

Asia: Must-haves for the latest global Islamic TV channel

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The leaders of Turkey, Malaysia and Pakistan have decided to set up an English TV channel in order to remove misgivings about Islam and project the 'correct' religious values. What better moment to ask ourselves exactly what misgivings, and what values we are talking about here...

"President Erdogan, PM Mahatir [sic] and myself had a meeting today [Wednesday] in which we decided our 3 countries would jointly start an English language channel dedicated to confronting the challenges posed by Islamophobia and setting the record straight on our great religion — Islam.

"Misperceptions which bring people together against the Muslims would be corrected; issue of blasphemy would be properly contextualised; series and films would be produced on Muslim history to educate/inform our own people & the world; Muslims would be given a dedicated media presence."

As a media professional, the news gave me great joy as a new channel, which would obviously be well-funded, will generate jobs for journalists and exciting careers and creative opportunities for many others associated with the media, particularly Pakistanis given their language and professional skills.

When these leaders move forward with their project they will have to keep a couple of important points in mind. The first and foremost challenge is that such a channel runs the risk of 'preaching to the converted' ie Muslims, mostly expats, who live in the Anglophone West.

It would be a professional challenge to have the content inform as well as entertain because given the media choices available in more open societies the channel could easily be seen as a mouthpiece of a handful of Muslim countries directed at their own expats.

Opening up our own societies and moving them in the direction of tolerance for diverse opinions would go a long way in establishing the bona fides of the channel.

One way of safeguarding against such an eventuality is to build in, within the channel schedule, a platform for debate where a diversity of voices would not only discuss misperceptions about Islam in the West but also openly talk of ills within Muslim societies and the need for reform.

An honest introspection is imperative if the proposed channel is to have any impact whatsoever amongst the desired audience in the West. For example, look at the record of the three main movers of this idea where media freedom is concerned.

We are not talking of outright dictatorships or monarchies; we are discussing countries that have an electoral process and elected governments, admittedly with varying degrees of credibility of that process and the governments that are formed as a result.

So opening up our own societies and moving them in the direction of being tolerant of diverse opinions and especially criticism of those directly or indirectly in power would go a long way in establishing the bona fides of the channel and the countries/governments backing it. Pluralism and the rights of women are an absolute prerequisite here.

Equally, a channel by itself would be most inadequate to remove the misgivings about our faith as most of these are based on how we are seen to practise it. Take the example of the misuse of the blasphemy law which has brought infamy to our country and society. Just this week, the Supreme Court acquitted Wajih-ul-Hasan who was sentenced to death in 2002, citing serious flaws in the prosecution case and the investigation into the matter which formed the basis of Mr Hasan's sentencing.

On the one hand, one can celebrate the fact that justice was finally dispensed — but it would be heartless not to see that an innocent man spent 18 years in prison. Who will compensate him for losing his freedom and life for a staggeringly long period of nearly two decades?

This is not all. As a leader eloquently argued in this newspaper a charge of blasphemy, let alone, a conviction by a court of law is tantamount to pinning a target on the accused's back. There have been instances of those acquitted later being hunted down.

Not just the accused. A high court judge who acquitted the accused was murdered. Even their lawyers have not been spared. University professor Junaid Hafeez has been in prison for six years. Rashid Rehman, the Multan-based human rights lawyer, who took up the case, was warned in open court not to take up the brief. The brave man did not relent. He was shot dead in his office in 2014. Nobody has been arrested or faced justice for that murder as far as I know. Since the professor was charged, some half a dozen presiding judges have come and gone but Junaid Hafeez remains in prison.

We would do well to remind ourselves that we can have any number of channels but the impact will be insignificant unless such gross miscarriage of justice does not stop in practice.

For the proposed channel to really serve the purpose of removing misgivings about Islam and contextualising what the faith says about matters that are often misunderstood there is a dire need for this ostensible voice of the Muslim world to be objective and open.

Human rights, freedom of expression are universal principles, and if my own belief is anything to go by, tolerance is one of the founding principles of our faith. The channel will have to represent these and be critical where these values are not respected.

I was shaking with anger when I saw the photo in social media of a notice displayed in the lobby of a block of seemingly upmarket Karachi flats warning owners 'not to rent their flats to any non-Muslim' as the residents' association would refuse to provide any services to them.

Two personal friends, both educated professionals belonging to minority faiths, confirmed they personally experienced this apartheid when they were attempting to rent apartments in Karachi. I cite this example merely to illustrate the size of the challenge. Will the leaders take note?

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