article is to offer a general impression of leadership in these areas and a strategy for leadership development, not an in-depth cultural analysis.

The Underpinnings of Middle Eastern Instability

The Middle East was not always characterized by instability throughout history. On the contrary, the people from this region are very proud of their accomplishments in medicine, mathematics, and science. In recent years, however, the Middle East has been criticized as being economically segregated, politically chaotic, and socially antiquated. Although these generalizations may not hold up entirely across the region, they do indicate that there are issues that need to be addressed. The causes of the present conditions across the Middle East are undoubtedly variegated and complex, but there are several major foundations that underpin the instability: 1) rigid social power structures, which enable 2) political and corporate corruption, and 3) undermine political and economic development.

Rigid Social Power Structures

In the Middle East, power in all spheres is considered a zero sum game[ii]. That is, within the family unit, business management, and politics power is considered a limited asset. Middle Eastern cultures by and large retain a strict, authoritative patriarchal family structure. Sidani and Thornberry also comment that education in public schools tends to focus on the elevation of the teacher rather than empowerment of the student; the students' primary responsibility is to please their teacher.[iii] These traits are congruent with Hofstede's finding that Arab countries score high on the cultural dimension of power distance, or "the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally."[iv] In sum, power and authority are viewed as non-negotiable in the Middle East. Authority is something to be held rather than shared.

Political and Corporate Corruption

The unfortunate effect of strict power structures is that they do not foster leadership accountability. With extremely limited opportunity to challenge authorities, people in authority often have near absolute power. When a leader of character is in power, this can be very positive for followers. Oftentimes, however, this lack of accountability and power distribution lends itself to political and corporate corruption.

According to Pollack, corruption spans the Middle East.[v] Sidani and Thornberry echo this sentiment, stating that "Corruption in the Arab world has also been a continuing ailment that is impacting operations both in the public and private sectors."[vi] The authors add that the pervasive top-down decision making style makes problem-recognition nearly impossible and that "the capacity for self-criticism or self-analysis is atrophied in much of the Arab world."[vii] Izraeli perhaps states it best when he describes the response he received from many Arabs and Israelis whom he interviewed concerning business ethics:

> [They] often responded with a chuckle or smile, a knowing wink and a derogatory wave of the hand. This was followed by a short explanation that these concepts are a contradiction in terms: business does not go with ethics and that Western norms of business ethics did not apply in the Middle East.[viii]

Thus, corruption in the Middle East is a major contributor to the region's instability, and its effects are devastating.

Undermined Political and Economic Development

The most obvious effects of the corruption on the political side are the constantly strained foreign relations, the continued, frequent occurrence of terrorist attacks throughout the region, and the general lack of democratic reforms. Jreisat states that many traditional Arab politicians are characterized by "individualism, paramountcy of the self, noninstitutional orientation, and the 'great leader' syndrome."[ix] Thus, many Middle Eastern political leaders show a lack of true concern for improving the infrastructure of their nations, the lives

of their citizens, or the international legitimacy of their regimes. While the West often gives lip service to its disapproval of the political corruption, it sometimes actually supports corrupt regimes when doing so serves Western interests.[x] For instance, consider the former shahs in Iran who were eventually revolted against by their own people, the current president in Egypt who has extended his term in office nearly thirty years despite the will of the people, or the Saudi Arabian monarchy which is an oil-sponsored autocracy. In sum, political corruption throughout the region is a serious problem that undermines its stability and stunts its development.

The effects of the corruption are equally devastating from an economic perspective. Imam and Jacob state that the "realization that hydrocarbon revenues are exhaustible, uncertain, and volatile has led to a growing consensus in the Middle East that governments must diversify their tax revenue sources,"[xi] but the authors add that widespread corruption hampers the ability to diversify. Gillespie concurs with this idea, adding that "Across the region, government leaders realize that their countries need more investment, both foreign and local, to develop their economies. They also recognize that corruption constitutes a major disincentive to investment."[xii] Internally, corruption stymies growth because of the inconsistent regulatory obstacles it creates for entrepreneurs in the private sector.[xiii] As a result, Askari states that "Over the 30 years between 1975 and 2005, per capita real growth [in the Middle East] was anemic"[xiv] and added that the cost to start a business in the region has risen to the highest in the world. The lack of economic stability has led to poverty, economic segregation, and higher motivation for continued corruption throughout the region.

In sum, the rigid social power structure, the political and corporate corruption, and the resulting lack of political and economic development have served as the basis for the Middle East's modern legacy of instability. As political and social relations between the Middle East and the rest of the world grow increasingly tense, it is certain that there is a need for positive change. In this context, though, it is clear that a new style of leadership must arise if true, lasting change is to occur.

The Inadequacy of Middle Eastern Style Leadership

Unfortunately, the current status quo style of leadership in the Middle East is not adequate for effecting true change. As previously mentioned, the tendency of traditional Arab leaders to hoard and protect power often precludes both proper accountability and the creative potential of more team-oriented leadership styles. That is not to suggest, however, that Middle Eastern leadership style is entirely negative—on the contrary, there are pros and cons as there are with any culture's leadership dimensions.

On the positive side, for example, Robbins states that "Arab leaders are expected to be tough and strong."[xv] At the same time, the author adds that "To show kindness or to be generous without being asked to do so is a sign of weakness." Dorfman points out that Arab leaders tend to be task-oriented more than team-oriented, adding that three-out-of-four Arab managers surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with statements such as "'I consider the department in which I work as my private property and I manage it the way I like,' 'I do not let anyone participate in the decisions I make,' and 'The prescribed procedures for work are mostly constraints that should not be adhered to.'"[xvi] Thus, Middle Eastern leadership tends to be directive, top-down, and strictly hierarchical. Neal, Finlay, Catana, and Catana call it "paternalistic."[xvii] This leadership style may be effective in certain circumstances, but its overall rigidity has stifled the region's development and proven inadequate for conquering its instability.

The Inadequacy of Western Style Leadership

Just as the solution is not a continuation of Middle Eastern style leadership, neither is it a superimposition of Western style leadership. Western leadership, especially postmodern communal leadership

models, may be seen as weak and indecisive by Middle Eastern peoples. Sidani and Thornberry argue that Arabs actually prefer leaders they perceive as strong and decisive.[xviii] Furthermore, Western leadership has its own pitfalls and the Arab world has proven resistant to its influence.[xix] Again, this is not to suggest that Western leadership has nothing to offer the Middle East—on the contrary, recent Western ideals of participative and creative leadership may be very helpful for Middle Eastern leaders. In and of itself, however, Western leadership cannot be superimposed on Middle Eastern culture because it is based in cultural values and norms that are foreign to the region's inhabitants.

<div align="center">Christ-Like Leadership as the Alternative</div>

The one leadership model that offers hope for effecting true and lasting change in the Middle East is Christ-like leadership. Jesus Christ, a historical figure from the Middle East himself, and an important figure in both Christian and Muslim religious traditions, has been heralded by many scholars as the greatest leader of all time. After all, he founded the largest, most influential religion that the world has known to date. Darden calls Jesus' leadership style the "one flawless example"[xx] that stands out above all other theories and models. While different religious groups within the Middle East may have different theological perspectives on the divinity, birth, and death of Jesus Christ, they all acknowledge him as an exemplary leader sent by God to bring a divine message to earth. The following five dimensions of Christ's leadership style are offered as fundamental foundations for a leadership model to stimulate internal reformation in the Middle East: 1) servanthood, 2) decisiveness, 3) holistic-orientation, 4) empowerment of followers, and 5) divine vision.

Servanthood

Perhaps the most cited aspect of Christ's leadership is his example of servant-leadership. Contrary to the self-promoting focus of worldly leadership styles—indeed, contrary to human nature—Jesus taught that "those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:42-43, New International Version). Jesus did not just give lip service to this concept, but rather he demonstrated it through the washing of his disciples' feet and he commanded them to do the same (see John 13). Furthermore, Jesus taught his disciples must love one another in the same way he loved them (John 13:34). Thus, leading like Jesus means humbly serving those who follow us, not out of self-abasement, but as an expression of love for God and for one another.

Decisiveness

Christ's humility and servant-leadership was not meant to suggest indecisiveness or egalitarianism, however. Markos argues that Jesus did not at all intend to deny his own authority or challenge the very concept of authority.[xxi] On the contrary, Jesus was quite aware of his own God-given authority (see Matthew 28:18), but he also recognized its source and purpose. Thus, when push came to shove, Jesus was a decisive leader. This was most notably demonstrated when Jesus "made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area" (John 2:15). Through his decisive action, he made his seriousness evident for all to see. Thus, Christ-like leadership means decisiveness and vigilance concerning that which is true, right, and just.

Holistic Orientation

The pitfalls of many leadership styles are the result of imbalance. Middle Eastern leadership may be too rigid in its hierarchal structure, Western leadership may place too great an emphasis on the individual leader's happiness, etc. Christ's leadership, on the other hand, stemmed from his holistic vision of life. Jesus was at

once gentle enough place his hands on the little children and bless them (Mark 10:16) and strong enough to challenge the motives of the reigning religious authority, calling them a "brood of vipers" (Matthew 3:7). Teaching his most famous message (see Matthew 5-7), Christ addressed humility, righteousness, grace, loving one's enemies, the sacred bond of marriage, the earthly pursuit of helping the needy, the heavenly pursuit of storing up treasures in heaven, the importance of the purity of one's heart, the futility of worry—he taught his followers a holistic way of living. It does not take great imagination to perceive the impact that these principles could have on the Middle East if the region's leaders lived them in word and deed. In sum, leaders in the line of Christ must pursue this same holistic, God-honoring approach to life, spirituality, and the treatment of others.

Empowerment of Followers

One of the most powerful actions Christ took as a leader was to empower his followers. Luke 10 records his commissioning of his disciples to go out onto the road ahead of him and spread his message. In Matthew 28 he again calls his disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), encouraging them with the assurance that he would go with them. Thus, Jesus did not try to establish his kingdom by himself. Even as the greatest leader of all time, he worked with and empowered his followers. Christ-like leaders must be willing to lead by example and participate, but also to genuinely empower their followers rather trying to carry the weight of their authority all alone.

Divine Vision

Finally, Christ had a divine vision—the coming of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15)—that guided everything he did and taught. He connected ancient prophecy (see Daniel 2) with contemporary conditions and a future hope. His vision of the kingdom of God was comprehensive yet personal, simultaneously abstract and practical, and, in its humble irony, powerful enough to change the course of history and inspire men, women, and children for ages to come. He inspired the willing portion of humanity to pursue the most sublime goals ever considered by mankind and he did it without having command of a nation, without propaganda, without riches, and without military might. In the end, it is Christ's style of leadership alone that can truly bring transformation to Middle East.

An Imperative Conclusion

This article presented the need for change in the Middle East, the underpinnings of the region's instability, the pros and cons of Middle Eastern and Western leadership styles, and the alternative that Christ-like leadership offers for transforming the subcontinent. It is noteworthy, though, that every place on earth inhabited by mankind is in need of transformation. Because the eyes of the Western world have become fixed on the Middle East in recent years, however, there exists a great opportunity for Christ-like leadership to be lifted up as an ideal model before world leaders if it is effectively implemented in the region. Or even if it is exemplified by only a select few leaders in the region, the lives that are changed and the forgiveness that results will be bright stars of hope in a territory darkened by centuries of hate and bitterness. It is in light of this possibility that leaders and developers from both Middle Eastern and Western nations should work together to train a generation of Christ-like leaders.

Discussion

There are two supplemental notes worth adding to this article: 1) the rising role of women in Middle Eastern leadership and 2) the potential for leaders from impoverished population segments. Neal et al note

the rising role of women in Arab leadership contrary to many Western assumptions.[xxii] Although the region remains largely paternalistic, educational reforms have opened many doors for women entering business and even politics. This trend may be very positive as it may allow more stereotypically feminine (but nonetheless Christ-like) leadership traits to become a natural part of Middle Eastern leadership—traits such as gentleness, human concern, and teamwork.

Second, when Jesus was on earth, he gathered his disciples from some of the most common (and even lowly) rungs of society—fishers, tax collectors, etc. In a similar way, it is conceivable that some of the most capable leaders may come from the underdog segments of Middle Eastern populations—the Iraqi Kurds, the Copts in Egypt, or the Palestinians in Israel. It is often demonstrated to be true, and has been true in my experience, that young people who have endured hardship with integrity are the most prepared to face the temptations of leadership with integrity. More research and experiment should be afforded to empowering individuals from these populations—they may be the greatest source of transformational, Christ-like leaders.

Notes

(Smith, Achoui and Harb 2007)
[1] (Sidani and Thornberry 2009)
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[1] (Sidani and Thornberry 2009, 35)
[1] (Sidani and Thornberry 2009, 45)
[1] (Izraeli 1997, 1556)
[1] (Jreisat 1997, 177)
[1] (Gillespie 2006)
[1] (Imam and Jacob 2007, 3)
[1] (Gillespie 2006, 40)
[1] (Pollack 2008)
[1] (Askari 2006, 410)
[1] (Robbins 2008, 102)
[1] (Dorfman 2004, 307)
[1] (Neal, et al. 2007, 292)
[1] (Sidani and Thornberry 2009)
[1] (Neal, et al. 2007)
[1] (Darden 2006, 37)
[1] (Markos 2009)
[1] (Neal, et al. 2007)

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[i] (Smith, Achoui and Harb 2007)
[ii] (Sidani and Thornberry 2009)
[iii] (Sidani and Thornberry 2009)
[iv] (Hofstede 2009)
[v] (Pollack 2008)
[vi] (Sidani and Thornberry 2009, 35)
[vii] (Sidani and Thornberry 2009, 45)
[viii] (Izraeli 1997, 1556)
[ix] (Jreisat 1997, 177)
[x] (Gillespie 2006)
[xi] (Imam and Jacob 2007, 3)
[xii] (Gillespie 2006, 40)
[xiii] (Pollack 2008)
[xiv] (Askari 2006, 410)
[xv] (Robbins 2008, 102)
[xvi] (Dorfman 2004, 307)
[xvii] (Neal, et al. 2007, 292)
[xviii] (Sidani and Thornberry 2009)
[xix] (Neal, et al. 2007)
[xx] (Darden 2006, 37)
[xxi] (Markos 2009)
[xxii] (Neal, et al. 2007)

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