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WHAT MUSLIMS REALLY THINK

Word on the Street:

What Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush get wrong about Muslims

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“In order to understand Islam today, one must understand what Muslims actually think and how that compares both to what we believe and what Al Qaeda believes to be true.”



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After September 11, 2001 two questions dominated America's public debate: Why do Muslims hate us so much? And where are the Muslim moderates? On the first question, commentators supplied easy, simplistic answers that appealed to the country's wounded egos and prejudices, not critical faculties and common sense. We were told that "they" (Muslims in general, not just the tiny militant minority) hated our freedoms and way of life; that they were jealous of our economic success, political influence, and international prestige. We had nothing to do with their twisted misperceptions of our country and foreign policy. In short, the root causes of anti-Americanism, asserted pundits, reveal more about the moral and political decay of Muslim societies than about American actions. And, for many Americans, the answer to the second question was that there aren't any moderate Muslims-- that Osama bin Laden and the radicals were the exclusive representatives of Islam. We are hated because of who we are, not because of what we did-- that was the received wisdom after September 11, 2001.

Seven years later, embroiled in two wars in Muslim countries and deeply invested in political conflicts from Morocco to

Indonesia, it is worth pausing to ask whether this received wisdom is entirely correct. Of course, the landscape has changed; Iraq, in particular, has become a new source of radicalization and a reason to hate American foreign policy. But the broader questions about what the world's one billion-plus Muslims think remain, and in many ways are even more pertinent today than ever. In order to understand Islam today, one must understand what Muslims actually think and how that compares both to what we believe and what Al Qaeda believes to be true.

The first question--where are the Muslim moderates?-- was based on a fundamental misreading of Islam 101. Unlike, say, the Catholic Church, there exists no organized, hierarchical clerical establishment in Islam; there is no intermediary between the believer and God. Religious scholars and leaders, then, derive their authority mainly by interpreting Islamic texts and jurisprudence. That authority is then contested with multiple interpretations and counter-interpretations. To be sure, Muslim puritans and radicals-- and some of their Western counterparts-- want us to believe that Islam is a monolith, with

a timeless essence. But it is a mistake to take their claims at face value because the Muslim world is complex and fragmented, divided along ethnic, nationalist, and socioeconomic lines. Unfortunately, many U.S. commentators bought the totalizing rhetoric of Osama bin Laden and his right-hand man, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who anointed themselves spokesmen for Islam and Muslims. They lost sight of the social and political turmoil shaking Muslim societies to their very foundation.

Indeed, bin Laden represents not a new, dominant Islam but a revolt inside it, directed as much against the clerical establishment as against the ruling elite. Bin Laden and Zawahiri aim at filling the vacuum of legitimate authority in the Muslim world and challenging the unholy alliance between Muslim rulers and clerics. In other words, Muslims, not Americans, were to be the primary audience of September 11. It's not a clash of civilizations but a clash within a *particular* civilization that matters here.

The ensuing clash was momentous and completely ignored in the United States. Less than two weeks after September 11, I traveled to the Middle East and was pleasantly surprised by the almost universal rejection-- from taxi drivers and bank tellers to fruit vendors and high school teachers-- of Al Qaeda's terrorism. Everyone I met expressed genuine empathy with the American victims, even while remaining highly critical of U.S. foreign policy. And, if the "terrorism experts" had listened closely, they would have found that far from condoning September 11, leading mainstream and, yes, radical clerics-- such as Hassan al-Turabi, head of the People's Congress in Sudan (who, in the early 1990s, hosted bin Laden) and

Sayyid Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, the spiritual founding father of Lebanon's Hezbollah-- condemned the 9/11 attacks as harmful to Islam and Muslims. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, an influential Egyptian-born conservative cleric now based in Qatar, even issued a fatwa denouncing Al Qaeda's "illegal jihad" and expressed sorrow and empathy with the American victims: "Our hearts bleed," he wrote on his website just after the September 11 attacks. Nothing could justify the attacks, he wrote, including "the American biased policy toward Israel on the military, political, and economic fronts." That may be cold comfort to the victims, but it was also a significant challenge to bin Laden.

To be fair, most political religious leaders did not criticize Al Qaeda's political ideology, only its terrorist methods. Indeed, bin Laden may occasionally revert to religious rhetoric, but it is his political and ideological rhetoric that truly resonates among Muslims of all persuasions and ranks, who blame the United States for sustaining Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territories as well as oppressive Arab autocrats.

As countless polls show and as I have found in my own research, the efficacy of Al Qaeda's anti-American (and anti-Western) message stems from politics and foreign policy, not culture and religion. Yet the nuanced Muslim response to September 11 received hardly any coverage in the U.S. media, which constantly replayed sensational images of a few Palestinian children and teens in refugee camps celebrating the fall of the Twin Towers. Entrenched as received wisdom, that narrative

facilitated the expansion of the war on terror by the Bush Administration, particularly the Iraq invasion. Nor does it help that Americans know very little about Islam and Muslims, and the little they do know is based mostly on stereotypes. Forty-four percent of Americans say Muslims are too extreme in their religious beliefs. Less than half believe U.S. Muslims are loyal citizens. Nearly one-quarter, 22 percent, say they would not want a Muslim as a neighbor. Thirty-two percent say they admire nothing about the Muslim world.

Yet 57 percent say they know nothing or not much about the opinions and beliefs of Muslims. Fortunately, two evidence-based books, *Who Speaks for Islam: What a Billion Muslims Really Think*¹ by John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed and *Al Qaeda In Its Own Words*, edited by Gilles Kepel and Jean-Pierre Millelli, shatter the conventional wisdom and set the record straight. Based on tens of thousands of hour-long, face-to-face interviews with residents of more than 35 predominantly Muslim nations conducted by Gallup between 2001 and 2007, *Who Speaks for Islam?*² lets the voices of a billion Muslims be heard. But it is more than a statistical research survey. Esposito, a leading scholar of Islam and the director of the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown, puts the data in context and makes sense of it. Few are as qualified as Esposito, who has written extensively on contemporary Islamic societies to assess the findings and draw relevant public and foreign policy lessons.

Some of the findings will shock American readers. According to the survey, only 7 percent of the

¹ <http://www.powells.com/partner/32324/s?kw=who%20speaks%20for%20islam%3F%20esposito>

² <http://www.powells.com/partner/32324/s?kw=who%20speaks%20for%20islam%3F%20e>

respondents think the September 11 attacks were “completely” justified, and a majority of Muslims, including nine out of ten Muslim “moderates,” condemned the killings on both religious and humanitarian grounds. Forget what bin Laden and Zawahiri preach about jihad. For most Muslims, jihad, whether it means a struggle of the soul or the sword, must be a just and ethical struggle; it has only positive connotations, and does not sanction the killing of noncombatants.

Moreover, Esposito shows clearly that many Western commentators assign too much weight to Islam and neglect the social and political factors that are the real drivers behind both politically “moderate” and radicalized Muslims. According to the study, the 7 percent of respondents who condoned the attacks mentioned the West's politics as justification, not its culture or way of life. There was not a single mention of religion or culture.

The interviews also put to rest the popular hypothesis that Muslims hate American freedom and success. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that extremists are anti-democratic, a significantly higher percentage of the politically radicalized (50 percent versus 35 percent of moderates) say “moving toward greater governmental democracy” will foster progress in the Arab/Muslim world. More surprisingly, the politically radicalized are as likely, if not more so, as moderates to express interest in improving relations between the world of Islam and the Christian West (58 percent versus 44 percent of moderates).

Again, it comes down to foreign policy. While the American way of life is prized by Muslims, American

foreign policy is loathed. When Esposito and his colleagues asked respondents in ten predominantly Muslim countries how they viewed a number of countries, the attributes they most associate with the United States include “ruthless” (68 percent), “aggressive” (66 percent), “conceited” (65 percent), and “morally decadent” (64 percent). When asked what about America they thought brought out these qualities, though, most respondents list foreign policy issues, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and America's support for Muslim dictators. Much of this also seems to have developed since September 11; clearly, the war on terror has damaged American standing and reputation almost everywhere. A clear majority of Muslims believe that the United States is waging a “war against Islam” and that its goal is “to weaken and divide the Islamic world.” A majority of moderate and radical Muslims alike view Western, particularly American, political, economic, military, and cultural hegemony as threats to Islamic identity and independence.

In my own interviews with politically radicalized activists over the years, many cited Western intervention as a primary driver behind their decision to join extremist groups. They said they wanted the West to stop meddling in their countries' internal affairs and pay them respect. And, when asked by the Gallup interviewers what they wanted from the West, a plurality of Muslims likewise cited concrete changes in certain aspects of foreign policy and greater respect for Islam. Esposito groups Muslim grievances against the United States along three dimensions-- perceptions of cultural disrespect and denigration of Islam, political domination, and the reality of acute conflicts-- all of which he finds filtered through a focus on U.S. foreign policy. Regardless of whether

or not respect can be granted as opposed to being earned, the important point is that Muslims do not demand Westerners change *who* they are, but *how* their policies relate to the Muslim world.

Nevertheless, an important point remains: What sort of political worldview do Muslims hold? And can the West actually alter its foreign policy in a way that stays true to its own liberal values? According to the Gallup survey, however diverse Muslim populations may be, large majorities (over 80 percent) of moderates and political radicals want sharia or Islamic law as a source of legislation in a democratic polity. Women are as likely as men to say that “religion is an important part of life” and that “attachment to spiritual and moral values is critical to their progress.” Even in the “new” Iraq, 58 percent of Iraqi women opposed separation of religion from politics, and 81 percent said religious authorities should play a direct role in crafting family law.

But it would be wrong to read too deeply into this. Such views are not a call for theocracy. Majorities of the politically radicalized and moderates said they did not want religious leaders to be directly in charge. Rather, implementing sharia, according to many Muslims, would be a way to limit the power of rulers whom they regard as autocratic, “un-Islamic,” and corrupt. And while many Western commentators and policymakers argue that sharia is anti-democratic, Muslims view it as a vehicle of liberation and a counterweight against authoritarianism and Western domination.

In short, the gaps between Western and Muslim worldviews are real, but

they are bridgeable. Take the gulf between Western perceptions with that of Muslims on the status and plight of women in Muslim societies. This is a central issue: In surveys, what Americans find most troubling about Islam is the "oppression of women" and the fact that women readily accept second-class status. However, according to the Gallup study, majorities of women in virtually every country surveyed say they deserve the same legal rights as men, to vote without influence from family members, to work at any job they are qualified for, and to hold the highest executive positions in government. In Saudi Arabia, one of the most religiously conservative Muslim countries, majorities of women say they should be able to drive a car by themselves (61 percent), vote without influence (69 percent), and choose the job for which they are qualified (76 percent).

At the same time, although Muslim women challenge entrenched patriarchic structures, the majority do not yearn to become like their Western counterparts. They favor gender parity, but want it on their terms. And, like their male counterparts, Muslim women say their most pressing priorities are economic development and political reforms, not gender issues. Moreover, the Gallup study did not find that religiosity among Muslim men correlate with less egalitarian views toward women. In Lebanon, Morocco, and Iran, men who support women's rights tend to be more religious than those who do not. Plain old secular patriarchy, not Islamic principles, account for the lagging status of women in much of the Muslim world.

As a result, if we make the effort to understand women's issues within a

Muslim context, what seemed an intractable divide is in fact nothing of the kind. As Esposito argues persuasively, empowering women requires addressing the more serious problems of authoritarianism and socioeconomic development rather than blunt efforts to reform gender politics. Moreover, the gaps are balanced by a number of commonalities between the Muslim world and the West. A critical segment of both Americans and Muslims believe that religion should be a social pillar, informed and guided by the Bible or sharia; both also emphasize the preservation of family values. Each is concerned about its economic future, employment and jobs, and the ability to support their families. Each gives high priority to human rights and broad-based political participation. Both strongly support eradicating extremism and terrorism. These are important commonalities, and potential building blocks for better cross-cultural understanding.

But that possibility becomes less likely with each new phase of Bush's war on terror. Administration ideologues, in their zeal to defeat the "enemy," alienate the very Muslim majorities that are natural American allies. They have played into the hands of bin Laden and Zawahiri, who relentlessly portray themselves as the vanguard elite who speak for the umma, the Muslim community worldwide, and defend it.

In *Al Qaeda in Its Own Word*, Kepel, a renowned French scholar on contemporary Islam who has written extensively on Muslim militancy, has collected and annotated selected extracts by four radical leaders: bin Laden, Zawahiri, Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi (the late Al Qaeda chief in Iraq), and Abdullah Azzam, leader of

the Afghan Arabs in the 1980s. Most of these documents are available in print or on the Internet, but the book's importance lies in the analytical essays written by Kepel's post-graduate colleagues on each of the four men. The book makes an excellent companion to Esposito's, because it illustrates and analyzes how our real enemy is manipulating the battlefield-- that is, the Muslim public.

The insightful chapter on bin Laden by researcher Omar Saghi argues convincingly that bin Laden has gained ground not by appealing to a monolithic form of dogmatism; on the contrary, he claims to tolerate multiple varieties of belief. Rather, he justifies himself by insisting that only a vanguard like Al Qaeda can carry out jihad on behalf of the umma, applying God's laws and preserving the Muslim community from sin.

But his claim has not gone unchallenged. A significant majority of Muslims-- more than 90 percent, according to Gallup-- condemn bin Laden's terrorism on religious grounds and thus reject his claim as their representative. Moreover, on the run from U.S. forces, he has been reduced to a static photo, a fading television image who fell victim to his own success. As Saghi argues, Al Qaeda's large-scale, spectacular terrorism is a product of media consumption; "it is still a crime, but less and less effective as a political and military tool." Increasingly, bin Laden is overshadowed by a galaxy of wannabes in Iraq, London, Spain, Lebanon, and Indonesia who call themselves Al Qaeda but have only a tenuous connection to the group at best. More and more Muslims view bin Laden's project through the

monstrosity of killing of civilians around the world.

Al Qaeda in Its Own Words makes clear that the distinctions among the extremist groups we typically lump under the umbrella term “jihadists” are significant, and that understanding them is critical to assessing the relatively limited nature of the threat and constructing strategies to counter it. For example, in his chapter on Azzam, Norwegian researcher Thomas Hegghammer highlights the discontinuities between Azzam's radical ideas and those of bin Laden and Zawahiri. The conventional wisdom in the United States describes Salafi-jihadism, or global jihad, as homogenous and historically continuous, beginning in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan and carried forth by Azzam's disciples, bin Laden and Zawahiri, after their mentor's 1989 assassination. In reality, the “global jihad movement” is a complex and fragmented political phenomenon that has witnessed radical ruptures and shocks since its inception. While Azzam certainly influenced his two most famous acolytes, to equate his worldview with theirs, as many terrorism experts do, is to falsify history: Azzam opposed terrorism as a tool of war as well as aggression against noncombatants. His definition of jihad was to defend Muslims under attack and occupation, not to wage battle against Muslim rulers and the United States. In my interviews with Azzam's former lieutenants and confidantes, I was told that at the height of the Soviet occupation, he vetoed proposals to attack Russian civilians because it would tarnish the image of the mujahideen and jihad. Bin Laden and company, of course, have had no similar reservations.

In the introduction to *Al Qaeda in Its Own Words*, Kepel posits that the “science of terrorism” in the United States has become a cottage industry, propping up wobbly theories and doing little to advance knowledge about the jihadist phenomena. By focusing on radical Muslim terrorism with all its fearful implications, analysts forestall inspection of the variety of distinctions and divisions that exist within Muslim society, and even among Muslim radicals. Since September 11, the vast diversity of Islam and of mainstream moderate Muslims has been obscured by a murderous minority. Sadly, many in the West take bin Laden's claims for granted. The result is that the over-militaristic American response has alienated the moderate Muslim majority and reinforced a belief that the war against global terrorism is really a war against Islam. Nevertheless, it is not too late to change tact and reach out to Muslim moderates. But to do so, it will take a more nuanced and subtle understanding of who they are and how they think. Policymakers interested in doing so should begin by opening these two books. ♦

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