

Fighting for Moderate Islam: Ideas and Activism on the New Front Line

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Two leaders of moderate Islam share their visions for a way forward in the face of often violent religious extremism.

On February 25, Mohammed Dajani and Zainab al-Suwaij addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dajani is the Institute's Weston Fellow and founder of al-Wasatia, a moderate Islamic movement in Palestine. Suwaij is cofounder and executive director of the American Islamic Congress (AIC). The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MOHAMMED DAJANI

There are three taboos in Palestinian society that need to be broken: attitudes toward the United States, toward Islamic education, and toward Holocaust education. I have been working on breaking these taboos for over twenty years.

The Dajani family lived in West Jerusalem until 1948, when they moved to East Jerusalem. Following the move, my grandfather taught me a critical lesson when he tore up a UN Relief and Works Agency refugee card that my grandmother brought home one day. He was adamant that the narrative of victimhood was a choice one has the power to transcend; he later became a notable member of Jerusalem's elite and its chamber of commerce. This left an important impact on my ideology.

While studying at the American University in Beirut, I was first involved in the Arab nationalist movement and then with Fatah. But in 1975 I decided to leave politics and focus on academia. After being threatened for criticizing the corruption in Fatah, I left for the United States where I earned my PhD. In 1993, I returned to Jerusalem for the first time since 1967 and saw the triumph of my perceived enemy. Soon afterward, however, my father was taken to the hospital, where Israeli doctors treated him as a patient, not as a Palestinian or a Muslim. This opened my eyes to the humanity in the "other" and helped change my attitudes; eventually I began to think of my enemy as a partner.

These experiences propelled me to focus on breaking the three taboos noted above. Regarding Palestinian attitudes toward the United States, I started a master's program in American studies at al-Quds University because Palestinians were largely ignorant of American culture at the time. Unfortunately, some critics claimed that the initiative was a CIA attempt to recruit Palestinian students, and to this day there are very few programs of its type in the Arab world.

I began to think about the second taboo, Islamic education in Palestinian society, following the 2006 elections that brought Hamas to power. At the time, I thought the outcome would help create a multiparty system, and I believed Hamas's campaign messages of accountability and transparency. But those hopes were not borne out. Soon afterward, I witnessed minor clashes at a checkpoint between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians wanting to pray in Jerusalem. The tensions soon subsided and the Israelis organized buses to transport the worshippers to the city. They were obviously not Hamas-affiliated Palestinians, who would never agree to an Israeli-charted bus. I was struck by this group of moderate Muslims, and the incident showed me the need for a movement to give these people a strong voice. That is why I founded al-Wasatia, an organization dedicated to moderate Islam. The movement was decidedly nonpolitical from the start; instead it sought to build a bridge between politics and religion in order to change Palestinian culture.

One of al-Wasatia's first projects focused on the poor state of Palestinian Islamic education, specifically its use of Quranic interpretations that were predominantly funded by Saudi Arabia. A close examination of the Quran reveals abundant examples of multiculturalism and openness, but Palestinian children were being taught to kill apostates and non-Muslims -- this despite the fact that Islam forbids killing nonbelievers, saying it is a matter to be left to God. Similarly, Palestinian education has promoted the idea that Islam, as a religious system, is preferred by God, even though many Quran verses suggest that Islam can simply mean belief in God. Given this context, we began asking Palestinians to return to the Quran and focus on the middle path that it lays out. Similarly, we began teaching that other religions promote moderation as well.

Today, al-Wasatia's three primary goals are to build trust between members of different faiths, remove stereotypes, and educate future generations. This has prompted a lot of pushback from within Palestinian society, where many have accused the movement of being a U.S.-inspired form of Islam. Yet extremism and groups like the "Islamic State"/ISIS will not be defeated by military strength alone. We must offer an alternative ideology like al-Wasatia. Moreover, the United States should support people and organizations in the region that are working to counter Wahhabism and other extreme ideologies.

Finally, I began addressing the third taboo, Holocaust education, after visiting Auschwitz in 2011. I felt that I could no longer remain a bystander while elements in Palestinian society denied the Holocaust or claimed that its details were exaggerated as part of a Zionist plot. This prompted me to start a joint project to teach Palestinians and Israelis about both the Holocaust and the Palestinian Nakba, in part by taking students to Auschwitz and a Palestinian refugee camp, respectively. The president of the university requested that students be informed the trip was not a university initiative; nevertheless, thirty students participated. Upon our return, the media reported that the trip was sponsored by Zionist funders, and I received threats. But I was convinced that taking students to Auschwitz was critical to challenging the collective narrative of Palestinians. Indeed, breaking all of these taboos is vital to ending the cycle of fear and securing a better future for our children.

ZAINAB AL-SUWAIJ

The search for moderate Islam is extremely important in today's world. Although this need has been felt for a long time, the violent manifestations of radical Islam have made it more obvious now than ever.

The September 11 attacks demonstrated that terrorism was not a phenomenon limited to the Arab world. This moved me to found the American Islamic Congress (AIC), which works on countering radical voices in the Muslim community. At the time, no one within the Muslim community was looking at these radical elements, and many were hesitant to discuss such internal matters publicly.

Extremism does not always present itself as acts of violence; more often, its ideas are spread through sermons, programs, youth activities, pamphlets, and books that help set the stage for radicalization and violence, especially among youths. Ironically, the freedoms guaranteed by the United States protect the legality of most such reading materials. The American Muslim community is diverse, of course, and many of its members simply want to lead normal lives and provide for their families. Yet a significant constituency is involved in questionable activities, and extremist ideology is widespread.

The recent White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism emphasized working with community leaders and youths. Yet these programs fail to address the root ideological causes, and they sometimes overlook the affiliations of these leaders and the ideas they support. Countering violent extremism requires a diverse and multipronged approach. Also, the Muslim community has adopted a narrative of victimhood that must be combatted, in part by Muslim leaders taking better responsibility for the community. One effort toward this end, called Project Noor, focuses on civil and human rights issues and teaches individuals how to counteract radicalism; it is now active on fifty-five college campuses.

AIC is also working on developing and promoting moderate Islam and Islamic reforms. It is challenging the idea that Islam is immutable; rather, history proves that Islamic practice and ideology have changed, often for political purposes. Groups like ISIS and the Muslim Brotherhood are doing exactly that in exploiting Islam for political ends. As such, AIC wants to modernize interpretations of Islamic texts with the goal of improving society. At a time when radical ideas are spreading, the Muslim community needs to ask how it can use Islam for peaceful ends.

Finally, some Muslims have begun to question their safety in the United States following the murder of three Muslim students in North Carolina. But the real danger is the spread of radical ideologies. Change won't happen overnight, but we are moving in the right direction.

This summary was prepared by Gavi Barnhard.