



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

The United States Institute of Peace hosted a workshop on Islamic perspectives on peace and violence on November 7, 2001. The workshop was co-sponsored by the Division of International Peace and Conflict Resolution at American University. Of course, interest in this topic took on much greater significance following the events of September 11, which posed questions about how Islam views acts of political violence. Although this political context made the topic particularly timely, it should be noted that the workshop was also part of a series of workshops organized by the Institute over the past year on the perspectives of various faith communities toward peacemaking.

The workshop was co-chaired by David Smock, director of the Institute's Religion and Peacemaking Initiative, and Abdul Aziz Said, Mohamed Said Farsi Islamic Peace Chair professor at American University. The other three presenters, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Muqtedar Khan, and Sulayman Nyang, are all prominent Muslim scholars based at American universities and experts on Islam and peace. This report was prepared by David Smock.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policies.

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Islamic Perspectives on Peace and Violence

Briefly . . .

- Islam and the West share cultural roots, including a shared commitment to peace, but Islam and the West are out of touch with each other. The clash between the two, however, is one of symbols rather than of civilizations.
- Contrary to stereotypes, Islam advocates numerous nonviolent and peacebuilding values and expects Muslims to live by them. Despite these ideals set out for Muslims, various societal forces pose obstacles to their implementation.
- Terrorism finds some historical precedent in a few heretical Islamic sects, but Islam does not teach Muslims to kill innocent people in the name of a political agenda.
- Although there is no justification for the terrorist acts of September 11, American support for authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world both breeds radical opposition in these countries and stimulates anti-American sentiment.
- When moderate Muslims remain silent, extremists speak for all. It is time that Muslim moderates rescued Islam and Muslim causes from the clutches of extremists.
- Moderate Muslims must fight against all forms of prejudice, hatred, and intolerance within Muslim ranks and must militantly advocate peaceful resolutions of conflict both within and outside the community.
- The West and Islam need to actively engage each other and learn the best that they each have to offer.

Introduction

The events of September 11 raised American public interest in Islam to a new level of intensity. Osama bin Laden declared that the Muslim world was at war with the worlds of Christianity and Judaism. Moreover, he asserted that it was the religious duty of Muslims to attack the United States and individual Americans. Some who were not very familiar with Islamic theology took this radical rhetoric as symptomatic of a widespread pathology within Islam that made Muslims generally suspect as purveyors of hatred and terrorist acts. Even those who had a more balanced view of the Muslim world realized the need for a deeper understanding of Islam. Questions that are being asked include: What is the Islamic perspective on violence and when is violence religiously justified?

How can one understand contemporary Islamic extremism? What contributions can Islamic institutions make to peacemaking? What are the most important Islamic resources for peacebuilding? How can common ground between Islam and the West be found at this time? These questions and others were addressed by four scholars of Islam at the workshop organized by the United States Institute of Peace on November 7, 2001.

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Islam and the West

Popular slogans to the contrary, Islam and the West are not inherently incompatible, according to Professor Abdul Aziz Said. There is a deep resonance between Islam and Western civilization. Like Christians and Jews, Muslims share a common calling to work for peace, as enjoined by the Quran. The shared cultural roots joining Islam and the West are too often forgotten. Although the recently voiced (and frequently ill-conceived) opinions regarding a "clash of civilizations" posit that Islam falls outside the Judeo-Christian and Hellenic cultural continuum, the reverse is in fact the case. Classical Islamic civilization was constructed out of Arab, Biblical, and Hellenic cultures, but cast a wider net by integrating Persian, Central Asian, and Indian components within its cultural synthesis. Historically, Islam is the true bridge between West and East. Said went on to point out that Islam's Hellenism was mediated primarily through Eastern Christian intellectual circles, and important streams of Muslim philosophical and scientific thought still remain an understudied field linking Late Antiquity with the Renaissance. Thus there are strong grounds for asserting that Islam as a civilizational force and religious tradition should be perceived as an integral part of the Western tradition.

What is often viewed as a clash of civilizations is really a clash of symbols, Said pointed out. The symbols on the one side are headscarves, turbans, and other symbols of Islamic religious expression that Westerners often find repellant, just as fundamentalist Muslims view much of Western culture as anti-Islamic. Moreover, cultural contact between Islam and the West has been marred by historically unequal power relations, "leaving the West arrogant and insensitive and the Muslim world defensive and insecure." Western arrogance breeds contempt and fanaticism on the Islamic side, and there is evidence of paranoia on both sides. The Islamic world is offended by the West's cultural triumphalism, backed up by overwhelming military force. This is interpreted by some Muslims as a new Crusade. The West and the Islamic world are out of touch with each other. Before the West can effectively convey its intentions, it has to understand what is going on in the Arab and Muslim world today. This involves active listening to the voices from the region and engaging with them in sustained dialogue.

Islamic Views of Peace and Violence

Contrary to stereotypes of Islam, Professor Mohammed Abu-Nimer stated, Islam advocates numerous nonviolent and peacebuilding values and expects Muslims to live by them. These values are supported by the Quran and the Hadith (the Prophet's sayings). One of these values is the duty to pursue justice (Quran 5:8). Another is the necessity of doing good by struggling against oppression and helping those who are in need. A third such value is that all humans are God's creation, have sacred lives, and thus are all equal (7:11). Islam grants no special privileges based on race, ethnicity, or tribal affiliation. Moreover, all Muslims are to respect and preserve human life (5:32). Islam also calls for the quest for peace, which is a state of physical, mental, spiritual, and social harmony (5:64). Other verses stress the importance of tolerance and kindness to other people (16:90). Looking at the life of the Prophet, one notes his use of nonviolent methods to resist those who persecuted him; the Prophet never resorted to violence or force. Peacemaking and negotiation are considered more effective than

aggression and violent confrontation. In fact, the Arabic meaning of the word Islam itself connotes peace. Another virtue in Islam is forgiveness (23:96). Muslims are urged to live in harmony and peace with all fellow humans.

Despite these ideals set out for Muslims, various societal forces pose obstacles to their implementation, Abu-Nimer noted. Among these are the cooptation of religious leaders by governments, which leads to a lack of trust and credibility in religious leadership. Other challenges include corruption, patriarchal social structures, rigid social hierarchies, economic dependence on the West and the sense of helplessness it engenders, and the humiliation generated by such confrontations as the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Islam does not fully advocate pacifism, Professor Muqtedar Khan stated. Islam does permit the use of force. But the theory of jihad, which means "struggle in the path of God," forbids violence except: (1) when Muslims are not allowed to practice their faith, that is, when freedom of religion is threatened; (2) when people are oppressed and subjugated; and (3) when people's land is forcibly taken from them. In these situations Islam allows a range of responses. One can forgive the oppressor or one can respond with force. There are Quranic sources encouraging both positions. The Quran states, "And slay them wherever you find them, and drive them out of the places from where they drove you out, for persecution is worse than killing" (2:191). But the Quran also states, "Tell those who disbelieve that if they cease persecution of believers that which is past will be forgiven them" (8:38). Khan went on to say that there is no hierarchy of verses in the Quran. Those who privilege the first verse over the second will wage war to fight injustice. And most militant Muslims invoke this verse in the defense of their actions. But then there are Muslims who privilege the second verse and seek a diplomatic end to persecution and urge forgiveness. These two verses are exemplary of the tension between realism and idealism in Islam. But in the final analysis Islam is what Muslims make of it, Khan said.

Islam and Terrorism

The great tragedy of September 11, stated Professor Sulayman Nyang, is distinct from all previous terrorist acts against the United States because it is a form of "high-tech bestiality." It is a bestiality made possible by the subordination of science and technology to the totalitarian, fanatical, and eschatological construct of a system-challenging group. Much blood has been shed by people who believe that their violent actions serve a divine cause. This distortion of the teachings of the great religions has been most brutal and fanatical when the blood of the faith community, tribe, or nation is made sacred "by the fanatical utterances of the religiously and racially intoxicated. Muslim leaders and communities should make it clear that they have zero tolerance for terrorists."

Nyang continued by saying that any Muslim familiar with the history of Islam as a political force in history and as a philosophical-moral framework for human action knows well that Islam does not teach Muslims to kill innocent people in the name of a political agenda. According to the Quran, taking of one life is like the killing of all humankind. Added to this are the other verses that set down the rules of engagement if Muslims are forced by their circumstances and conditions to fight their enemies.

Terrorism, Nyang said, can be traced historically and philosophically in early Islamic thought to the Kharijites. The Kharijites were a small sect in 7th century Islam whose members at first supported Sayyidina Ali Ibn Abu Talib for the caliphate but then opposed and fought him because he accepted arbitration in his fight with Muawiyah, the governor of Syria. Being totally committed to an egalitarian understanding of social justice and unwilling to compromise even when it served the collective interest of the *ummah* (the whole Islamic community), members of the Kharijite sect unleashed a series of terroristic acts that made life nasty, brutish, and short for many Muslims. This

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lasted until the Kharijites were effectively decimated by the Umayyad dynasty. Their acts of terrorism helped stimulate an enhanced appreciation for political order and stability within Islam. The rise of sultanic strongmen in Islamic history can be traced to some extent to the acts of political violence by dissident groups like the Kharijites.

Besides the Kharijites, there was also the case of Hassan al Sabbah, the leader of the Assassins in the Islamic Medieval Ages who is now remembered in history books as the Old Man of the Mountain. Exercising tremendous influence over his followers, this mysterious Muslim leader found in terror an effective instrument of political and social intimidation. This terrorist network gave us the English word "assassination," derived from the Arabic word *hashasin*.

Factors Underlying September 11

"It is not the hatred of democracy and freedom but the desire for democracy that has made many Muslims hate the United States, which they blame for the perpetuation of undemocratic polities in their world."

Khan asserts that the American support for authoritarian regimes in the Muslim world both breeds radical opposition in these countries and stimulates anti-American sentiment. He cites Turkey, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait as examples of non-democratic regimes that repress popular movements with U.S. support. The lack of peaceful channels for protest and dissent in the Arab world has slowly radicalized most moderate Islamic opposition groups. The West legitimized the military coup that prevented Islamists from coming to power after winning an election in Algeria in 1992. The United States gave tacit support to Turkey when it forced Islamists out of power in the 1990s, even after they had won popular mandates. "It is not the hatred of democracy and freedom but the desire for democracy that has made many Muslims hate the United States, which they blame for the perpetuation of undemocratic polities in their world." Other sources of hostility include American troops stationed in Saudi Arabia, U.S.-supported sanctions against Iraq, and uncritical American support for Israel.

Khan goes on to say that none of this justifies the atrocities of September 11. "I wonder how those Muslims responsible for the slaughter of American civilians would rationalize their actions in the light of this Quranic verse: 'He who has killed one innocent soul, it is as if he has killed all humanity. And he who has saved one soul, it is as if he has saved all humanity . . .' (Quran 5:32). What happened was horrible, inhuman, and un-Islamic. But reflection over Muslim grievances can help us understand how even devout people can be driven to commit themselves to terror. Systematic repression dispossesses people of their humanity, inciting them to commit inhuman acts."

Nyang quotes John Cooley in citing the boomerang effect of American support for the Afghan rebellion against Soviet occupation. Cooley wrote, "The consequences of arming, training, and financing this global band of Muslim partisans, many of whom hated their American, Saudi, and other paymasters as much as or more than they did the Soviet occupiers, were evident even before the war was over" ("Terrorism: Continuity and Change in the New Century," *Global Dialogue*, Autumn 2000, p. 13).

Challenges for the West and for Muslims

There are three dangers, noted Khan, against which all peace-loving people must be on guard: (1) this conflict must not be allowed to become a clash of civilizations between Islam and the West; (2) hawks and extremists must not be allowed to hijack and dominate the discourses in the West and in the Muslim world; and (3) the search for security and revenge should not be allowed to undermine the moral fabric of our societies. He goes on to note that the United States should stop "obsessing over bin Laden and Islam and examine the recent history of their actions overseas to grasp the depth of hatred they engender among foreigners." Moreover, "when the United States responds to the murder of innocent people with massive attacks that kill more innocent people,

then it is merely responding to terror with terror. When Islamic scholars claim that suicide bombings against Israel are permissible because the Israeli army also kills civilians and children, then they have conceded the interpretation of Islamic law to the Israeli army." Regardless of what the other does, we must be careful to respond by remaining within the boundaries of our own morality. We must not allow the inhumanity of the other to strip us of our humanity. The best way to ensure that this war on terror does not escalate is by advancing a new discourse. Unlike the present discourse whose central themes are Islamic terrorism and Western colonialism, we need to explore themes that talk about bridging the gap between Islamic values and Muslim practices, and between democratic values and American foreign policy. The new discourse will emerge if the moderates within the Muslim world and in the West seriously begin collective exercises in self-reflection and self-criticism to bridge the chasm between values and actions, deeds and words, ideas and realities.

Said asserted that new U.S. perspectives are critically important. American policy toward the Islamic world need not be obsessed with Islamic fundamentalism, but it should rather address some of the root causes of terrorism—suffering of the Palestinians, maldistribution of resources, and absence of legitimate and genuinely participatory political authority in the Arab world. The exclusion of Muslim and Arab people from active participation in political life undermines political stability in the Middle East and the Islamic world and threatens vital American interests. The future of democracy in the region, Said said, depends upon what Americans do at this critical moment in history. This is not to say that the United States should substitute pro-democracy interventions for its traditional support of repressive regimes. While repressive regimes can be imposed by subversion, democracy cannot be successfully implanted from the outside, and certainly not by subversive means. It is an indigenous and delicate flower that only flourishes when deeply rooted in the dreams and hopes of the great majority of a nation. The United States now has a chance to be part of the struggle for democracy in the Arab world. Success depends on a strong American commitment to the ever-emerging transnational consciousness, one that trusts in the universal promise of democracy.

The Muslim community today, Said asserted, finds itself engaged in a profound struggle in this crucial moment of its history, effectively cut off from the past, faced with a present that is characterized by tyranny, poverty, and humiliation, with no viable or desirable prospects for creating its own future. Muslims have much to gain from understanding the West and its hard-won achievements in the realm of political coexistence. Democracy is scarce in the Islamic world today, but this is more the result of a lack of preparation for it and less because of an absence of religious and cultural foundations. Islamic social institutions are more dynamic and variegated than is generally recognized; they provide the basis for genuine participation. Muslims need to ask, what kind of citizens can Islam create, animated by Islamic values and contexts? What can Islam do to bring about participatory decision-making? Today's challenge for Muslims lies in the expansion of the original ideas of Islam, and a willingness to demonstrate curiosity about historical experiences and achievements of the West.

According to Khan, Muslim moderates must become aggressive in their dealings with extremists in their midst. The first step is to recognize that when moderates remain silent extremists speak for all. Those Muslims who do not wish to be represented by the likes of Osama bin Laden must speak out loud and clear. What is also crucial is that they reject specious interpretations of Islam and Islamic principles that people like bin Laden use to justify the murder of innocent civilians. Moderate Muslims must also remember that vague and generalized statements condemning terrorism are not helpful. They must condemn specific acts and specific individuals and groups associated with those acts. If you are against terrorism then let the world know that in unequivocal terms, Khan said.

Khan continued, "Many Muslims have become hypocritical in our advocacy of human rights in our struggles for justice. We protest against the discriminatory

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practices of Israel, India, and other non-Muslim nations, but are mostly silent against the discriminatory practices in Muslim states. We rightly condemn Israeli treatment of Palestinians at all international forums. But our silence at the way many Muslim nations have treated the same Palestinians really questions our commitment and concern for them. While we loudly and consistently condemn Israel's ill treatment of Palestinians, Russian excesses in Chechnya, or Serbian atrocities in Bosnia, we remain silent when Muslim regimes abuse the rights of Muslims and slaughter thousands of them. Are Muslims not supposed to stand for justice even if it means taking a position against our dear ones (Quran 6:152)? It is time that we face these hypocritical practices and struggle to transcend them. For decades we have watched as Muslims in the name of Islam have committed violence against other Muslims, from the Iran-Iraq war to the struggles in Afghanistan. As Muslims can we condone such inhuman and senseless waste of life in the name of Islam? The culture of hate and killing is tearing away at the moral fabric of the Muslim society. We are more focused on 'the other' and have completely forgotten our duty to Allah. In pursuit of the inferior jihad we have sacrificed the superior jihad, which is the inner struggle for godliness."

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It is time, Khan continued, that Muslim moderates rescue Islam and Muslim causes from the clutches of extremists. "As I see it, the only way out is through an extreme intolerance for intolerance. Moderate Muslims must fight against all forms of prejudice, hatred, and intolerance within Muslim ranks and must militantly advocate peaceful resolutions of conflict both within and outside the community. Indeed, Muslim moderates must wage war against war and realize the Quranic mandate that Muslims are a nation of moderation and justice (2:143)."

According to Abu-Nimer, "Our job, as Muslim and non-Muslim scholars and practitioners, is to continue the construction of an authentic and culturally based peace-building and nonviolence framework that can be applied both on policy and community levels. The Quran, the Hadith, and other Islamic traditional sources provide plenty of evidence to support the conviction that Islam is a religion of peace and justice, and that nonviolent practices are well rooted in the religion. Educating both Muslims and non-Muslims on the peaceful message of Islam and eradicating the ignorance that leads to the negative stereotyping of Islam and to enmity between Muslims and non-Muslims is the first step toward peaceful and just relations between Muslim and non-Muslim communities. However, such efforts are not enough. Peacebuilders and agents of social change in Muslim communities have also to face the structural obstacles that exist in Muslim communities. Although such social, cultural, and political obstacles are often maintained by external forces, individuals and organizations can resist this decay and these evil forces. Every Muslim community should resort to self-examination and criticize itself for the role it has played in perpetuating the reality of stagnation, violence, and a sense of helplessness."

Engagement Between the West and the Islamic World

Active engagement would allow the West to avoid entrapment in this process of confrontation, moving beyond initial negative reactions to Islam in order to discover human commonality and shared experiences and needs.

Most important for both communities is active engagement, commented Said. Active engagement with one another, through sustained dialogue, permits each to understand the deep meanings, associations, and implications of the prevailing clash of symbols referred to above. The West need not recoil from Islamic symbols, as they do not represent anti-Western, anti-secular, irrational extremism. The West remains secure enough to uncover the extent to which a deeper pathology has been clothed in religious rhetoric. Active engagement permits us to understand and recognize the true expressions of human religiosity and protects us from the politics of manipulated symbolism. Whereas healthy expressions of religiosity reflect a mature understanding of a faith tradition, psychopathology operates at the level of symbols in order to generate a new system of confrontation. Confrontation feeds

on the need to address despair through actions predicated upon and intended to spread fear. It should not be difficult for Western Christians to understand the danger of misappropriating religious symbols, for we need only look at the experience of the Crusades of the 12th and 13th centuries, in which mobilization for material and political goals was cloaked in the symbolism of religious devotion. Active engagement would allow the West to avoid entrapment in this process of confrontation, moving beyond initial negative reactions to Islam in order to discover human commonality and shared experiences and needs.

As Muslims seek to harmonize the Islamic spirit of communalism with the changing conditions of their own societies, Said continued, they have a new opportunity for conceptualizing the nature of Muslim citizenship and assuming a greater role in the shaping of their history. A retreat to a cultural ghetto by any group, be it Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, or Hindu, is not only a denial of the rich diversity of the modern cultural experience, but also a rejection of responsibility for future generations.

Islam and the West have the ability to develop a new and mutually rewarding relationship, Said concluded. Such a relationship would be premised not on ideas of cultural superiority, but on mutual respect and openness to cultural eclecticism. Muslims and Westerners can learn from each other and cooperate in pursuit of humane values. The West and Islam are not destined to meet as rivals. The West can give Islam the best that it has in exchange for the best of Islam.

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Contributors

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