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Right Turn

By Jennifer Rubin

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Muslims speak up, and against radical Islamists

By Jennifer Rubin

The Obama administration is forever searching for “moderate” Muslims to collaborate with on anti-terror activities and to foster moderation in Muslim communities here and abroad. However, it invariably selects to interact with or give visibility to groups like CAIR and individuals like the Ground Zero mosque builders who apologize for or ignore radical Islamists who have politicized Islam and used it as a justification for murder. Obama officials, and hard-line conservatives who assert that all Muslims are radical, should have come over to the Heritage Foundation this morning.

The ostensible purpose of [a two-hour session](#) was the English translation of a landmark Indonesian book, [The Illusion of an Islamic State](#). That original book provided Indonesians with a theological argument against advocates of a radical interpretation of Islam. It also supplied a wealth of revealing information on the degree to which outside forces (Saudi Arabian Wahabbists), funded generously by oil money, had sought to manipulate the 2009 national election in the largest Islamic democracy in the world. The result was remarkable: a repudiation of the vice presidential candidate backed by the Muslim Brotherhood-related PKS party and a new determination to reject the exclusionary, radical and violent sort of Islam that, in the minds of many in the West, has come to represent the only “legitimate” type of Islam.

At Heritage, C. Holland Taylor, the founder of [LibforAll](#) — a private foundation that promotes moderate Muslims’ efforts to root out Islamic extremism — and the co-publisher of and contributor to the book, along with Kyai Haji Achmad Mustofa Bisri, an Indonesian religious leader, scholar and artist (and the author of a new epilogue for the English-version of the book), appeared on the first of two panels. The message was two-fold. First, radical Muslims have propounded the false notion that theirs is the one true interpretation of Islam and that anyone who doesn’t abide by their interpretation (Muslim or otherwise) is wrong and should be silenced (by death if need be). Second, there are highly respected religious figures as well as politicians and cultural figures in Muslim countries pushing back against an ideology of hate, violence and religious supremacy who could use our help.

I asked the panelists what if anything the West could do to assist these Muslims in their internal battles with co-religionists. Mustofa Bisri, via translation from Taylor, explained, “We cannot overcome this problem solely by ourselves. People from the East and West and North and South must work to overcome this threat [of radical Islam].” Contrary to the position of radicals (and the widespread understanding of Western non-Muslims), Mustofa Bisri explained that Mohammed’s message was that Islam should “add to the perfection” in the world, not supplant other religions. Taylor added that the argument that any help we give to non-radicals will only “discredit” them is wrong. He said that no matter

what they do, moderates will always be accused of being pawns of the CIA. He said bluntly that, “Muslim societies need to be put in an ICU,” meaning they are in critical condition and need specialists from all disciplines to rescue the patient.

So what can the West do? Taylor suggests, for example, “holding Saudi Arabia” accountable for its role in funding and spreading radical Islam. He also points to joint efforts with anti-terrorism officials in the EU to work with anti-extremist groups in combating and delegitimizing proponents of radical Islam.

A second panel included a Bush administration national security council official, Juan Zarate, and M. Zuhdi Jasser, M.D., the chairman and president of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, which works to promote liberty, tolerance and diversity within the Muslim community. Zarate echoed Taylor’s view that “victory” in the war against Islamic terror will only come when the radical ideology at its center is discredited, although he concedes the West “has not figured out how to support” anti-extremists in the Muslim world. Jasser, who testified in the House Homeland Security Committee hearings on radicalization of America Muslims, was clear in his prescription: “The separation of mosque and state is key to defeating” radicalism. He was candid that many self-proclaimed Muslim leaders are “apologists” for Islamic radicalism, pointing to a recent appearance in Britain by a supposedly respectable Muslim figure who excused bin Laden and suggested the West was behind a giant conspiracy. And Taylor added that the West endangers itself by “willful refusal to get involved” in the heart of the issue and to recognize that “the solution hides in plain sight,” namely promotion of Muslims who offer a tolerant, non-violent ideology.

So, I asked this panel, why is it that our government seems to cultivate precisely the sort of Muslim leaders who are part of the problem, who apologize for or deny the Islamic radical ideology’s role in terrorism? Zarate argued that it is hard to determine who really represents the American Islamic community, and in the wake of 9/11 the Bush administration was eager to find outreach opportunities and went to “pre-existing groups” that offered themselves as legitimate and moderate representatives of their communities. He suggested that the Obama administration “has tried” to work on this. (However, he offered no evidence of any results.) Jasser was more direct, stating that the U.S. government shouldn’t get tied up in a concern over the First Amendment and shy away from making distinctions between Muslim groups. The watchword he says, should be whether groups accept the separation of mosque and state, believe in liberty and don’t excuse violence.

The event and the panelists’ message is sure to annoy the sort of Muslim activists who objected to the radicalization hearings and deny that Islamic terrorism, at its root, is a manifestation of radical ideology. It also will sound jarring to those on the right who insist (ironically, as the radical Muslims do) that the Koran is to be taken literally and that the radicals are the “real” face of Islam. But, then, the book is meant to stir debate, undermine misconceptions and shatter the aura of legitimacy that radical Muslim leaders have erected. In that regard, the book and the Heritage event should be considered a roaring success.

Tomorrow, I’ll have an interview with Taylor and Mustofa Bisri on how the Indonesian experience can be internationalized and what the reaction of the Obama administration has been to their message.

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