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Islam and the West: Searching for Common Ground

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In the name of God, most Merciful, most Benevolent.

Distinguished Chairman, Senator Richard G. Lugar and eminent members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, it is indeed an honor to share my expertise with this august body. We are engaged today in a highly noble Islamic and democratic ritual – Shura – consultation and I thank you for this opportunity.

1. Islam is structurally a dynamic religion and has always been epistemologically pluralistic. In simple terms Islam has a built in mechanism for continuous evolution, reform and self-rejuvenation through the engine of Ijtihad. Ijtihad is a legal tool that enables Muslim jurists to think independently on issues where scriptures are either silent or ambiguous. It is also a divine invitation to all Muslims and all human beings to think, reflect and deliberate on God's message and global realities in order to act in the most gracious, most compassionate and most just fashion. Ijtihad will always keep Islam relevant and meaningful to Muslims and others who are fortunate to be blessed with its grace.

Muslims have from the earliest period, after the death of the Prophet of Islam [pbuh], interpreted Islam in many ways. There have been many interpretations of what the Islamic Shariah – the essence of Islamic message – constitutes, some even contradictory but Muslims have recognized difference and diversity as a consequence of divine purpose and developed a culture of tolerance for different manifestations and interpretations of Islam.

So from the very beginning there have been different interpretations of Islam, Shia and Sunni, rational and traditional, mystical and philosophical, cultural and juristic. So it is more accurate to talk about Islams rather than Islam. For academic as well as strategic purposes, it is absolutely necessary to distinguish between different Islams and not paint with a broad brush for it will inevitably lead to bad analysis and bad policy.

2. For the purposes of U.S.' foreign policy however it is important to distinguish between two broad competing historical tendencies within Islamic history. These two tendencies can be captured as;

A defensive mechanism that seeks to conserve, preserve, and defend "Islam", and eventually leads to narrow, combative, and often intolerant interpretations of Islam and who a good Muslim is. In our times we associate this tendency very strongly with Salafi and Wahhabi groups. But we must be careful to recognize that religious intolerance does not necessarily lead to political confrontation, violence, terrorism and anti-Americanism. While Al Qaeda is definitely Salafi-Wahhabi and is our enemy, the Saudi royal family and the Qataris and the Kuwaitis are also mostly Salafi-Wahhabis but they are our friends and allies. Most Jihadis are theologically Salafi Wahhabis, but very few Salafi Wahhabis are jihadis.

The alternative is a more liberal and compassionate, even mystical interpretation of Islam, which is highly accommodating of difference within Islam and between religions. It is compatible with democracy, religious pluralism and is often referred to as liberal Islam and or moderate Islam.

3. What is Radical Islam

Since September 11th, there has been a strong tendency among conservative Americans and Israelis to construct the enemy as a discrete, ideological and institutionalized actor called radical Islam and sometimes, radical fundamentalist fascist Islam. Radical Islam is imagined as a manifestation of Islam that is narrow, intolerant, authoritarian, violent, anti-west, anti-democracy, anti-American and anti-Israel. I too have been guilty of this generalization in an article for current History in 2006. However since then have noticed anomalies. Secular, progressive Muslims also often share several of these characteristics with radical Islamists and there is no definitive relationship between conservative and traditional Islam, anti-Americanism and violence.

There is no doubt that there is at present a very angry and viscous and growing tendency within the Muslim World, but it maybe a mistake to put it in a box called radical Islam. For example Hezbollah and Hams are very different from each other, the former is Shiite, the later is Sunni, the former is motivated by geopolitics, the latter is struggling for independence. Neither shares theological or political goals with Al Qaeda. For example Hamas has never targeted the U.S. also consider the Wahhabis and Salafis, while al Qaeda sure is anti-America, not all Saudis, Kuwaitis and Qataris, who share the same theology are anti-America or even violent.

My humble suggestion is to consider the various trends – political and theological – as options. Today there is nearly a universal consensus in the Muslim world on three issues: [1] that there must be political, social, normative, cultural, economic and structural change. Muslims are struggling to respond to the challenges of modernity and postmodernity, not to mention the global geopolitical realities of the postcolonial world. [2] Most Muslims agree that there is no security in Muslim societies; they are victims of terrorism and war. [3] There is also a strong consensus that Islam must play a role in the resurgence, reconstitution, revival, development and transformation of the Muslim World.

I submit to you that all these movements in the Muslim World, secular bathism, Islamism, resurgent Sufism, the calls for Islamic democracy, for liberal democracy and revolution are all attempts to cope with the relative backwardness of the Muslim World, its tensions with modernity which is driven by western culture and its inability to secure itself. Islamists like secular and moderate elite have a vision to offer.

The battle of competing visions will not be won through rhetoric and discourse it must come through delivery. The vision that delivers reform, change, empowerment and security, will win. So far Islamists have done a better job than most in the Arab world unlike in South Asia and East Asia. Moderate and liberal Muslims can win the battle for the soul of Islam only if they are able to deliver. So far they have failed. So far everyone has failed except for the radical who at least hit back against those whom Muslim perceive as enemies.

Radical Islam is an option that Muslims have turned to, due to the failure of all other ideas, movements to deliver a stable, prosperous and peaceful state and society for average Muslims.

Radical Muslims also offer an explanation of global politics and recent history that glorifies Islam, privileges Muslim tradition and sometimes is consistent with a simplistic view of reality. For example the current crisis in Lebanon goes a long way to convince Muslims that radical Islamists are right when they say that Israel with the help of the U.S. is out to destroy their nations.

Political, military, economic and intellectual independence from the West has always been the overriding goal of political Islam. However, the failure of Islamists to achieve these goals in nearly a century, in combination with real and perceived injustices committed by America and its allies against Muslims has engendered an extremely vitriolic hatred of America in the hearts of some Islamists giving birth to radical Islam. I like to call these radicals as *rogue Islamists*, who are willing to do anything, absolutely anything to destroy America and its power and will to prevent the realization of Islamist goals. Rogue Islamists and their hateful discourses are globalizing anti-Americanism and in the process undermining the moral fabric of the Muslim World and corrupting the Islam's message of justice, mercy, submission, compassion and enlightenment, not of

war, hatred and killing.

Radical Islamists are a threat to both America and Islam. Their discourses are corrupting Islam and generating hatred against the West, modernity, America and other Muslims whose disagree with them. Their most powerful weapon is their ideas and their ability to convince Muslims to even give up their lives in order to hurt America, Americans and American interests. While America seeks security from the attacks by rogue Muslims and needs to reduce anti-Americanism, moderate Muslims who do not subscribe to the Islamists discourse seek to rescue Islam and innocent Muslims from the corrupting influence of rogue Islamist.

A response to rogue Islamists requires a complex strategy that above all must counter and delegitimize the Islamists worldview and discourses and expose their fallacies and the devastating consequences they could bring to Muslims and the world by triggering a long and bloody global conflict between America and the Muslim World. *It is my contention that the best anti-dote to radical Islam is liberal Islam.* Liberal Islam can not only challenge radical Islamist worldview using Islam as the foundational idiom and also provide an alternate interpretation of Muslim reality and a more positive vision of the future.

4. Liberal Islam and its Strategic Merits

It is my contention that the best anti-dote to radical Islam is liberal Islam. Liberal Islam can not only challenge radical Islamist worldview using Islam as the foundational idiom and also provide an alternate interpretation of Muslim reality and a more positive vision of the future.

Moderates Muslims have a very idealistic view of the Islamic duty of Jihad. They argue, based on a tradition of Prophet Muhammad, that Jihad is essentially a struggle to purify the self and to establish social justice. The highest form of Jihad, *Jihad-e-Akbar* (The superior Jihad) is struggle against the self to improve and excel in moral and spiritual realm. The lowest form of Jihad is the military Jihad that is essentially defensive and constrained by strict ethics of engagement. They correctly point out that terrorism, or *Hirabah* (war against society), is strictly forbidden by Islamic scholars. They however do maintain that Muslims can and must struggle for justice and freedom while strictly obeying Islamic and international norms of just warfare. For Muslim moderates Islam is a religion of peace without being pacifist.

Moderate Muslims are critical of American foreign policy in the Muslim World. They are also critical of the prejudiced view of Islam in the West and in particularly among the policy elite who are also quite ignorant about Islam and the Muslim world. But Muslim moderates do not blame the US or the West or modernity for all the problems in the Muslim World. They recognize that the decline of the Islamic civilization preceded colonialism. They are aware that the

decay of free and creative thinking in the Muslim world was not caused by western powers but came about as a result of internal dynamics. Moderate Muslims are critical of the polemics against the West, the rising anti-Semitism and the tendency to blame Israel for everything problematic in the Muslim World and the growing intolerance, sectarianism and authoritarianism in Muslim societies. Above all they lament the intellectual decline of the Muslim World.

Moderate Muslims are also engaged in what is now referred to as the “battle for the soul of Islam”. They argue that Islam is a message of compassion and peace sent by God in order to civilize humanity and give human existence a transcendent and divine purpose. They are aghast and reject the use of Islam to incite terror, to justify bigotry and to discriminate on the basis of faith, or gender or ethnicity. They recognize that Islam has been appropriated by political and extremist groups who are using Islam as an ideology to pursue a counter hegemonic agenda both with the Muslim World and against the rest, especially against the US. Moderate Muslims acknowledge the global problem created by “rogue Islamists”. They insist that the false interpretations of Islam by the *Jihadis* and their crusades are not only creating a global *fitna* (crisis) but are also corrupting the essence of Islam and worsening the socio-political, economic and cultural crisis in the Muslim World.

It is in the battle for the soul of Islam that America and Liberal Islam share a common strategic goal and that is the systematic dismantling and delegitimization of the discourse coming from rogue Islamists that projects America as an anti-Islam crusader power and Islam as an ideology of hate and violence. It is in the arena interpretation and reinterpretation of global political realities and religious texts and their contemporaneous meanings that the war on terror will be won or lost. It is also in this contested realm that the hearts and minds of Muslims can be won or lost. So far while moderate Muslims are beginning to have an impact in this battle in America, they are not even an important player in the Muslim world. American policy makers must recognize the strategic value of liberal Islam and promote and protect it.

The interpretive battle the Liberal Islam wages is in three arenas:

1. Providing an alternative understanding of world political and global realities in order to prevent the perception that the war on terror is a war on Islam.
2. Advance a liberal understanding of Islam within the Islamic idiom that explains the compatibility of Islam and liberal values such as tolerance, democracy and pluralism.
3. Deconstruct the Jihadi discourse to expose the extremist tendencies behind their interpretation of Islam and underscore the more compassionate and rational dimensions of Islam.

5. Who is a moderate Muslim

As one who identifies himself strongly with the idea of a liberal Islam and also advocates moderation in the manifestation and expression of Islamic politics, I believe it is important that we flush out this “religio-political identity”.

Muslims in general do not like using the term – moderate, progressive or liberal Muslim, understanding it to indicate an individual who has politically sold out to the “other” side. Others insist that there is no such thing as moderate Islam, or radical Islam; there is “only one Islam” – the true Islam and all other expressions are falsehoods espoused by the *munafiqeen* [the hypocrites] or the *murtads* [the apostates]. Of course the unstated politics behind this position is, “my interpretation of Islam is obviously the true Islam and any body who diverges from my position is risking their faith”.

In some internal intellectual debates, the term moderate Muslim is used pejoratively to indicate a Muslim who is more secular and less Islamic than the norm, which varies across communities. In America, a moderate Muslim is one who peddles a softer form of Islam, is willing to co-exist peacefully with peoples of other faiths and is comfortable with democracy and the separation of politics and religion.

Both, Western media and Muslims, do a disservice by branding some Muslims as moderate on the basis of their politics. These people should general be understood as opportunists and self-serving. Most of the moderate regimes in the Muslim World are neither democratic nor manifest the softer side of Islam. That leaves intellectual positions as the criteria for determining who is a moderate Muslim, and especially in comparison to whom, since moderate is a relative term.

I see Moderate Muslims as reflective, self-critical, pro-democracy and human rights and closet secularists. Their secularism is American in nature that is they believe in the separation of church and state, but not French; they oppose the exile of religion from the public sphere. But who are they different from and how?

I believe that moderate Muslims are different from militant Muslims even though both of them advocate the establishment of societies whose organizing principle is Islam. The difference between moderate and militant Muslims is in their methodological orientation and in the primordial normative preferences that shape their interpretation of Islam.

For moderate Muslims *Ijtihad* is the preferred method of choice for social and political change and military *Jihad* the last option. For militant Muslims, military *Jihad* is the first option and *Ijtihad* is not an option at all.

Ijtihad narrowly understood is a juristic tool that allows independent reasoning to articulate Islamic law on issues where textual sources are silent. The unstated assumption being when texts have spoken reason must be silent. But increasingly moderate Muslim intellectuals see *Ijtihad* as the spirit of Islamic thought that is necessary for the vitality of Islamic ideas and Islamic civilization. Without *Ijtihad*, Islamic thought and Islamic civilization fall into decay.

For moderate Muslims, *Ijtihad* is a way of life, which simultaneously allows Islam to reign supreme in the heart and the mind to experience unfettered freedom of thought. A moderate Muslim is therefore one who cherishes freedom of thought while recognizing the existential necessity of faith. She aspires for change, but through the power of mind and not through planting mines.

Moderate Muslims aspire for a society – a city of virtue -- that will treat all people with dignity and respect [Quran 17:70]. There will be no room for political or normative intimidation [Quran 2:256]. Individuals will aspire to live an ethical life because they recognize its desirability. Communities will compete in doing good and politics will seek to encourage good and forbid evil [Quran 5:48 and 3:110]. They believe that the internalization of the message of Islam can bring about the social transformation necessary for the establishment of the virtuous city. The only arena in which Moderate Muslims permit excess is in idealism.

The Quran advocates moderation [2:143] and extols the virtues of the straight path [1:1-7]. For moderate Muslims the middle ground, the common humanity of all, is the straightest path.

It is my contention that the mainstream American Muslim community broadly qualifies as an example of liberal and moderate Islam. They believe in democracy, human rights, respect women's role in the public sphere and most importantly believe, practice and advocate religious pluralism.

5. What Role can American Muslims play in the War on Terror

American Muslims have an enormous potential to become an important ally in America's war against extremism. If consulted and brought into counter terrorism planning they can help America become more effective, more focused and more cost effective. These are the following areas in which they can and could have played a major role:

Threat Assessments and Threat Identification

- a. American Muslims would have provided the administration with a more accurate picture of the potential for threats from within the US. Their analysis would have helped in making the Department of Homeland Security a vastly smaller and more effective institution.

- b. It is possible that the American government is unnecessarily spending vast amounts of resources in surveillance of groups and individuals who may not constitute threat and may actually be overlooking those who could be problematic. American Muslim input on this subject can be immensely useful.
- c. Many US policy makers continue to err in understanding and predicting the behavior of Muslims groups and the chaos in Iraq is a case in point. If American Muslims were involved in the management of Iraq after the war, it would have been easier for Washington to establish better communications and perhaps gain more cooperation from various groups.

Provide a Muslim Face to America

- a. American Muslims could have given a Muslim face to America's response to September 11 and the feeling in the Muslim world that this is a Christian-Zionist crusade against Islam would have been averted.
- b. The Bush administration should have appointed a number of prominent American Muslim sportsmen, such as Hakeem Olajuwon, and some Imams such Imam Hamza Yusuf [American convert to Islam who is well respected in the Muslim World] as special envoys of goodwill to the Muslim World. The State Department is now attempting this in a less prominent way. Prominent Muslim presence in America's diplomatic and counter terrorism endeavors would have gone a long way in not only preempting the rise of anti-Americanism, but also in building trust between America and the Muslim World.

Human Intelligence

- a. A most important asset that American Muslims can bring to the war on terror is human intelligence, cultural insights, linguistic skills and experience and awareness of the diversity within Islamic groups and movements. It is possible that FBI, CIA and the NSA can access this resource through recruitment. But voluntarily support in this area from the community can be priceless.
- b. Many American Muslim scholars have argued that Islam and democracy are compatible. The Bush administration could have recruited several of them to make this case in Iraq and help design the Iraqi democracy and write its constitution. Without a significant input from respectable Muslim scholars, the Iraqi constitution may not stand up to accusations that it is unIslamic and written to make Iraq subservient to American interests.
- c. Moderate Muslims opposed to extremism can also play a role in undercover operations like that played by Mubin Sheikh in Canada and in the Showtime serial – sleeper cell.

Counter-Islamic Discourse

- a. One important arena where the US needs its Muslim citizens is in countering the anti-US propaganda. Both Islamists and governmental media have launched a propaganda war against the US in response to its war on terror. This anti-US media offensive is determined to focus on US foreign policy excesses and failures. It also seeks to explain every aspect of American policy as if it is serving only Israeli interests. With American Muslims as spokespersons surfing the media and the airwaves in the Muslim World, the US could have a better chance of getting a more balanced view of its policies.
- b. American Muslims can also counter the abuse of Islam by rogue Islamists and undermine their legitimacy. American Muslim scholars have consistently maintained that *Hirabah* (terrorism) is not Jihad and is strictly prohibited by Islamic principles. They have also demonstrated how suicide bombings violate Islamic ethics of self-defense and are not legitimate instruments of Jihad. If the voice of American Muslim scholars was given more attention, say through a White House sponsored conference on Jihad, many of the moderate and liberal elements in the Muslim world would recognize the fallacies in the Islamic edicts of rogue Islamists and the scholars who support and justify their cause.

Restore Balance to America's Foreign Policy

To put it bluntly, American foreign policy lately has been a colossal failure and even potentially dangerous to America's interests. This administration would do well to listen to some moderate Muslim voices in shaping its foreign policy objectives and in determining tactics. Except in the case of Israel, American Muslims have the same vision for the Muslim World as claimed by this administration. American Muslims too want wholesale regime changes and establishment of democracy in the entire Muslim World. They too want to see the general human rights environment improving and wish that prosperity and freedom would take root in the Muslim World. The difference is that American Muslims would recommend strategies that are more humane and involve less bombing and killing. This administration needs American Muslims and it is time it acted on this need and included them in its policy deliberations.

6. What can the U.S. do?

- a. The U.S. must deliberate seriously on what kind of relations it wishes to have with a religion who adherents constitute nearly 25% of the world's population and include over 55 countries. Islam is also the fastest growing religion in all sectors of the west, U.S. and Canada, Europe and Australia. Islam is outside and inside, the US and the West must find a to coexist with Islam without constantly demanding Muslims to abandon Islam. This is a very important issue for Muslims

- since many see the U.S. as waging a war against Islam itself. This has to be done at every level including government, media, and education.
- b. The U.S. must not undermine the important goal of maintaining positive US-Muslim relations for short-term goals or for immediate expediencies.
 - c. The U.S. must improve its credibility. It must practice what it preaches, fulfill its promises and certainly abstain from betraying those who take risk at its behest and when motivated by it to pursue democratization or social liberalization. After watching the way we have handled the crisis in Lebanon and repeated requests for help from the Lebanese Prime Minister, I am not sure anyone will be eager to trust the U.S. in the near future.
 - d. American Muslims are America's natural allies and the best community when it comes to institutionalization of liberal Islamic values. The U.S. must embrace and it and treat it as an asset rather than as a suspect.
 - e. The U.S. has to make goodwill gestures towards the Muslim World, and that does not mean support dictators or sell more arms. Cooperation in areas of development, education and economic empowerment will go a long way.
 - f. Evenhandedness in its approach to the Muslim World is absolutely necessary. Abandoning it especially in moments of crisis is extremely detrimental.
 - g. The U.S. must rethink its relations with the Islamists and find ways and means to work with moderate Islamists in order to empower them and isolate the radicals.
 - h. The U.S. must find a way to deal with the Arab-Israeli conflict that does not undo years of diplomacy and good work on the US-Islamic relations every time there is a crisis with Israel.
 - i. Muslims think that the U.S. and the West does not value Muslim life and do not care for their human rights. The changing of this perception will take a long time but the U.S. can begin with Guantanamo and by recognizing that Muslims too have a right to defend their lives, property and territory.
 - j. U.S. foreign policy since 9/11 has sought security for America and its ally Israel by deliberately undermining the security of the Muslim World through bellicose rhetoric, irresponsible aggressions and astonishing disregard for Muslim lives. The U.S. must realize that the U.S. cannot feel more secure by making others feel insecure. It is important that the U.S. work for the security of all, including Muslim nations. This is imperative.

U.S.– Muslim relations will remain a critical component of global politics for a longtime. They must be repaired and nurtured. There is no other alternative.

