



Center for Strategic & International Studies
Washington, DC

From Guantanamo Bay to General Boykin

A Dialogue with Muslim Scholars

November 5, 2003

On November 5, 2003, CSIS' Transnational Threats Initiative hosted a panel of Muslim scholars to facilitate dialogue concerning the American Muslim community, their leaders, and the roots of Islamic radicalism in the United States.

The panel explained how the growth of radical Islam is one of a few unintended historical and psychological consequences of the Cold War. It was noted that the United States is not engaged in a clash of civilizations, as projected by Samuel P. Huntington. The scholars disputed the belief that September 11th was a plot carried out by the United States to start such a clash with Islam. Unlike the political and military threats posed by the Soviet Union on the United States, Islam is in no position to destroy America, they said. Of historical relevance for the growth of radical Islam today is that the "Arab Cold War" happened in conjunction with the Cold War. During this time, different factions of Muslims were being supported either by the United States or Soviet Union. Support from the United States, for instance, allowed radical Muslims to become more prominent via the "great American magnifying mirror." Many Muslims are responding to Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda like many Americans responded to the KKK. These psychological and historical issues demand that American Muslims play a decisive role in destroying radicalism in the Muslim world.

Principal political religious leaders are split as to the extent that the Wahhabi clergy in Saudi Arabia funds the madrassahs. Invariably, Arab moderate leaders cite that 1% of their population is extremist. Note that 1% of the world's population equals 1.4 million people. Therefore, 1% of all Arab nations is a rather horrifying figure especially when 1% is often holding 99% of the population hostage by hijacking a religion for violence and nefarious purposes.

In regards to the United States, participants voiced concern over those schools certified to supply names of chaplains to U.S. prisons. There is a big struggle among various faith groups for the souls of prisoners, one participant noted. As such, prisons have become an ideological playground in the United States. Many believe that Wahhabists, or those funded by Saudi Arabia, are often responsible for recommending chaplains. However, there has been a failure to establish generally accepted definitions for Wahhabism, fundamentalism, and extremism, which has hitherto complicated such dialogues. The Justice Department, for instance, cannot independently distinguish between moderates and Wahhabism and thus relies on such institutions to confirm chaplains. Of importance is the need to establish an American Muslim ideal that respects the very old theological debate within Islam as well as the United States'



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pluralistic society. The primary concern of being a chaplain is to accommodate different kinds of people with different beliefs.

The tremendous growth of Islam within America has made mosques reach from urban to rural areas, from North to South, and laterally across the country. While this expansion has opened up productive discussion to better understand the American Muslim community, many fear that civil liberties are in jeopardy. Since September 11th, many American Muslims worry that their religious affiliation deems them more likely to be wrongly accused as threats to national security. Many in the American Muslim community also feel snubbed when attempting to demonstrate their patriotism by serving the United States. It is important to note that Muslims have been in the military since World War I.

Emanating from the forum was the concern over the integrity and loyalty of American Muslim leaders and those who speak for the community. Many believe that the American Muslim community must attempt to produce a modern day Martin Luther King, Jr. who can become the dominant voice of Islam. While many Imams in North America publicly condemned the September 11th attacks as acts against the basic freedoms of the people and the teachings of Islam, several Muslim chaplains and leaders have been questioned over their affiliations to suspect radical Islamic factions recently. Panelists noted such investigations take a toll on the already complex and emotionally charged American Muslim community. In response to these incidents, American Muslim organizations have sanctioned and/or censored those who use Islam for erroneous causes. The panelists also stressed that they have confidence in the American judicial system to decide whether Muslim leadership truly embraces and promotes the American ideal. Also of importance is a responsible media that will provide an unbiased and thorough portrayal of the American Muslim community and those under investigation.

September 11th made the terrorist threat categorically clear. The war on terror is a military war in conjunction with a moral war. The American moral economy is in jeopardy and can be defended by responsible dialogue between those in academia, politics, the military, and the media. In addition, further discussion concerning a resolution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict will be pivotal in combating Islamic-American misunderstandings. Finally, by addressing and balancing American civil rights and liberties we can more aptly engage Muslims in the strengthening national security.