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## **Chapter One**

### *Navigating Islam in America*

By Hedieh Mirahmadi

I will never forget that beautiful summer night, in the elegant Hollywood Hills eatery, where I first met a Saudi prince. Having grown up in a staunchly secular, yet culturally Muslim family, it was fascinating for me to meet an official member of the Saudi royal family. That title carries a mystique and an air of superiority, conferring on its holder the role of official representative of Islam, a topic I then knew very little about. The night progressed, with countless bottles of champagne and unimaginably priced bottles of wine, until I could no longer restrain myself from posing the question that had been on my mind all evening: “Sorry to ask this,” I turned to my gracious host and said, “but isn’t it forbidden to drink alcohol?” With a coy smile, and the utmost seriousness in his voice, Prince Ahmed responded, “Oh Hedieh, don’t you know? Allah doesn’t live here. This [America] is *dar al-harb*, and Allah doesn’t turn his gaze to this land.” That statement thrust me directly into the curious and contentious debate over the true understanding of Islam, an issue that I—and many others—would spend the next decades trying to decipher.

In order to truly understand how we should engage the Muslim community today, it is critical to begin with a discussion of how the study and practice of Islam has changed over time. A brief analysis of over fourteen centuries of history is essential to understanding the diversity in thought and beliefs of Muslims around the world. While this diversity is at times a cause of great

conflict among Muslims, at other times it has been a source of great strength—and not just for Muslims. As the West continues its long-term struggle against radical extremism, this diversity makes clear just who its real allies are within Muslim communities.

Today, Americans want to know how a religion whose very name is derived from the Arabic word for “peace” could become a rallying point for terrorists. They want to know how a faith that teaches tolerance and compassion could provide the moral impetus for hijackings and suicide bombings. And they want to know why men who claim to act in the name of Islam could have declared war against their very way of life.

These questions should be asked, for they go to the very heart of the present conflict. In answering them, America will learn that its real enemy is not Islam or Muslims, but rather a small sect that has been working for centuries to subvert Islam and transform it into a weapon of war. This enemy is not an individual or group, but rather a complex transnational network of organizations that share a common ideology and that are united by their hatred of the West and their determination to create a new world order.

While most of the world began to appreciate the full magnitude and nature of this threat only after the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, the Muslim world has been aware of its existence for some time. There is no umbrella term that defines all the adherents to this extremist movement, but a couple of terms applied to them should be familiar. Many use the term “Wahhabi,” after the founder of their sect, but they prefer to call themselves “Salafis,” which translates as “pure ones.” Unlike classical Muslims, whose focus is on an individual's personal relationship with God, the focus of Wahhabis and Salafis is on military combat, which they call “*jihad*.” The catch-all term “Islamist” is also commonly used to describe various factions of Islamic movements that, despite their differences, are all united in the drive to

establish a new world order dominated by a rigid interpretation of Islamic law.

### **Classical Islamic Roots**

History reveals that some companions of the Prophet Muhammad brought Islam to the Far East and the West not only through trade, but also through directed social outreach. Ascetic scholars of classical Islam taught—and lived—teachings of goodwill toward others, respect, compassion, and purity of heart, thereby helping Islam to flourish and to develop into four main schools of thought (*madhabs*) based on divine law and the examples of the Prophet. The names of these pious scholars still resound throughout the Muslim world, where judicial systems and disciplines of academic legal study remain based on the four major schools of Islamic thought they founded.

The Qur'an teaches that "among God's signs are the variations in your languages and your colors," reminding us that diversity and multiplicity are God's way. Diversity in religious interpretation and practice strengthens all religions, just as a multiplicity of political parties strengthens democracy. A strong intellect requires competing stimuli and the exchange of ideas in order to develop; when people are forced to follow a single opinion, the result is the death of reason, invention, and growth. The founding of different schools of Islamic thought was the fruit of the mental and spiritual labor of believers; this labor was directed towards the goal of creating interpretations of divine law that evolve in each era and reflect changing cultural dynamics while retaining the spirit of religious scriptures.

Throughout Islamic history, we find hundreds of interpretations of religious texts introduced in different eras. This plethora of competing ideas tremendously enriched traditional Islam and gave individuals the means to seek security, peace, and tranquility through their own beliefs and practices, derived with the help of these varying interpretations.

## Unity in Principles

Though the interpretations of Islamic texts vary widely, all Muslims agree on certain basic principles of their faith. These include: the oneness of God, the validity of the prophecy of the Prophet Muhammad and of all earlier prophets, and the divine perfection of the Qur'an as God's final revealed word to humankind. There is a similar lack of disagreement among Muslims on what constitutes Islam's pillars of worship: the profession of faith ("There is no god but God, and Mohammed is His Prophet"), the set amount of mandatory prayer, and the universal requirements to fast, to give alms, and to make the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to Mecca. These fundamentals—identical to all schools of Islamic thought—constitute the "trunk" of the tree of faith; different opinions and practices exist only in its "branches."

The greatest traditional Muslim legal scholars did not neglect the spiritual dimension of their religion: as Imam Malik, the founder of the Maliki *madhab*, declared, "Whoever studies spirituality without observing the divine law is a heretic, and whoever studies divine law without spiritual teachings is corrupted, and whoever studies spirituality and divine law together will find the truth and reality of Islam."

In the Middle Ages, classical Islam flourished through the teachings of these spiritual masters. Their lives were based on refined manners, generosity, service to others, and humility. Their spiritual nourishment was remembering God by chanting and singing His praises. They asked their students simply to accept God as their Creator and the Prophet Muhammad as His messenger, to worship God without ascribing any partner to Him, and to abandon idolatry. They taught the importance of repentance, of purifying the ego of arrogance and lower desires, and of

honesty and trustworthiness in all matters. They emphasized the need to be patient and God-fearing and to love others selflessly, depending only on God for one's reward. They rejected fame and high positions because they did not seek a materialist life.

They convinced the wealthy to build mosques, dormitories, and soup kitchens for the poor, offering free room and board, and stressing charitable work. Based on the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (who said, "There is no difference between Arabs and non-Arabs, except through righteousness") such institutions joined together rich and poor, black and white, and Arab and non-Arab. Furthermore, they saw everyone as equal, especially women, who were included as full partners in community building.

### **Wahhabi Roots**

At the same time as this vibrant traditional Islam developed and flourished, another approach to religion began to evolve: Islamic extremism. Even in the early years, some Muslims took an extreme approach--misusing the name of Islam and pretending to be like their tolerant contemporaries while spreading intolerant—and intolerable—doctrines of oppression and fanaticism.

What is often referred to as the "Islamist movement" is, more specifically, the modern outgrowth of an eighteenth-century heresy spawned by a radical Bedouin named Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703–1792). Claiming that Islam had been corrupted by countless innovations, he set out with puritanical zeal to eliminate all these "new" elements from the faith. Dogmatic and narrow in his view of religion, Wahhab denounced intellectualism, mysticism, and classical Islam (especially its spiritual aspects), labeled earlier Islamic scholars as "heretics," and rejected the teachings of the four *madhabs* that for centuries had fostered justice and moderation in

Muslim society.

His strategy allowed the members of his sect, known as “Wahhabis,” to interpret Islam according to their own whims; they accepted whatever supported their ambitions, and rejected what stood in their way. Those who rejected the new doctrine were summarily declared “apostates.” The “enemies of Islam”—that is, Jews, Christians, and people of other faiths as well as traditional Muslims— were targeted by a vicious crusade to “purify the faith.”

Ibn Abdul Wahhab believed that Islam must be reformed through violence and insurrection. By opening the entire faith to reinterpretation, he was able to provide a theological justification for his call to arms. His ideology is in direct conflict with the cooperative, tolerant nature of classical Islam. Wahhabism was imposed by force throughout local tribes, but because it initially lacked economic and political power Wahhabism failed to take root beyond Arabia—although this would change when conditions became more favorable in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To give false credibility to their new sect, Wahhabis refer to themselves as “Salafi”, which translates as “the pure ones” and most policy analysts prefer to use that term. Despite this attempt at false credibility, Salafis are still called Wahhabis by the majority of Muslims who resent their oppressive and deviant amalgamation of Islam.

### **Irrational Fears Forbid the Permissible**

Some examples of the rigidity, Wahhabi-Salafi doctrine include its prohibition on the use of tobacco or the consumption of coffee. Wahhabism became so extreme that some sect members consider *anyone* who smokes or drinks coffee a disbeliever. One of the Wahhabis' most-revered scholars, Shaykh bin Baz, declared that the West was ignorant for considering the earth to be round; only in 1985, when a Saudi astronaut flew aboard the space shuttle Discovery, did he

accept that the earth was not flat. This narrow view of the world—and the corresponding attitude of dismissiveness toward other perspectives—is a hallmark of Wahhabism.

Salafis destroy ancient relics and shrines based on their irrational fear that they promote idol worship, as seen in 2001 when the Salafi- Taliban regime in Afghanistan destroyed two priceless third-century statues of the Buddha. Salafis also prohibit the visitation of graves and, even destroyed the burial place of the Prophet Muhammad and his loved ones, despite their hugely sacred significance to traditional Muslims everywhere. For decades, Wahhabis prohibited photography—even for purposes of identification—on the grounds that it was also a form of idolatry.

Before the relatively recent rise of Wahhabism, for centuries women had freely pursued careers as teachers of religious texts, physicians and healers, leadership advisers, and social activists. Muslim women owned property, ran businesses, and maintained financial independence—in short, they enjoyed rights that Western women would not obtain until the twentieth century. In sharp contrast, Wahhabism has systematically disenfranchised Muslim women by denying them the freedom to think and operate as independent beings. Strict Wahhabi clerics preach that women must stay at home and obey the men of the family. They deny women education, jobs, the freedom to move about in society, and even the right to choose a husband. Centuries of women’s contributions to classical Islamic societies have been excised from history by Wahhabis and their teachings.

Yet, the most damaging aspect of Wahhabi doctrine is the insistence that only its interpretation of Islamic law is correct, and that those who refute it—especially other Muslims—are apostates, making it legal to fight, torture, or kill them as enemies of the faith.

### **Initial Failure and Subsequent Success**

Wahhabism remained confined to its humble tribal origins for years after Wahhab's death until the founder of the Saudi family, Mohammed ibn Saud, converted to Wahhabism and spread it by force. It was a merger of religious hegemony and military might that helped both Wahhab and Ibn Saud realize their dream of power, and soon they established the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Wahhab's descendants still preside over some Saudi religious institutions, thus providing a theological ground for their existence; in return, the Saudi dynasty provides military power, financial support, and political leadership to the Wahhabi clerical structures.

In the rest of the Middle East the end of European colonialism gave rise to corrupt and despotic new regimes, which only fueled further social and political unrest throughout the region. As traditional Islamic institutions formally collapsed with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I, a dangerous void was created. Initially, it was filled by a socio-political paradigm that drew heavily on modernist notions of nationalism and Marxist concepts of class struggle and world revolution.

However, from the late 1970s through the 1990s, Islamism as a political movement began to supplant the failed Marxist liberation movements and Arab nationalism. In some countries, left-wing leaders reinvented themselves as Islamist revolutionaries after calls for popular revolt went unheeded by the masses. Islamist scholars falsified grounds on which revolutionaries could overcome traditional Islamic prohibitions against civil insurrection. While traditional Islamic law categorically forbids uprisings against Muslim rulers, the Islamist scholars declared the leaders of countries such as Egypt and Algeria "unbelievers," allowing the masses to revolt.

This led to Islamist opposition movements and insurrections in Algeria, Yemen, Libya, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and elsewhere. It has also fragmented the movement, since some Islamist

leaders urged immediate rebellion while others called for a more gradual approach to social change. The most successful of these movements, known as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), spread like wildfire across the Muslim world from its origins in Egypt. Though it maintains its base there, and continues to operate to a degree as an opposition political party, the repression its members faced under the Nasserite Egyptian government soon forced many MB members abroad. For a significant number of these “political refugees” fleeing Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, and Syria as well as Egypt, Saudi Arabia was the destination of choice.

With this sudden injection of proselytizing fervor, organizational expertise, and intellectual talent, the Saudi Wahhabi regime developed the ideological infrastructure that—together with considerable sums of money from oil sales—enabled Wahhabism to establish itself in the mainstream across the Muslim world.

Petrodollars in hand, Wahhabis have financed the construction of Islamist schools and the distribution of free Islamist literature all over the globe, in every language and in every country. Muslim students from around the globe flocked to the kingdom, where they received a free education in Islamism along with guarantees of jobs at Saudi-funded mosques and religious institutions from California to Calcutta.

Wahhabi Saudis have built and financed more than 1,500 mosques, 200 colleges, and nearly 2,000 religious schools, most of which are in Europe and North America. Today, Salafis have indoctrinated millions of youth to embrace their puritanical views as a means toward world supremacy.

It is important to note that not all Saudi subjects are Wahhabis. In fact, Saudi Arabia is an ideologically diverse society, and while many of its citizens are adherents of traditional Islam, they are overshadowed by the power and influence of Wahhabi officials. Recently, under King

Abdullah's reign, observers have detected attempts to shift the balance of power away from the Salafis so as to allow this diversity of opinion to emerge. It will be important to see whether this internal shift has an effect on the version of Islam that the Saudis propagate abroad.

While Islamists now enjoy a global reach as perhaps the religion's most powerful movement, they constitute only a fraction of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims. It is the special relationship between the Islamist movement and the Gulf Arabs that makes the voice of Islamist extremism resound so loudly through the world today. For over two centuries, traditional Muslims have stood powerless against the unlimited oil wealth that funds the Islamist influence on nearly every Islamic institution throughout the world.

### **The Globalization of Islamism**

Islamists have formed numerous political groups and revolutionary organizations, including Palestine's Hamas, with its legions of suicide bombers, and Algeria's Armed Islamic Movement, which has a penchant for wiping out whole villages with machetes. Salafism motivates political parties such as Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front, which tried to come to power through elections, and Jamaat-e-Islami, a highly influential politico-religious group in Pakistan. Yet despite differences in methods and tactics, all Islamist groups are united by the aim of establishing a theocracy based on a puritanical interpretation of Islam.

### **The Reinvention of Military Jihad**

While traditional Islam rejects wholesale the tactics of terror, many Islamists firmly believe that violence is the primary means of reforming religion, society, and the world as a whole. While the

majority of traditional Muslim scholars has long held that waging jihad (military combat) against non-Muslims was justified only in response to aggression—as defined collectively by all Muslim nations, not just by one Muslim country—the radical Islamists view war against the West as a religious obligation, with those who participate in it being rewarded with eternal Paradise. They give such priority to jihad that they have added it as the sixth pillar of Islam.

Islamists have always been linked to extremism and violence, but the movement did not become a serious threat to the West until the 1970s when the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan sparked a revival of the concept of jihad. Islamist organizations stepped up, calling for volunteers for the “holy war” in Afghanistan and opening recruitment offices and training camps throughout the world. Most volunteers were Arab, but recruits came from as far away as the Philippines and the United States. In addition to military training, each of these volunteers received intensive indoctrination in Salafi Islam, a tactic that did much to facilitate the spread of extremist ideology.

As the conflict in Afghanistan ended, these militants sought new battles. They moved to Bosnia, Somalia, and Chechnya, and are now in Iraq. This, in turn, created a vast international network of jihadis, many of whom later joined al-Qaeda. In many of these regions, Salafis encountered stiff resistance from indigenous Muslims. Wherever traditional Sunni practices predominate, Salafi ideology conflicted directly with the prevailing local understanding of Islamic spirituality and ethics. Until the present day, traditional Muslim leaders are able to distinguish intruding Wahhabi ideologues and their adherents from the rest of their community.

Though all of this history may appear to be relevant only to Muslim nations trapped in an endless factional struggle, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it is here in my own country, the United States, that this battle is waged most dangerously.

## **Islamists in the United States**

Islamists first came to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s as students, intending to return home after completing their studies. Many of them remained in the United States; with support from wealthy backers in the Gulf, they established themselves as successful businessmen, engineers, and academics, and began to acquire power and influence in the growing American Muslim community. Thanks to their relentless activism, over time Islamists took control of many existing mosques and Muslim charities, and (again, with the help of petrodollars) built hundreds of new mosques, religious schools, and community centers across the U.S. Using tactics similar to the Communists, they organized domestic organizations to speak for American Muslims, making sure that their voice was the only one heard.

Today, the Islamist movement's influence can be felt in a majority of American Muslim communities. Islamist clerics and activists set the tone for weekly sermons, organize the training and selection of clerics, and may even decide which books will be sold in mosques and Islamic centers. While the Islamists are successful in taking over leadership of many major Islamic organizations and institutions, their views do not represent the vast majority of moderate, mainstream American Muslims. It is important to stress here that these are self-appointed leaders who do not represent the will of the Muslim masses.

Though mainstream American Muslims reject the uncompromising nature of Islamist doctrine and abhor the terrorist violence it sometimes promotes, they lack the financial and political resources, as well as the requisite religious training, to mount a serious defense against their powerful, well-funded, and sophisticated Islamist adversary.

The traditional Muslim, with his basic understanding of Islam as a way of life based on

tolerance and respect, was and is the average worshipper in most mosques. Yet without major outside support these common Muslims do not have the capacity to retain leadership control, and are thereby consigned to remain “average worshippers” for the foreseeable future. Mosque politics are left to those whose voices are the loudest, to those who can best manipulate the ballot boxes to their advantage. The average Muslim, far more concerned with earning his daily bread and educating his children, has no interest in the bitter political battles waged in mosques, tending instead to avoid such confrontation. Traditional Islamic leaders are so rare in the United States, and are so lacking in formal support, that they have little or no effect on the American Muslim scene.

The Islamists' tactical focus in the U.S. is concentrated on the creation of a series of organizations and institutions, each with its own unique function, controlled by a complicated web of interlocking directorates. Some groups are fronts for subversive activities, while others conduct legitimate operations. One group of organizations focuses on Islamic academic institutions, aiming to replace traditional Islamic scholarship with a program of indoctrination that promotes Islamist ideology.

Another group targets the Muslim community as a whole, establishing umbrella organizations that claim to speak for all Muslims, and seizing control of houses of worship. These groups control what is—and is not—preached from the pulpit. They represent Islam to the broader society, attempting to deflect the suspicions of law-enforcement authorities and to influence the country's political processes to support the Islamist agenda.

A third group, composed of charities and shell companies, manages the movement's finances and raises funds to support its extremist causes overseas. The entire process is intended to foster rapid ideological change, one that affects entire communities and, in some cases, whole

societies.

Again, the strategy is similar to that used by the Communists to organize dissent and control socio-political movements, with the targets instead being mosques, religious schools, and Islamic centers. Perhaps a more accurate analogy is to the way the Mafia runs a neighborhood or industry. It survives based on economic control, intimidation, and fear.

### **Salafi Control of U.S. Islamist Organizations**

This complex edifice of Salafi control is founded on its ideological principles, created and propagated by the Muslim Brotherhood and its offshoots, and supported by Gulf oil wealth.

During the 2007 trial of an Islamist charitable organization in the United States, prosecutors read into the record a document that outlines the Muslim Brotherhood's grand strategy in the West "to destroy Western civilization from within so Islam is made victorious over all religions." To implement this strategy, organized Islamist groups focus their activity on infiltrating, influencing, and assimilating into the American political system. This was clearly designed to be a long-term social engineering project, and millions of dollars were invested to accomplish these goals. The same document further revealed fundraising in America for terrorist organizations such as Hamas.

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT, founded 1981) has had a tremendous impact on the development of Islamist organizations throughout the world. Headquartered in Virginia, with offices around the globe, IIIT is believed to have been founded with Brotherhood seed money in order to further propagate the Islamist agenda through publications, short-term continuing education courses, and chaplain training for the U.S. military. Its offices were raided in 2003, along with nineteen other businesses and related non-profit organizations, and its

founders, board members, and finances remain under investigation by the U.S. Government. IIT's most troublesome subsidiary is also its best known: the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences, the largest Islamic seminary in the United States. It is one of the only U.S. institutions authorized to certify Muslim chaplains for the American military.

As new Muslim immigrants came to the United States, they integrated into these existing Islamist structures, created separate local mosques to serve their religious needs, or dropped out of Islamic activism entirely. A notable difference between American and British Islam is that American Muslims did not immigrate together with their religious leaders, which left the community very vulnerable to whichever version of Islam was taught by the institutions they found already existing in America—which were invariably Islamist and staffed by imported Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood teachers.

### **Public Diplomacy Blunders Involving Islamists**

The U.S. government continues to make policy blunders when working with American Muslims—despite the overwhelming media attention to the community after 9/11—because of a regrettable lack of understanding of the prevailing currents within Islam. These blunders give credibility to the Islamists and their organizations, rather than empowering the real mainstream voices of the community. A few specific examples will prove illustrative:

- In 2000, the son of an Islamist leader was appointed to the White House Office of Public Liaison. Using the powers of his position, he authorized radical Islamists to meet with President Bush. Following revelations of his Islamist background he was quietly moved to another position—but his successor was also someone of Islamist

convictions.

- In 2002, the spokesman for FBI Director Robert Mueller memorably described the American Muslim Council as “the most mainstream Muslim group in the United States.” Its founder was sent abroad on numerous missions by the State Department, and once joined President Bush at a prayer service dedicated to the victims of the 9/11 attacks. He is now serving time in a federal prison for an assassination plot and for lying to Federal agents.
- In March 2006, not only did the IIIT, though still under investigation by law enforcement, sponsor a conference featuring an address by the State Department’s head of counter-terrorism, but the conference was also funded by the U.S. Department of Defense.

This is a relatively small sampling of the numerous occasions on which Islamist organizations and speakers have been lauded by the U.S. government. The controversy raises the broader, more troubling question of why the U.S. government uses Muslim employees as “gatekeepers.”

As a Muslim community activist for over a decade, I have seen many such gatekeepers throughout the U.S. government. These are often Muslims on different levels who have been working at various jobs unconnected to “Muslim issues,” but who, in the aftermath of 9/11, have been asked to take on the “Muslim portfolio.” In their new capacity, they are asked to ensure that only “credible Muslims” are allowed into meetings with high-level U.S. government officials. These gatekeepers are also given the authority to determine who is and who is not worthy of the government’s various outreach initiatives. Putting it bluntly, these gatekeepers decide who qualifies as a “real” Muslim. I was born a Muslim, live my life as a devout Muslim, and have worked against the Islamist encroachment into American society for over a decade. Having been

barred from entry by some of these gatekeepers, I take offense that anyone, let alone someone in the U.S. government, has the right to consider me a “fake” Muslim.

However, this is about much more than personal outrage; these gatekeepers are allowed to determine who participates in the debate about American foreign policy, law enforcement, and national security. Many of us have seen the U.S. government repeatedly embarrassed by the media for cozying up to known Islamic extremists, but no one seems to ask why those meetings and relationships continue.

At the same time, individual Muslim leaders and scholars who truly are moderate rarely have the opportunity to meet with politicians, since they are characterized by these organizations and gatekeepers as either “outsiders” or “deviants” with “no credibility” in the Muslim community. This tactic effectively silences the moderate majority and prevents them from reaching policymakers who are willing and able to make a difference. Islamists are fierce opponents of any individual or group who dares to challenge their policies, using strong-arm tactics of slander, threats, and even physical attacks or boycotts to prevent any Muslim straying from the Islamist course. Even public discussion of the orientation of Islamist groups is met with fierce opposition. Their critics are either publicly humiliated or intimidated into silence by well-financed lawsuits designed to prevent anyone from questioning their background.

### **American Muslim Youth Accept Salafism as “True Islam”**

Since Islamists control many of the primary schools, mosques, and national organizations, a large percentage of the Muslim youth are a product of this ideology. Most have no awareness of the diversity of classical Islam, with its numerous schools of thought and its openness to change, innovation, and integration. Many young Muslims are indoctrinated into believing that Islam is

monolithic, and that all Muslims should be united in working toward one political outcome: the world domination of Islam. Currently, we see the national Islamist organizations giving positions of authority to their new generation of leaders, which only perpetuates the problem. Though not official members of the Muslim Brotherhood, they are taught to believe in the same goals.

I tell you this tragic account of Islamism in America not as a researcher for a book, or because of some grudge against Muslims, but as a victim of its aggressors. In the early 1990s, I was naïve about the different sects in Islam and eager to join American Muslim activism. The Islamist leaders took me under their wing and tried to inculcate me with their anti-Semitic prejudices and with their insatiable desire to make America a Muslim nation. When I rejected their dogma and sought a path of spirituality instead, they vilified me in the community and have waged a campaign of slander against me ever since. Islamist oppression is a reality I live with every day, and I can say that it threatens the sanctity of all our lives.

### **Where Is the Solution?**

Unfortunately, traditional anti-Islamist Muslims have had little or no support to build an infrastructure in the United States. Though they form the silent majority, they are not well organized; most have stayed out of national movements because they wanted to concentrate on work and family, and have no interest in community politics and power grabs.

While Islamists have enjoyed massive funding of organizations and mosques, moderates have relied on intra-community resources which are often scarce. By nature, they modestly assimilate into and have respect for the culture in which they live as normal citizens. They fully appreciate the ability to live peaceful lives in America, and keep away from any conflict with aggressive Islamists. They are not power-hungry, and are content to manage their local mosques

and cultural associations. Their mosques and prayer halls tend to be simple, unspectacular, and hidden away.

Within these communities there often is great openness to democratic values, as well as a tendency to participate in the U.S. milieu rather than to isolate themselves from it. This can be seen in the Bosnian, Indonesian, Turkish, Indian, and Moroccan communities. It is further seen—to a great extent within the very large Pakistani community ( most significantly, in its cultural associations), and in the Urdu- and English-language press. While some Pakistani mosques have been Islamized, most are not.

Among the ethnic Lebanese, Iraqis, and Syrians, the majority hold American values while retaining a love of their homeland and cultural traditions. That is one reason why the community in the Dearborn area, with over 150,000 ethnic Arabs, is not seen as a hotbed of political Islam as much as are the communities in Chicago, Los Angeles, or New York. Finally, the religious ministries of several Muslim states have authorized clerics to operate within their expatriate communities, specifically for the purpose of preventing radicalization. Such clerics can be a great resource for the struggle against Islamist influence. For example, the Bosnian community in the United States has created a formal office that oversees religious functions and controls all Bosnian-built mosques.

Traditional Muslims also do not have a religious-based political agenda. For this reason, there is no one set of opinions they adhere to; rather, they pursue individual beliefs, goals, and interests. Within the moderate Muslim community opinions will vary on social issues, the role of religion in public life, issues of social integration, and so forth. For these reasons, moderate Muslims have not collectively pursued representation in Washington. This has resulted in hundreds of poorly-supported, understaffed organizations that lack a national infrastructure or a

coordinating council, and which are essentially invisible to state and national government.

To turn the tide against extremists requires a marshaling of government resources to give anti-extremists the moral, political, and material support they need to prevent radicals from controlling public space, speech, and behavior. Traditional Muslims are America's allies in the fight against extremism. If they win, their societies have a chance to join the globalizing world, and America benefits; if they fail, they lose, and America loses—making our future grim indeed.

The U.S. government will often need to engage with groups and nations that do not share its values, but it does not have to partner with domestic Islamist groups that endorse militancy and radicalism abroad. It can identify and promote true moderates more representative of Islam in America, but to do so requires concerted effort. It obliges our policymakers to invest the time to research alternative Muslim voices. It is a campaign we have won before, when we really believed there was a threat to our way of life; we are reminded once again of our determined will in the fight against Communism. The struggle against radical Islamism requires that same dedication, focus, and economic investment we put into bringing down the Soviet empire.

Tackling extremist ideologies requires programs specifically designed to provide new social and cultural opportunities for Muslims both here and abroad. For example, we could facilitate the retraining of clerics, open cultural centers for youth at risk, and provide for the institutional capacity building of anti-Islamist organizations, and a range of other programs specifically designed to ameliorate the ideological paradigm Muslims find themselves in today.

When we do realize that there is an ideology unifying those who want to destroy our way of life, we have to find useful tools and approaches to countering that destructive social and intellectual construct.

There is ongoing debate about which group in Islam, or which particular ideological

influences, are best suited to address the issues of terrorism and political violence. It is often argued that apolitical Salafists, who do not have the immediate goal of violent insurrection but who seek to impose *sharia* law, are a useful partner in counter-radicalization and rehabilitation. Many analysts have accepted the argument that the conservative, puritanical interpretations of Salafi Islam will not pose a problem for the West so long as the Salafists disavow terrorism and direct their efforts at “Islamicizing” only their own communities. If we remember that the Salafi sect emerged as a repudiation of everything that came before it, and elevated military jihad to a status never before seen in Islam, we can see that it is not exactly a tradition of plurality and coexistence. The Salafi scholars would have to turn away from hatred and rejection of anything “other” before they could take part in a long-term ideological shift.

Most importantly, the Salafis have yet to disavow the legitimacy of military jihad. As the *New York Times Magazine* reported, the Saudis still consider military jihad to be a cornerstone of their beliefs; therefore, the Salafis’ ability to reduce violence is necessarily limited.

The best ideological tool against radical Islamism is its theological opposite: traditional Islam. Its acceptance of other faiths, emphasis on an inward spiritual focus instead of outward political and social aggression, and its categorical rejection of the validity of military jihad all make it best equipped to stop extremist violence before it starts.

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Long-term success in the struggle against Islamist violence requires a multi-faceted approach addressing the ideological core of the problem. No matter how many schools we build or how many jobs we create, we will not overcome radical Islamist indoctrination if there are no ideological and theological alternatives for the target populations. We cannot capture hearts and minds only with voting rights or freedom of the press; it takes much more than that.

To decrease the radicals' incitement to violence, we have to stop the slide into religious fanaticism. To do that, we must invest in programs that promote an ideology that is the antithesis of extremist tenets. I am not referring just to Western notions of what this antithesis could be, but rather to traditions within the Islamic paradigm that are open, tolerant, and pluralistic. When such traditions are reinvigorated within Muslim society, this will generate its own grassroots momentum for change.

However, we must be aware that since the U.S. government has popularized the concept of "promoting democracy and freedom," there are all kinds of scholars reinventing themselves as "moderates." We must do considerable due diligence and examine the writings of scholars and clerics before supporting them. We must read what they write and what they present to their own communities, not just what they present to a Western audience. There is often a sharp contrast between the material these pseudo-moderates produce for public consumption and what they create for a Muslim audience.

Also, we must be wary of those leaders who loudly clamor for "freedom," but whose doctrine much more resembles the Communist Manifesto. Someone asking for freedom is *not* necessarily an ally. Often, especially in the Muslim world, the most radical of clerics are oppressed because they are a threat to their governments. They throw around terms such as "freedom of expression" and "human rights" when their core doctrine has nothing to do with

either. We must be critical and discerning. There are leaders and clerics in the Muslim world who do share our core values of free speech, freedom of religious expression—whatever that religion may be—and acceptance of others’ lifestyles or choices. However, they are often not the ones you see standing in the forefront because the extremists are not funding them. In fact, you have to be willing to seek them out.

We must also invest in counterradicalization projects that identify Islamist extremist movements both here and abroad. These programs will make it easier for our policymakers to separate the good from the bad actors in the world arena. We cannot all expect to be experts, but we can invest in people who are. The products of their research will not only benefit policymakers, but also serve the equally important goal of being a resource for intelligence and law enforcement agencies. Such projects include the study of recruitment and indoctrination into Islamist extremist movements, the demographics of these movements, and their activities around the world. This research will also expose the malevolent nature of their philosophy, which in turn will prevent other NGOs from inadvertently supporting their work.

The struggle for ideological primacy within Islam is a fight that only Muslims themselves can wage, but the real moderates cannot win it alone. As Americans we cherish our freedom of expression, and we need to help others who struggle every day to win those same rights that we enjoy.

We need to come together as a nation and a government to decide what exactly the threat is. Though we may not agree right away on solutions, and it may be a complex system of national power brought to bear—military might, legislation, foreign and domestic aid, and the like—we have to decide what we are calling “radicalism” and “extremism.”

If we do not do that we may find ourselves dangerously vulnerable and progressively

more alienated from the majority of the Muslim community, who are quite frankly shocked that we have not yet gotten it right, and who find themselves progressively more victimized by the onslaught of radical Islamism.