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Right Turn

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No easy task: Fighting back against radical Islam

By Jennifer Rubin

As I reported [yesterday](#), there was a remarkable event at the Heritage Foundation featuring the rollout of the English-language version of [“The Illusion of an Islamic State,”](#) a book intended to challenge the theological legitimacy of Islamic extremism. After the program I interviewed the book’s co-publisher and contributing author, C. Holland Taylor, whose foundation LibForAll works to combat Islamic extremism and support progressive Muslims, and the Indonesian Muslim scholar and artist Kyai Haji Achmad Mustofa Bisri, who penned an epilogue for the English edition of the book.

Mustofa Bisri defies every Western stereotype of an Islamic leader. He’s not Arab, wears Western clothes, has a gentle disposition and evidences obvious affection for America. When I ask him his impression of America his face lights up and he becomes animated. “America reminds me of my own country,” he tells me through a translator. He observes that at the program were people of “many different languages, ethnicities and religions. I’m looking at all this diversity. For those who harbor prejudice against America — they should come to see this.” Not exactly, the Muslim view of America that dominates news coverage, is it?

What does he hope to accomplish from the release of the book, which was originally aimed at giving Indonesian Muslims theological arguments against extremists and revealing the extent to which the Saudis export and fund jihadism? He says, “At a minimum people will begin to know Islam as a blessing for all creation, and not a curse.” This sounds lofty and impractical, but in the battle for hearts and minds within Muslim countries and in Muslim communities in Europe and North America this is groundbreaking stuff. Taylor interjects that “all this time people in the West have been hearing a narrative that all Islam is Islam A,” he says, describing the exclusionary version of Islamic radicals. “But Islam is not limited to A,” he says.

Moreover, both Taylor and Mustofa Bisri are aiming to affect policymakers in the West. Taylor explains that they have met with anti-terrorism officials in the EU and representatives of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, one of Germany’s premier political foundations. The goal is to navigate between increasingly radical right-wing parties (which propagate anti-Muslim views) and left-wing parties that either ignore the impact of radical Islam or harbor some affection for those with whom they share hatred for the West. Can government work with and elevate the stature of nonviolent Muslims who think of themselves as British or German first, and not as Muslims first? It’s a worthy question to pursue.

They also have met with the Roman Catholic bishop of Antwerp, who was charged with Muslim outreach there and who has been involved with the Vatican’s outreach to Muslims begun under John Paul II and

continuing under the current pope. And today they are meeting with Dr. Richard Land, the head of the public policy entity within the Southern Baptist Convention. The purpose of these religious interactions is to disabuse others of the notion that all Muslims are intolerant, anti-West and anti-Christian. If other religious leaders are interested in ecumenical understanding, it would be desirable for them to interact with those trying to recapture their religion from extremists.

In Washington, Taylor says they have met with representatives of the Obama administration who are charged with international Muslim engagement. He describes them as “very interested” in their approach, with plans for further discussion.

Meanwhile, revolutionary change is sweeping the Muslim world. As for the Arab Spring, Mustofa Bisri says, “I look at this from an optimist’s point of view. I see there is a strong desire for democracy. I see this tendency in their hearts, but it remains to be seen if they can actualize [what they feel].” Taylor points out that those predisposed to democracy, increased openness and free expression are precisely the same people with whom the message of Islamic tolerance, diversity and opposition to violence is likely to resonate.

At the time when the most heinous representative of radicalized Islam (Osama bin Laden) has dominated the news, Syria’s dictator is killing hundreds of Muslims, Egyptian Salafists are killing Copts and American Muslim leaders with sympathies for the Muslim Brotherhood are determined to speak on behalf of all American Muslims, there is no shortage of opportunities for a different sort of Islam and a different set of leaders who can stimulate debate within Muslim communities and educate the West. It is not hard to appreciate that anti-extremism efforts are critical to winning the war against Islamic terror. It is a daunting task, but Mustofa Bisri and Taylor remind us that a single book with a powerful message had a huge political impact in the largest Muslim-majority democracy in the world. If it can work in Indonesia, why not in the rest of the world?

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