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Muslim Rocker: Bonds Trump Bombs

The former fundamentalist tells a U.S. defense forum that military force alone won't change hearts or deter terrorists

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A famous visitor from the Muslim world – Indonesian rock star Ahmad Dhani, formerly a fundamentalist – dropped into one of the U.S. defense industry's main deal-making forums Tuesday with a challenge.

The military-led war on terrorism will not defeat emerging enemies, said Dhani, 34, his long hair and untucked shirt reminiscent of singer-activist Bono. "You cannot defeat the ideology of religious hatred and terrorism with weapons alone," Dhani said.

Instead of war, Dhani advocated promoting "good aspects of Western culture," such as "love for knowledge," free speech, religious tolerance and the rule of law. He told of how he uses his Western-inspired music to question extremism at home.

Dhani spoke at the opening of the three-day Homeland Defense Symposium at the Broadmoor Hotel, with several hundred contractors and military officials listening intently. This annual event traditionally brings together military officials and weapons contractors.

The 650 or so registered participants include executives from 98 companies and senior Bush administration officials. Francis Townsend, the president's top assistant for counterterrorism and homeland security, is scheduled to speak today.

Some speakers Tuesday warned that the U.S. military capacity to carry out operations in Iraq and elsewhere is strained to the limit. Some advocate an increasingly collaborative approach to new threats.

The approach of "building a new international defense alliance" and talking with other countries, including a potentially nuclear-armed Iran, holds greater promise than military action today, retired U.S. Army Gen. Barry McCaffrey, now a network news analyst and professor, said in an interview.

"We've been threatening the Iranians in public with the potential for military action," McCaffrey said, calling this "an insane option" that would "outrage the entire face of the Earth" and hurt U.S. energy supplies.

And, he said, “we’ve executed this war on terrorism badly.”

A leading musician in Indonesia, Dhani has faced threats at home after playing ideological jiu-jitsu with resurgent fundamentalist groups. In one hit song, he warns against “lost souls poisoned by ignorance and hate.”

As a boy, he loved Western music by the Beatles, Led Zeppelin and others, much to the consternation of his father, who ran a fundamentalist political group.

Dhani attended a fundamentalist school. Preachers instilled a sense that non-Muslims were infidels who would suffer in hell. When a cousin converted to Christianity, he refused to talk to him for a year.

But as a young man, he broke with fundamentalists, including his father, he said. Now he’s trying to convince Americans that reaching moderate Muslims through popular culture can turn potential enemies into friends.

“If the radical Indonesians feel they have a duty to do some assignment for Allah, I feel like I have a duty to my Allah to spread some peace and love,” he said.