

Safe in the West

Western Muslims should strive against internal extremism to ensure their safety.

By M. A. Muqtedar Khan and John L. Esposito

The war on terror and its attendant consequences has created extremely difficult circumstances for Muslim Americans in particular and Western Muslim in general. The changing political and legal environment in Western countries has undermined the quality of life of Western Muslims. Many face workplace discrimination, racial and religious profiling, challenging businesses environment, travel hassles. The situation has become difficult and risky and Islamic institutions; particularly mosques and Islamic charities face harassment and unnecessary scrutiny.

The challenge for Western Muslims today is existential. If things get worse what will happen to them? Some fear the rhetoric and recommendations of Islamophobic political commentators, questioning the patriotism of Muslim communities in the West and even raising the example of the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. Clearly the future of Islam and Muslims in the West is at risk and in this environment Western Muslims will have to manage their politics with foresight, prudence, and patience.

Three potential dangers face Western Muslims.

- (1) Increased anti-western terrorism in the Muslim World which fuels Islamophobia, enhances the political influence of Western anti-Muslim extremists and enables the institutionalization of legislation designed to undermine the influence of Muslims.
- (2) The Bush administration's foreign policy that is geared towards the projection of American power and reassertion of American hegemony in the Middle East. Aggressive American unilateralism triggers events and actions that ultimately undermine the security and well being of Western Muslims.
- (3) Homegrown extremism among Muslims.

At the moment, Western Muslims can do little to reduce the first two dangers beyond engaging in dialogues -- political and religious -- at various levels. However, they can and must play an aggressive and decisive role in eliminating internal extremism that resonates with extremism in the Muslim World. Extremist discourse, actions and postures by a small minority of Western Muslims not only undermine the efforts of the vast majority to improve Western-Islamic relations, they also provide concrete evidence of the most egregious stereotypes of Islam and Muslims.

Western Muslim community leaders, activists and scholars must condemn and reject any and all forms of extremist rhetoric coming from Juma khutbas, public statements on TV and other media and from some Muslim publications themselves. Care must be taken to not only moderate Muslim public discourse but also Muslim-Muslim discourse in order to ensure that extremism and vehement anti-Westernism do not take root in the community. Islam and Muslims in the West can be critical of the West and Western ideals but cannot and must not be anti-West. The critical distinction between being opposed to American foreign policy in the Muslim World and being anti-American must be maintained.

In the current environment any criticism of the US foreign policy can be easily construed as anti-Americanism. However, the difficulty of the task does not mean that Muslims should either give up criticism of US policies or embrace anti-Americanism. Consider for example the self-criticism of prominent Western Muslim scholar Tariq Ramadan. He is critical of many Western and Eastern Muslim practices, but in spite of it he is never perceived as un-Islamic or anti-Islamic. Indeed he is embraced by many as an inspirational intellectual. On the other hand Muslim critic such as Irshad Manji is perceived as anti-Islamic by many mainstream Muslims in the US and Canada. Muslims in their criticism of American policies must come across as Tariq Ramadan and not Irshad Manji.

The first thing to achieve this is to eschew blaming the entire American society, or the West or even democracy for the excesses committed by specific administrations or even individuals. For example blaming the entire US states, or ‘democracy’ or even the West for what happened in Abu Ghraib is akin to blaming Islam for what happened on September 11th, 2001. Often Muslim rhetoric, critical of the US/West, tends to treat the US or the West as monolithic and comes across as anti-western polemic rather than thoughtful criticism.

The Threat of Internal Extremism

Most Western Muslims have the same basic desires as many others, material well being, cultural acceptance and the opportunity to practice their faith without social and political intimidation. Some, however, wish to use their geographic location as an asset in their war against their perceived enemies. The argument made by some, especially the neoconservatives that radical Islam is well deeply embedded in the West and the Western Muslim community hides in its bosom many secret ‘sleeper’ terrorist cells is patently false. Such claims must be seen as racist and religiously bigoted. No community has been as closely scrutinized as Muslims in America and no widespread threat has been uncovered. The 9/11 Commission fully exonerated the community of any connection to terrorism.

Nevertheless in every Muslim community there is a small group of individuals angry with the West and fearing that Islam is being destroyed. In their anger they say and do counterproductive and dangerous things. Most people in the West are sensible and recognize isolated episodes of violence or intemperate rants. However there are three issues on which a small minority of Western Muslims continues to alienate Western populations from Islam and Muslims.

- (1) **Justifying Suicide Bombing:** Suicide bombing has become a metaphor for all that is terrible about Islam and Muslims. Even though most Muslims everywhere condemn suicide bombing as un-Islamic some continue to utilize the freedom of speech available in the West to claim that suicide bombing is a noble and Islamically justifiable defense strategy. Such individuals succeed only in branding Islam as a barbaric religion that inspires violence. They also belie the majority of Western Muslims who condemn it and make it look as if they are dissimulating and lying. This promotes the canard that Western Muslims are all secretly supporters of terrorism and that Islam indeed teaches violence.

- (2) Equating the war on terror to the war on Islam: Some radical Muslim commentators have been insisting that the war on terror is actually a war on Islam. Unfortunately the history of American foreign policy and recent actions in the Muslim World has convinced many Muslims that the US is at war with Islam. For Western Muslims this is an unacceptable interpretation of what is happening. First of all it is not true. Islam continues to thrive in the West even today. The prominent role played by Muslims in the 2004 presidential elections is clear proof that in spite of growing Islamophobia and the Patriot Act, they remain a vibrant force and far from being snuffed out. In Europe the presence of Muslims has transformed Europe's foreign policy, its relations with the US and its posture with regards to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Those who insist that the West is at war with Islam do a grave disservice to Western Muslims and also undermine the prospects of future good relations between the West and the Islamic World.
- (3) Demonization of the West and Democracy: The third theme in radical Muslim discourse includes a rhetorical demonization of the West as evil and democracy as hypocrisy. In a curious way the very existence of this free radical discourse is indicative of how strong democracy is across the board in Western countries. But this constant demonization of the West (America and Europe), ridicule of their values, icons, religious beliefs, secular beliefs and cultural practices may very well lead to the elimination of free speech and the diminishing of democracy. As far as Western Muslims are concerned, those who attacked the US on 9/11/2001 have caused them untold misery. They cannot allow it to be amplified through irresponsible statements from within their own communities.

The community must get tough on radical discourse. Western Muslims should become more organized and aggressive in marginalizing and condemning voices that justify violence, incite hatred, and practice demonization of the other. How can community members and leaders fight bigots in the mainstream community and the rising Islamophobia if some within their own ranks mirror the same fear, ignorance and prejudice? The struggle for acceptance of Islam and Muslims in the West cannot be divorced from the acceptance of the West within its Muslim communities.

John L. Esposito is University Professor and Founding Director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University. Muqtedar Khan, who teaches Adrian College and is a bon-resident Fellow at the Brookings Institution, is author of several books on Islam and Muslims.