Bad social policy, not ideology, blamed for the Arab world's downward spiral

July 9 2014, by Rana Jawad

Political Islam: Muslim brotherhood supporters in Cairo. Credit: EPA/Ahmed Almasry

The rapid rise of ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) to global notoriety has taken observers of Middle East politics by surprise. All of a sudden, a new Islamist political movement has stunningly upstaged former global public enemy number one al-Qaeda and establishes an Islamic state, a caliphate encompassing lands in both Iraq and Syria.

ISIS sees itself and its newly declared caliphate as revoking the historic

deals that were struck between European imperial powers after World War I, which gave us most of the Middle Eastern borders we know today.

Nothing symbolises the sorry state of Arab politics more than the march of ISIS. The Arab world at large appears to be fast descending into a political quagmire, only a few years after the euphoria of the so-called Arab Spring. The unravelling of old dictatorships in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and Syria has opened up a pandora's box of sectarian, ethnic and tribal divisions, old faultlines that have persisted under the heavy hand of police states for the last century.

And the more chaotic the region becomes, the more desperate and frustrated the search for a meaningful explanation.

Bad governance

From the perspective of many western governments and much of the western media, many Arab countries have never been able to govern themselves effectively. They lack structures for effective democratic governance and rule of law; they are bedeviled by corruption and are too influenced by Arab or Islamic traditions which favour paternalistic or patronage systems of rule.

The rise of ISIS, meanwhile, is yet another example of how many Arab states, who never really saw their independence-era nation-building projects to completion, are still being buffetted about by the whims of modern-day feudal warlords.

In this sense, ISIS embodies the regressive and reactionary nature of "political Islam". The Arab world is of strategic interest to the West thanks to oil; at best, wealthy gulf countries fund football clubs, car and horse racing, and London skyscrapers – but beyond this, at least viewed

from the West, it's hard to see what the Arab region stands for in the world today.

But in the region itself, that narrative is read very differently indeed.

Too much intervention

Arab politicians and current affairs commentators alike have a fondness for conspiracy theories. Many of the woes the Arab countries have faced are often blamed on American-Israeli and perhaps also British plotting against long-term stability in the Arab countries; the old colonial "divide and rule" tactics have not been forgotten.

Much of this thinking stems from the tension between various states and movements (Syria, Iran, and the Lebanese Hezbollah) and Israel, with the conflict over Palestine now at its most heated for years.

In their eyes, much conflict within the Arab region (and between Sunnis and Shias in particular) is the latest in a long line of plots to weaken anti-Israeli sentiment and embroil the Arab world with internal conflict – and eventually to dismantle the resistant states and Hezbollah. In this scenario, the dark side of Gulf wealth is the funding of radical movements like ISIS.

The situation, then, is that many Arab peoples are so busy fighting and killing each other they are not attending to the real social challenges which are causing them real social harm: disunity, unemployment, poverty, and social inequality.

Better policy needed

This is the biggest missing link in the media and political debate over the

ISIS crisis. Modern Islamist social movements often proclaim that "Islam is the solution" to all the social and political woes of Arab populations. This reflects the fact that under dictatorship, the only viable platform for political protest in the Arab world was Islamic identity; there could be no civil society and no freedom of association; after dictatorship, religious identity was the inevitable fall-back position for political organisation.

The pressing social problems facing Arab and Muslim populations are often overshadowed in Western media coverage by the problem of "political Islam". Arab countries have some of the highest levels of unemployment in the world; they have not industrialised sufficiently (or at all, in some cases) to develop their workforces' skills and knowledge base.

Worse still, their reliance on rentier income from oil, gas or foreign remittances attached to those industries has lead sluggish economic growth and kept human capital poor.

The motivating thrust of political Islam is a sense of social dislocation, and a search for the identity and independence of the Arab nation. But the convoluted politics and thwarted economics of Arab countries make any such search terribly myopic, even disregarding the ideological extremism of Islamist movements.

For too long, the question of social policy in the Arab countries has been sidelined by raging political disputes, and these states badly need to start using policy to articulate a lost sense of the common good. An essential dimension of this governance reform would require Arab countries renegotiating their place within the wider political economy, and being less hostage to outside political influence of ally states (both within the Middle East and the West) and more receptive to the will of their people.

Until that happens, the reign of terror will prevail.