

**Testimony of Irshad Manji to the  
Subcommittee on Oversight,  
Investigations and Management  
House Committee on Homeland Security**  
September 14, 2012

My name is Irshad Manji. I am here in my capacity as Founder and Director of the Moral Courage Project at New York University.

Housed in the Wagner School of Public Service, the Moral Courage Project teaches people worldwide to speak up when others want to shut them up. We are motivated not just to break silences, but also to combat the abuse of power - the corruption - that comes from the fear of speaking out.

This means understanding why silences develop in the first place, which brings me to the question that concerns our hearing.

Let me be clear: I do not know if one or more FBI officers intentionally withheld information about Major Nidal Malik Hasan. But personal experiences leave me skeptical about whether the standard-bearers of national security are willing to share vital information, whether with the public or with each other.

I will give you a couple of examples in a moment. First, allow me to address why I would have personal experiences on this front. The reason is: I am a devoted Muslim who loves God, and because I love God, I speak up whenever Muslims use Islam to violate our God-given liberty and human rights.

As refugees from East Africa, my family and I settled on the West Coast of Canada. There, I grew up attending two types of schools – the multi-racial, multi-faith public school and then, every Saturday, for several hours at a stretch, the Islamic religious school (*madressa*). At madressa, I asked candid questions. For instance, why can't Muslims take Jews and Christians as friends?

At the age of 14, having asked one too many of these questions, I got booted out of madressa. But as I had to assure my mortified mother – more than once - leaving madressa does not mean leaving Allah.

I decided to study Islam on my own, and discovered that there is an Islamic tradition of questioning, re-interpreting and even dissenting with the clerics. It is this tradition that empowers me to reconcile my faith with freedom.

All of which puts me and my team on the receiving end of death threats – and actual violence – not just in Muslim-majority countries, but also in this part of the world. That is why I have first-hand experience with some of the inner workings of national security.

And that is how I have come to observe the censorship that plagues many good people whose mission is to protect the public.

In my remaining time, I would like to share two stories. Although the first takes place in Canada, of which I remain a citizen, it foreshadows the second story, which takes place in the United States, where I now work and live.

In June 2006, Canadian police arrested young Muslims for plotting to blow up Parliament and behead the Prime Minister. The “Toronto 17,” as they came to be known, called their campaign, Operation Badr. This title is a tribute to the Battle of Badr, the first decisive military victory by Prophet Muhammad.

Police knew that religious symbolism helped inspire the Toronto 17. Still, at the press briefing to announce those arrests, police did not mention the words “Muslim” or “Islam.”

At their second meeting with the press, police boasted about avoiding the words “Muslim” and “Islam” – again, despite knowing that Operation Badr had been organized in the name of Islam.

Three months later, at a police conference, I raised my concern about this silence. After my plea for honesty, several law enforcement insiders, independent of each other, confided to me that lawyers prevented authorities from publicly uttering the words “Muslim” and “Islam.”

As for my experiences in the United States, here is a concrete one: In 2009, I received media calls about David Headley, a U.S. citizen who helped plan the terrorist attacks on Bombay the year before. Apparently, Mr. Headley had named me among his targets. Journalists wanted to know how that made me feel. You can guess my response.

What made me feel worse was that these media calls came in a full day before any national security officials got in touch. Somehow, somewhere, their chain of communication had broken down.

The research on institutional silos – and silence – suggests multiple forces at play. But the antidote to all of these forces is moral courage: the willingness to speak up when others want to shut you up.

I thank you for this invitation and, unlike my madressa teacher, I welcome your questions.