



Islamist Critiques the Free World Needs to Use

Ryan Mauro

June 28, 2012

The following article appeared on the [Family Security Matters](#) website and was posted with permission.



Dr. Zuhdi Jasser offers many insights for the Free World. (Photo Credit: Faith in Public Life)

The free world is in dire need of texts that can mount a challenge to the Islamist ideology. At long last, they've arrived. Dr. Zuhdi Jasser's [A Battle for the Soul of Islam](#) and [The Illusion of the Islamic State](#) by several Indonesian authors, including former President Abdurrahman Wahid (1999-2001), are unused weapons in the ideological battle. Western governments, interfaith groups and activists should use these books to guide their choices of Muslim partners.

The two books have different but complimentary styles. Dr. Jasser's book tells his story, helping readers grasp the Islamist ideology and why he turned out differently. He addresses the Islamist interpretation of numerous Islamic passages. This is a book that touches you on the personal level. The Indonesian book is more academic. It illustrates how Islamists infiltrated the country in a process that is eerily similar to what we see taking place in Europe and the U.S. and, as the subtitle states, "How an Alliance of

Moderates Launched a Successful Jihad Against Radicalization and Terrorism in the World's Largest Muslim-Majority Country."

The Illusion of an Islamic State is more of a policy paper than a book. It is the end product of a study where 27 academics traveled across Indonesia and interviewed nearly 600 extremists in order to define the motivations, strategies and weaknesses of Islamists. The authors' stated goal is to confront the Muslim Brotherhood, Wahhabism and Hizb ut-Tahrir and turn Indonesia into an ideological launching pad against them.

The authors are a formidable foe for the Islamists. Former President Wahid had been called "the single most influential leader in the Muslim world" by some. One of the contributors leads Nahdlatul Ulama, a 40-million-strong organization founded in 1926 in response to the Wahhabist conquest of Mecca and Medina. Another author led Muhammadiyah, another anti-Islamist group with 30 million members.

The book is young, only published in Indonesia in May 2009, but has had a [tremendous impact](#). The project was funded by a single American donor and a Swedish government grant. The Gulf governments, on the other hand, spend billions promoting Islamism. The success of *The Illusion of an Islamic State* is frustrating in a way. If a relatively small expense could do so much good, then what would happen if real money and support was put behind it? The authors lament that they lack the resources to turn their momentum into an organized civil society movement and are disappointed that the U.S. and other Western countries are dropping the ball.

The common theme of the two books is that Sharia is meant to be a spiritual path based on an individual's relationship with God, not a system of governance that actually stands between man and God. Both believe that nationalism does not contradict Islam, whereas the Islamists view the *ummah*, or the entirety of Muslims, as a single nation-state and single political party. Both believe in critical thinking and questioning the teachings of imams. Islamists believe only the imams are qualified to tell you what God wants for you. From a young age, Jasser was taught to examine the texts independently as his father spoke classical Arabic and made his own translations. He was taught that imams aren't political authorities and to be aware when their spiritual instruction crossed that line.

One major problem is the treatment of Muslims as a single entity, an obstacle Dr. Jasser partially attributes to the influence of Arab tribal culture. Muslims who speak out against those within the *ummah* often become outcasts, much like would happen in a tribe. Dr. Jasser and other anti-Islamist Muslims [know this](#) all [too well](#). This has negative effects when it comes to security. The Fort Dix terror plot was foiled with the help of a Muslim informant working for the FBI. Instead of being celebrated, he was [out-casted](#) because, as he describes it, "For Muslims, we are all brothers, and I betrayed a brother."

This leads to double-standards where Muslims rage against real or imagined transgressions against their own but rarely speak a negative word about the co-religionists like Sheikh Yousef al-Qaradawi, a hugely influential cleric whose extremism is [plain for all to see](#). Another example would be how Imam Zaid Shakir, a prominent American preacher, [answered](#) when he was recently asked about Hizb ut-Tahrir, an anti-American group openly hostile to democracy that advocates resurrecting the Caliphate. His criticism was limited to their belief that a Caliphate would cure the ills of the Muslim world, followed by instructions to Muslims to not publicly criticize or "vilify" the group. This stands in sharp contrast to his [fiery rhetoric](#) about the U.S.

The most powerful moment for me in Dr. Jasser's book was his story of how his family wanted to construct a mosque in Wisconsin but public opposition stalled it. After they went to the media, the attitude changed and it was built. Rather than showcase the incident as proof that Muslims are oppressed in American society, as CAIR would, Jasser's family marveled at how American liberties allowed them to

win. "My parents always told us that the struggle and uncertainty about Muslims were human but their victory for religious freedom was American," he writes.

One of the barriers to Islamic reform is opposition to *ijtihad*, the independent interpretation of Islamic doctrine. The general [consensus](#) is that the "gates of *ijtihad*" were [closed](#) by 1258 A.D. It was declared that the qualified Islamic scholars had answered all the necessary questions. New questions are to be answered through analogical reasoning.

The result is that, in the words of Professor Ziauddin Sadar in IslamForToday.com, "serious rethinking within Islam is overdue" because the doctrine is "frozen in time." He [writes](#) that this has led to "three metaphysical catastrophes: the elevation of the Shari`ah to the level of the Divine, with the consequent removal of agency from the believers, and the equation of Islam with the State." Tunisian professor Dr. Muhamed Al-Haddad likewise [writes](#), "Daily life has evolved radically since the last millennium, but there has been no accompanying development in mainstream Muslim legal theory."

Middle East expert Harold Rhode [argues](#) "For the foreseeable future, the answer seems to be a resounding *no*" to the question of whether the gates can be reopened. However, there are Muslims arguing for the revival of *ijtihad* and there are Muslims who argue that they were never really closed to begin with.

Malcolm Jardine, for example, wrote a [paper](#) arguing that the belief that *ijtihad* has ceased "needs to be contested vigorously." Irshad Manji has started [Project Ijtihad](#) to promote critical thinking and cites the Nawawi Foundation's Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah's [paper](#) that argues that Islam "never had a doorkeeper to close it in the first place." Former Islamist Tawfik Hamid [reported](#) in January 2011 that a group of 25 scholars, including some from Al-Azhar University, had called for the formal continuation of *ijtihad*. They listed 10 points in need of re-examination including *jihad*, separation of mosque and state, women's rights and relations with non-Muslims.

It is Muslims like Dr. Jasser and the now-deceased Abdurrahman Wahid who need to be upheld and promoted. Interfaith groups would be wise to seek out those like them, rather than working with the more easily-accessible Islamists that spout their ideology and promote feelings of victimization, separatism and identity politics that undermine bridge-building. On this topic, there is one part of *The Illusion of an Islamic State* that truly impacted me as a Christian.

C. Holland Taylor writes how he brought his Pentecostal friend to meet Wahid when he came to the U.S. in May 2008. He was here to accept the Simon Wiesenthal Center's Medal of Valor for calling Iranian President Ahmadinejad a liar after he denied the Holocaust. His friend said, "Holland, I keep asking myself: how do these Muslim leaders you introduce me to, know what I know?"

Taylor asked what she meant. "It's obvious that President Wahid is filled with the Holy Spirit," the friend answered. She continued, "Well, I wouldn't be comfortable saying this to anyone at church...but the only explanation that makes sense to me, is that Jesus is far, far greater than I ever realized."

She didn't have to believe in Wahid's faith to believe that God was using him for good. God isn't limited to only using Christians or believers in whichever faith you belong to.

You may or may not agree with that analysis, but the bottom line is this: The Islamists are promoting texts and leaders preaching their beliefs. Why aren't we promoting the texts and leaders preaching *against* their beliefs?

<http://www.theird.org/issues/middle-east/islamist-critiques-the-free-world-needs-to-use>