

A 'Muslim Refusenik' in Pursuit of Reform in Islam

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Brief Analysis

The past several days have witnessed a horrific amount of Islamist international terror, from the slaying of Nepalese workers and the kidnapping of French journalists in Iraq, to the suicide bombings in Israel, to the school massacre in southern Russia. In light of the complex, overlapping nature of these and similar events, the global Muslim need for renewed leadership remains clear. Yet, the emergence of new leaders requires a bold analysis of the ills of Islam today. My book serves as a Muslim voice of reform advocating the diversity of ideas, people, and belief systems worldwide, urging non-Muslims to play an efficient role in helping Muslims attain those objectives. The widespread ill treatment of women, the vitriol toward Jews, and the scourge of slavery are some of the most prominent evils that occur under Islamist regimes today. All three clearly violate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The Trouble with Islam

All religions have their share of fundamentalism. American protestants have their Evangelicals, Jews have their ultra-orthodox, even Buddhists have their own literalists. Only in Islam, however, does one see fundamentalism becoming mainstream worldwide. Most Muslims today believe that the Quran is the final and therefore perfect manifesto of God's will. Consequently, when abuses take place in the name of Islam, even moderates are often unable to debate such justifications, given the fact that they have never been introduced to the possibility of raising questions about their holy book. Yet, Islam once embraced a tradition of critical thinking known as *ijtihad*. At one point, 135 schools of Islamic thought and 70 Islamic libraries flourished as scholars in Muslim Spain taught their students to ignore "expert" opinion about the Quran and embark on their own paths of independent reasoning. We must now rediscover and reintegrate that tradition of critical thinking in order to update the faith for the twenty-first century.

Muslims in the West

Given that they benefit from the precious freedom to think, express themselves, and challenge the views of others, Muslims in the West may be the most well positioned to reinstate the tradition of *ijtihad*. Unlike their fellow Muslims in other parts of the world, they do not fear state reprisal or persecution. Yet, the prospects of liberal Islamic reformation in the West seem thin, especially as many Western Muslims fear inter-Muslim strife. Even ardent reformists would think twice before going public with any statement that does not conform to the ordinary.

Moreover, Muslims in the West cannot undertake the mission of reform independently from other Muslims, as many would accuse them of being Westernized and corrupted.

North America provides a radically different environment for Muslims than Europe. In Europe, the typical Muslim faces a stark choice: either maintain his or her identity as a person of faith and be perceived as weak and brainwashed, or give up the faith and be drawn into a form of secularism that verges on atheism. North America seems to offer Muslims an opportunity to find a middle ground between these extremes.

Operation Ijtihad

The re-initiation of innovative approaches to Islam -- a non-military process that I call "Operation Ijtihad" -- can take many forms. One key measure would be to liberate the entrepreneurial talents of Muslim women. For example, the provision of micro-loans to Muslim women would not only be economically beneficial, it would also inspire that segment of society most oppressed by inflexible interpretations of the Quran to think critically about the holy book. Accordingly, wealthy countries around the world should offer a small portion of their national security budgets to a coherent program of micro-enterprise loans to Muslim women. By starting community businesses, women would be able to learn and spread education to many families, benefiting children as well as men. For its part, the U.S. government could make the development of an Arab-American free trade zone contingent on Arab states allowing women to participate. The United States could also help to foster a broad and inclusive business class that could in turn pressure Arab governments to live up to the notion of accountability.

These proposals challenge any theological doubts regarding whether Muslim women are allowed to work. In fact, not only does the Quran allow women to work, but the Prophet's first beloved wife Khadija herself was a businesswoman, one for whom the Prophet worked for many years. Hence, those who oppose women in the workplace need not fear that such measures violate the Quran.

On the whole, Operation Ijtihad goes hand-in-hand with the UN Development Program's report on Arab Human Development, as well as with the many nongovernmental organizations that stress the need for empowerment of women. It also considers the possibility of creating a center for leadership and innovative thinking for young Muslims around the world, which would help to open up the religion from within.

Southeast Asia

Given their historical experience of coexistence and diversity, countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia could serve as havens for religious and ethnic tolerance. Yet, the creeping influence of fundamentalist Islam is undeniable in these and neighboring countries. In particular, the flow of Saudi money is changing not only the landscape of that region, but also its values. Although there are many liberal reform movements in these countries, most of them remain underground.

In general, many hopes rest on the fact that the vast majority of Muslims worldwide are not Arab, and therefore do not have an emotional stake in maintaining the more repressive aspects of Arab cultural tradition and tribalism.

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