

Spreading Enlightenment Ideas Beyond Borders

Islamic terror has been trending down for five years.

Some American officials said this would never happen.

America has failed to properly fight terrorism, said former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton, so it “has spread, gaining countless new adherents.”

Others said fundamentalism’s demand for religious obedience over individual freedom means “peace is not possible.” Muslims will never embrace Enlightenment ideals like individual freedom and separation of church and state.

But Faisal Saeed Al Mutar, of the group Ideas Beyond Borders, calls that view “ignorant.” He says Middle Eastern young people are moving away from fundamentalism. Surveys do show Middle Eastern youth are becoming less religious and less trusting of religious leaders.

Faisal credits the internet. “Facebook, the social media entry to the Middle East, has been kind of revolutionary.” It introduced young people to American sitcoms. *Friends* and *Seinfeld*, subtitled in Arabic, “show you what good life looks like.”

Faisal grew up in Iraq and had a very different upbringing. “I was told, ‘you cannot hold hands with this woman...cannot listen to that music.’” That leads young people to “develop a lot of resentment against the establishment.”

But until social media was invented, most didn’t know about alternatives.

After Faisal escaped Iraq and discovered the freedoms of America, he started Ideas Beyond Borders, which translates articles and books about individual rights into Arabic. They also make short videos about these ideas.

His social media following grew quickly. One of his Facebook pages has 3.5 million likes. “People were searching for it,” he says in my newest video, because “this was the first time the ideas of freedom and liberty were available in Arabic.”

He asks his audience what videos they would like to see and what books “that if you publish yourself, you might get blown up” they would like translated next. “They often say Steven Pinker,” he says.

“What does Steven Pinker say that deserves being blown up?” I ask.

“Enlightenment,” he replies. “The values of reason, and science, and separation of church

and state, in this case, mosque and state. And freedom of economy. Freedom of movement has really led to a prosperous society.”

In the last few years, more young people have pushed back against their countries’ repression. “They want individual rights. They want freedom of speech,” says Al Mutar.

At those protests, Faisal’s volunteers set up tents and pass out Western books like *Lying* by Sam Harris and Pinker’s *Enlightenment Now*.

Some of his supporters have been attacked by radicals. One was killed.

But Faisal claims young people are winning the war of ideas.

I push back. “I’ve been told optimistic things before. Arab Spring was supposed to change everything.”

Arab Spring was “overblown,” he replies. But then the brief rule of ISIS changed the minds of some even very religious people.

“Some believed in the concepts that ISIS advocated...establishing a caliphate and establishing religious law,” says Faisal. “But then they live under it and see a beheaded woman and gays being thrown from rooftops. Most people there are just like anyone else. They want to live in peace and prosperity.”

Faisal’s journey to peace and prosperity began when he was a teen. His neighborhood “became infested with al-Qaida members.” He received death threats. That’s when he came to America.

“Is America what you expected?” I ask.

“Definitely,” he replies. “In fact, much better than I thought.”

Americans welcomed him into their homes and gave him books.

Now, Ideas Beyond Borders translates those books into Arabic. “We have 120 translators working for us full time.”

It’s good that Ideas Beyond Borders spreads the word about freedom.