Right Islam vs. Wrong Islam

By Abdurrahman Wahid

JAKARTA—News organizations report that Osama bin Laden has obtained a religious edict from a prominent Saudi cleric, justifying the use of nuclear weapons against America and the infliction of mass casualties. It requires substantial moral strength to confront the potential ramifications of this fact. Yet can anyone doubt that those who joyfully incinerate office buildings, commandeer trains, and broadcast threats worldwide seem at the chance to magnify their damage a thousandfold?

Imagine the impact of a single nuclear bomb detonated in New York, London, Paris, Sydney or a major city. The destruction of modern civilization is built on economic and technological foundations that terrorists hope to collapse with a single nuclear fibre nuke. As many as 100,000 people could die in the wake of a single bomb.

Just two small, well-placed bombs devastated Bali’s tourist economy in 2002 and sent much of its population back to the rice fields and out to sea, to fill their empty bellies. What would be the effect of a global economic crisis in the wake of attacks far more devastating than those of Bali or 9/11?

It is time for people of goodwill from every faith and region to recognize that a terrible drama threatens humanity. We cannot afford to continue ignoring the obvious threat. We must act now to avert this existential threat. Rather, we must set aside our international and partisan bickering, and join to confront the danger that lies before us.

An extreme and pervasive ideology in the minds of fanatics is what directly threatens us (oppressive and impoverished fundamentalist Muslim cajoled by petroleum dollars). Yet underlying, enabling and exacerbating that threat is the systemic and global crisis of misunderstanding.

All too many Muslims fail to grasp Islam, while all too many Westerners fail to understand Islam. This misunderstanding is encapsulated in the words of the Quran, "For you, your religion; for me, my religion." That is the essence of tolerance. Religious fanatism—either purposefully or out of ignorance—perverts Islam into a dogma of intolerance.

We must understand the true nature of Islam permits the continued rationalization of Muslims worldwide, while blinding the rest of humanity to a solution which hides in plain sight.

The most effective way to overcome Islamophobia is to understand the true message of Islam: Islam is truly to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. With that understanding, people of other faiths, and the majority of well-intentioned Muslims can unite, create and discard this dangerous ideology. The crisis that threatens Muslims and non-Muslims alike, with tragic consequences. Failure to understand the true nature of Islam permits the continued rationalization of Muslims worldwide, while blinding the rest of humanity to a solution which hides in plain sight.

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1) An aggressive program with clear ideological and political goals; 2) inadequate funding from oil-rich Wahihi states; 3) the ability to distribute funds in impoverished areas to buy loyalty and power; 4) a claim to and aura of religious authenticity and Arab prestige; 5) an appeal to Islamic identity, pride and history; 6) an ability to blend into the much larger traditionalist masses and blur the distinction between moderate Islam and their brand of religious extremism; 7) false claims made in the name of Islam; 8) networks of Islamic schools that propagate extremism; 9) the absence of organized opposition in the Islamic world; 10) the radical work of fundamentalist imams who guide their followers to extremism; 11) a well-organized "machine" established to train, publish and distribute Wahhabi/Salafi propaganda and disseminate its ideology to the world; 12) educational programs to study in Saudi Arabia and return home with degrees and indoctrination, to serve as future leaders; 13) the ability to cross national and cultural borders in the name of religion; 14) Internet communication; and 15) the reluctance of many national governments to supervise or control this entire process.

We must take effective strategies to counter each of these fundamentalist strategies. This can be accomplished only by bringing the combined weight of the vast majority of peace-loving Muslims, and the non-Muslim world, to bear in a coordinated and directed manner. This goal is to resolve the crisis of misunderstanding that threatens to engulf our entire world.

An effective counterstrategy must be based upon positive, non-confrontational strategies, which remove strengths and weaknesses in the face of religious extremism and terror. Distrust, of course, has fostered failure. But Muslims and non-Muslim societies faced a similar existential threat. A lack of seriousness in confronting the threat helped those who seek to promote a peaceful and tolerant understanding of Islam must overcome the paralyzing effects of inertia, and harness a number of actual or potential strengths, which can play a key role in realizing a fundamentalist ideology. These strengths not only are assets in the struggle with religious extremism, but in their mirror form they point to the weakness at the heart of fundamentalist ideology. They are:

1) Human dignity, which demands freedom of conscience and rejection of the forced imposition of religious views; 2) the ability to mobilize immense resources to bring to bear on this problem, once it is identified and a global commitment is made to solve it; 3) the ability to leverage resources by supporting individuals and organizations that truly embrace a peaceful and pluralist Islam; 4) near-universal respect for human rights and traditions and spiritual equality, which is inherent to fundamentalist ideology; 5) appeals to local and national—as well as international—sense of tradition and pride; 6) the power of the feminine spirit, and the fact that half of humanity consists of women, who have an inherent role to play in the outcome of this struggle; 7) traditional and Sunni leadership and mass movements, who are not yet radicalized (and Sunni movements have the highest rate of birth of the world’s 1.3 billion Muslims; 8) the ability to harness networks of Islamic schools to propagate peace and tolerance; 9) the natural tendency of like-minded people to work together when alarmed to a common danger; 10) the ability to form a movement of the like-minded individuals, organizations and opinion leaders to promote moderate and progressive ideas throughout the Islamic world; 11) the experience of a counterideology, in the form of traditional, Sunni and modern Islamic teachings, and the ability to translate such works into key Islamic languages; 12) the benefits of modernity, for all its flaws, and the widespread appeal of popular culture; 13) the ability to link religious movements with civil and cultural actors in the name of religion; 14) Internet communications, to disseminate progressive values and ideas; 15) like-minded individuals and organizations throughout the world; 16) the acceptance, and the universal human desires for freedom, justice and a better life for oneself and loved ones.

Though potentially decisive, most of these movements remain latent or diffuse, and require mobilization to be effective in confronting fundamentalist ideology. In addition, most efforts to defeat religious extremism have not succeeded without ultimately cutting off the flow of peddlers used to finance that extremism, from Leeds to Jakarta.

Only by recognizing the problem, putting an end to the bickering within and between nations, and adopting a coherent long-term plan (executed with international leadership and commitment) can we begin to apply the brakes to the sharpest spread of extremism. In order to solve the world’s crisis of misunderstanding before the global economy and modern civilizations itself begin to crumble in the face of truly devastating attacks.

Muslims themselves can and must propagate an understanding of the "right" Islam, and a complete ideology. Only by accomplishing this task requires the understanding and support of like-minded individuals, organizations and large international institutions. Our goal must be to challenge the hearts and minds of humanity, and offer a compelling alternative to the religious ideology of hatred to the darkness from which it emerged.

Mr. Wahid, former president of Indonesia, is a patron and senior advisor to the Libera Foundation (www.libera.org), an Indonesian and U.S.-based nonprofit that seeks to end religious extremism and discredit the use of terrorism.