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Right Islam vs. Wrong Islam

By Abdurrahman Wahid

JAKARTA—News organizations report that Osama bin Laden has obtained a religious edict from a misguided Saudi cleric, justifying the use of nuclear weapons against America and the infliction of mass casualties. It requires great emotional strength to confront the potential ramifications of this fact. Yet can anyone doubt that those who joyfully incinerate the occupants of office buildings, commuter trains, hotels and nightclubs would leap 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 L.A.! What about two or three? The entire edifice of modern civilization is built on economic and technological foundations that terrorists hope to collapse with nuclear attacks like so many fishing huts in the wake of a tsunami.

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 nation to recognize that a terrible danger threatens humanity. We cannot afford to continue "business as usual" in the face of this existential threat. Rather, we must set aside our international and partisan bickering, and join to confront the danger that lies before us.

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An extreme and perverse ideology in the minds of fanatics is what directly threatens us (specifically, Wahhabi/Salafi ideology—a minority fundamentalist religious cult fueled by petrodollars). Yet underlying, enabling and exacerbating this threat of religious extremism is a global crisis of misunderstanding.

All too many Muslims fail to grasp Islam, which teaches one to be lenient towards others and to understand their value systems, knowing that these are tolerated by Islam as a religion. The essence of Islam is encapsulated in the words of the Quran, "For you, your religion; for me, my religion." That is the essence of tolerance. Religious fanatics—either purposely or out of ignorance—pervert Islam into a dogma of intolerance, hatred and bloodshed. They justify their brutality with slogans such as "Islam is above everything else." They seek to intimidate and subdue anyone who does not share their extremist views, regardless of nationality or religion. While a few are quick to shed blood themselves, countless millions of others sympathize with their violent actions, or join in the complicity of silence.

This crisis of misunderstanding—of Islam by Muslims themselves—is compounded by the failure of governments, people of other faiths, and the majority of well-intentioned Muslims to resist, isolate and discredit this dangerous ideology. The crisis thus afflicts Muslims and non-Muslims alike, with tragic consequences. Failure to understand the true nature of Islam permits the continued radicalization of Muslims worldwide, while blinding the rest of humanity to a solution which hides in plain sight.

The most effective way to overcome Islamist extremism is to explain what Islam truly is to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. Without that explanation, people will tend to accept the unrefuted extremist view—further radicalizing Muslims, and turning the rest of the world against Islam itself.

Accomplishing this task will be neither quick nor easy. In recent decades, Wahhabi/Salafi ideology has made substantial inroads throughout the Muslim world. Islamic fundamentalism has become a well-financed, multifaceted global movement that operates like a juggernaut in much of the developing world, and even among immigrant Muslim communities in the West. To neutralize the virulent ideology that underlies fundamentalist terrorism and threatens the very foundations of modern civilization, we must identify its advocates, understand their goals and strategies, evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, and effectively counter their every move. What we are talking about is nothing less than a global struggle for the soul of Islam.

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The Sunni (as opposed to Shiite) fundamentalists' goals generally include: claiming to restore the perfection of the early Islam practiced by Muhammad and his companions, who are known in Arabic as *al-Salaf al-Salih*, "the Righteous Ancestors"; establishing a utopian society based on these Salafi principles, by imposing their interpretation of Islamic law on all members of society; annihilating local variants of Islam in the name of authenticity and purity; transforming Islam from a personal faith into an authoritarian political system; establishing a pan-Islamic caliphate governed according to the strict tenets of Salafi Islam, and often conceived as stretching from Morocco to Indonesia and the Philippines; and, ultimately, bringing the entire world under the sway of their extremist ideology.

The world must unite to defeat the Wahhabi ideology.

Fundamentalist strategy is often simple as well as brilliant. Extremists are quick to drape themselves in the mantle of Islam and declare their opponents *kafir*, or infidels, and thus smooth the way for slaughtering nonfundamentalist Muslims. Their theology rests upon a simplistic, literal and highly selective reading of the Quran and Sunnah (prophetic traditions), through which they seek to entrap the world-wide Muslim community in the confines of their narrow ideological grasp. Expansionist by nature, most fundamentalist groups constantly probe for weakness and an opportunity to strike, at any time or place, to further their authoritarian goals.

The armed *ghazis* (Islamic warriors) raiding from New York to Jakarta, Istanbul, Baghdad, London and Madrid are only the tip of the iceberg, forerunners of a vast and growing population that shares their radical views and ultimate objectives. The formidable strengths of this world-wide fundamentalist movement include:

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1) An aggressive program with clear ideological and political goals; 2) immense funding from oil-rich Wahhabi sponsors; 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) full-time commitment by its agents/leadership; 8) networks of Islamic schools that propagate extremism; 9) the absence of organized opposition in the Islamic world; 10) a global network of fundamentalist imams who guide their flocks to extremism; 11) a well-oiled "machine" established to translate, publish and distribute Wahhabi/Salafi propaganda and disseminate its ideology throughout the world; 12) scholarships for locals to study in Saudi Arabia and return 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 employ effective strategies to counter each of these fundamentalist strengths. 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 global campaign whose goal is to resolve the crisis of misunderstanding that threatens to engulf our entire world.

An effective counterstrategy must be based upon a realistic assessment of our own strengths and weaknesses in the face of religious extremism and terror. Disunity, of course, has proved fatal to countless human societies faced with a similar existential threat. A lack of seriousness in confronting the imminent danger is likewise often fatal. 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 neutralizing 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 rejects 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 tolerant Islam; 4) nearly 1,400 years of Islamic traditions and spirituality, which are inimical to fundamentalist ideology; 5) appeals to local and national—as well as Islamic—culture/traditions/pride; 6) the power of the feminine spirit, and the fact that half of humanity consists of women, who have an inherent stake in the outcome of this struggle; 7) traditional and Sufi leadership and masses, who are not yet radicalized (strong numeric advantage: 85% to 90% of the world's 1.3 billion Muslims); 8) the ability to harness networks of Islamic schools to propagate a peaceful and tolerant Islam; 9) the natural tendency of like-minded people to work together when alerted to a common danger; 10) the ability to form a global network of like-minded individuals, organizations and opinion leaders to promote moderate and progressive ideas throughout the Muslim world; 11) the existence of a counterideology, in the form of traditional, Sufi and modern Islamic teachings, and the ability to translate such works into key languages; 12) the benefits of modernity, for all its flaws, and the widespread appeal of popular culture; 13) the ability to cross national and cultural borders in the name of religion; 14) Internet communications, to disseminate progressive views—linking and inspiring like-minded individuals and organizations throughout the world; 15) the nation-state; and 16) the universal human desire for freedom, justice and a better life for oneself and loved ones.

Though potentially decisive, most of these advantages remain latent or diffuse, and require mobilization to be effective in confronting fundamentalist ideology. In addition, no effort to defeat religious extremism can succeed without ultimately cutting off the flow of petrodollars used to finance that extremism, from Leeds to Jakarta.

Only by recognizing the problem, putting an end to the bickering within and between nation-states, and adopting a coherent long-term plan (executed with international leadership and commitment) can we begin to apply the brakes to the rampant spread of extremist ideas and hope to resolve the world's crisis of misunderstanding before the global economy and modern civilization itself begin to crumble in the face of truly devastating attacks.

Muslims themselves can and must propagate an understanding of the "right" Islam, and thereby discredit extremist ideology. Yet to accomplish this task requires the understanding and support of like-minded individuals, organizations and governments throughout the world. Our goal must be to illuminate the hearts and minds of humanity, and offer a compelling alternate vision of Islam, one that banishes the fanatical ideology of hatred to the darkness from which it emerged.

Mr. Wahid, former president of Indonesia, is patron and senior advisor to the LibForAll Foundation (www.libforall.org), an Indonesian and U.S.-based nonprofit that works to reduce religious extremism and discredit the use of terrorism.