

How Islamists Use Sharia to Prevent Assimilation and Hold American Muslims Back

An Occasional Paper for the
Center for Security Policy



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The following paper is based on an April 9 webinar entitled [“How Islamists Use Sharia to Prevent Assimilation and Hold American Muslims Back”](#) convened by the Center for Security Policy featuring Kyle Shideler, Dalia al-Aqidi and Zubdi Jasser.

Introduction: By Kyle Shideler

The American experiment with immigration has always presumed that those coming to the United States had the intention of becoming Americans, putting aside old allegiances, and thereby integrating into society. It was also understood that immigrants would endeavor to keep elements of their cultural and religious traditions intact in the New World, and that some of these may even eventually be adopted and “Americanized” by the native populace.

Yet when Muslim immigrants began coming to the United States, they faced a substantial challenge to their assimilation into the American melting pot. At the same time Muslim migrants arrived in America, elements of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist political movement intent on imposing Islamic law and re-establishing an Islamic “caliphate” came with them. While others came to America seeking all it had to offer, the Brotherhood came to America as a force of conquest. Early U.S. Muslim Brotherhood thinkers argued that a “civilizational battle” raged between Islam and the West, and that the West sought to corrupt Muslims with their Western ways. Islamist thinker Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman, one of the early founders of Muslim Brotherhood institutions in America wrote,

Unlike the past, the civilizational forces contending in this century can reach and overtake anyone without invasion or military occupation of his land. They can subvert his mind, convert him to their world view, neutralize and contain him as a puppet whether he is aware of it or not. Certainly, these forces are contending with one another to dominate the world. And it is the decision of Muslims today whether Islam will be the victor tomorrow, whether Muslims will be the makers of history or merely the objects.¹

The Brotherhood viewed the natural tendency towards assimilation –which every immigrant group has faced—as an apocalyptic threat to Islam itself. Their solution to this challenge was two-fold.

First, they established or else seized control of the institutions of community life for Muslim Americans, founding or controlling most of the country’s most prominent mosques, Islamic Centers, and non-profit charities.

They did this by establishing institutions, beginning first with the Muslim Students Association in 1963, followed by a number of professional organizations for doctors and engineers, cultural organizations, innumerable mosques and Islamic Centers. In 1977 the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) was founded and represented itself, as the name implied, as the center of Islamic life in the United States.

Secondly, they worked to establish an Islamic legal jurisprudence, known as the “Fiqh of Minorities,” in which to govern Muslims living in the West. The Fiqh of Minorities postulated that the only permissible way of living as a Muslim in the West was to further spread the Brotherhood’s own brand of *Darwah*, or proselytizing and spreading their ideology. Uri Shavit calls this Brotherhood approach “the missionary migrant.” Shavit writes:

The concept of the “missionary migrant,”... suggests that it is permissible, and even desirable, for Muslims to reside in the West so long as they manage to preserve their Islamic identity, champion the causes of the umma, and contribute to spreading the word of Islam. This concept changed the Islamist perception of Muslim migrants from that of a minority whose loyalty is in question and whose presence in the West is at the very best resentfully tolerated, to that of pioneers carrying Allah’s message to the rest of the world and transforming Islam from being passively attacked to a state of initiative and expansion.ⁱⁱ

For the Brotherhood, the only reason to come to America is to Islamize it, meaning ultimately to conquer it. While the Brotherhood has been largely successful in its efforts at institution-building, it has never been without opponents from among the Muslim American community, who are explicit in their rejection of the Brotherhood, its goals, and its exercise of control over Muslim Americans.

The Center for Security Policy was pleased to hold a panel on “How Islamists Use Sharia to Prevent Assimilation and Hold American Muslims Back,” featuring the thoughts of two such opponents -Dalia Al-Aqidi and Dr. M. Zuhdi Jasser—who have contested with the Islamists over what it means to be Muslim in America. We offer here revised versions of their remarks for broader circulation.

Dalia Al-Aqidi offers her perspective as a journalist and commentator who has spent over three decades reporting from the capital cities of the Middle East and Washington D.C. She has written, produced and hosted live presentations on

television and radio in English and Arabic. A Muslim born in Baghdad, Iraq, Al-Aqidi came to the United States as a refugee in 1993, and achieved world-wide recognition as the anchor for Alhurra, the U.S.-based Public Arabic-Language satellite TV Channel. In 2004, The Chicago Tribune called her, “the most-watched TV reporter nobody in America has seen.” Away from the public eye Al-Aqidi has also served as an analyst team leader for a private intelligence firm, providing cultural background and geopolitical analysis to government and corporate clients.

In her presentation, Al-Aqidi looked at the growing relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and the radical left, which promotes a virulent anti-Americanism of its own upon which the Islamists seize and from which they derive much of their power. She also looked at the rise of Rep. Ilhan Omar, who serves as a model for the cooperation between Islamists and the left. Dalia urged Americans to better comprehend how Islamists operate within the American Muslim community by examining a similar model of how the radical “woke” left has co-opted or undermined many of their own beloved institutions.

Dr. M. Zuhdi Jasser is the Founder and President of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy (AIFD) and Co-founder of the Muslim Reform Movement. He is also the author of *A Battle for the Soul of Islam: An American Muslim Patriot's Fight to Save His Faith*. Dr. Jasser is a former Commissioner and Vice-Chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). A first-generation American Muslim, Dr. Jasser's parents fled the oppressive Baath regime of Syria in the mid-1960's for American freedom. A devout Muslim, he and his family have strong ties to the American Muslim community having helped lead mosques in Wisconsin, Arkansas, Virginia, and Arizona.

In his segment Dr. Jasser traced the evolution of Muslim Reform efforts since 9/11, both successes and setbacks. While acknowledging the ironclad grip the Muslim Brotherhood and its counterparts exercise in the United States over American Muslim religious institutions, Dr. Jasser argued against surrendering these spaces to Islamists, while building counter institutions for patriotic American Muslims. He also discussed the importance of vetting Muslim American candidates for higher office or appointments and noted that the tendency by political parties to infantilize and defend unvetted Muslim American candidates has led to distrust from the base that rightfully seeks candidates. Dr. Jasser also looked at the impact of U.S. government support for Islamists both domestically and abroad, and the negative impact this has on American Muslims who oppose Islamism domestically.

We also include at the end of this report a policy recommendation calling on the Trump Administration to uphold the President's campaign pledge to create a Commission on Radical Islam, featuring both experts on Islamist groups and Muslim Reformers, to address the ideological challenge that fuels both jihadist terrorism and the harmful societal impact of Islamist groups in America.

Panel

Challenge Islamists by Exposing Their Hypocrisy: by Dalia al-Aqidi

Being a Muslim has nothing at all to do with my political identity. While I come from a Muslim background in Iraq, I have always been fiercely secular. I refuse to follow Islamic religious law, and I believe it has no place in this country. But there are those I have encountered while I was growing up in the Middle East, and later working here in America who feel differently. I fought them when I was working in the Middle East as a journalist for three decades and now, I'm fighting them in the United States. They go by different names in different places, but they are the Muslim Brotherhood.

Founded in 1928 in direct response to the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate, The Muslim Brotherhood is the most important Islamist movement in the world. Since that time, its members have been concerned with restoring the Islam of the Caliphate. At its most fundamental level, that means establishing government by Islamic Law or Shariah.

The context the Brotherhood was operating in is important. During this period, the people of the Middle East were watching as competing systems of government were fighting each other in the West. Liberal democracy was one option, but fascism and communism were also ascending to prominence. Intellectuals in the Islamic world wanted to borrow from each system and then put them through an Islamic lens. They understood that the Ottoman Caliphate had ultimately been unsuccessful, and blamed it was decadent. They concluded that the Ottomans had failed to take Islam or Shariah seriously.

The system of government they developed was more centered on Islamic law but also incorporated elements of fascism and communism, seeking to build a modern state. Big, imposing bureaucracies that keep people in line through fear. They

looked to the Soviet Union and saw it was possible to have an ideological state, punishing political enemies in the service of the ideology.

Today we call these people Islamists.

While the Brotherhood was founded and branched off from Egypt, similar movements started elsewhere in the Muslim world with the same goals. For the first decades of their existence, Islamists looked to change governments in the Middle East. They were involved in coups and assassinations throughout the region, but they were only successful in getting themselves banned in many countries. Egypt expelled or imprisoned them under Nasser.

Mass immigration brought millions of Muslims from the Middle East into countries in the West, especially Europe and the United States. Slowly, communities of Muslims started to build institutions. Unfortunately, the people who were most interested in building these institutions were associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

They created hundreds of organizations of every kind. They knew that immigrants in a new country like to be reminded of home. People do not want to lose their link with the culture of their parents. There is a natural desire for families to want to involve themselves and their kids in cultural events and clubs. But because the Islamists dominated the institution-building, if you were a typical Muslim who wasn't an Islamist—or who didn't want to be exposed to Muslim Brotherhood propaganda—you had two choices: you could go to your local Islamist-controlled Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) or Islamic Center of North America (ICNA) Convention and be around other Muslims for a weekend, or you stayed home.

With this immigration into the West came the next big shift in Islamist thinking in the 1960s and after. The Brotherhood began to concentrate on what it called “Muslim Minority Affairs”—how to keep American Muslims separate, and to prevent them from joining the common American culture. In areas where Shariah conflicts with the Constitution or the laws of the United States, the Brotherhood wanted American Muslims to prefer Shariah. That was their mission, and it still is.

Another shift in Islamist thinking came even more recently. This new generation—people like Rep. Ilhan Omar and Rep. Rashida Tlaib—take the racial arguments of the ‘woke’ left, so-called social justice warriors, and uses it to keep the Muslim community separate from the rest of America. And of course, the left is also trying

to do this with African Americans, and with every possible group. They want to keep these communities separate by making these communities despise America, its history and its form of government. And by keeping them separate they keep them exploitable for political purposes. Islamists take advantage of Americans assuming Islamist politicians like Rashida Tlaib or Ilhan Omar represent Muslims, and they do not.

But it becomes very difficult for the average mosque-goer to fight against the Islamist agenda, particularly because they wield Shariah law to accuse those who oppose them of being bad Muslims. And once institutions have been taken over by Islamists or by the left, it's very hard for those who oppose them to act.

But this is not by any means solely a Muslim challenge. My Jewish and Christian friends have also struggled with the takeover of their institutions—educational, religious, political, and cultural—by the radical left. So, it is not just a problem for Muslim Americans, and I find this to be a useful comparison when discussing the issue of Islamists exploiting mosques and other institutions.

Ultimately, the Islamists in the United States would have no significant power without the influence of the far left. They are exactly as powerful, both in the Muslim American communities and in the wider American political environment, as the left allows them. Islamists can count on the left in the media to constantly tell Muslims that America is unjust. That it is a horrible evil country. The alliance with the left gives the Islamists free reign with the mainstream media, and as a result the propaganda can be overwhelming. The mainstream media is beholden to Democrats and the far left, who believe that Islamists will deliver Muslim Americans voters. Daily we are told if you are a Muslim and you are in America, you are victim. We're told that you're not welcome here, and you must fight against and reject your fellow citizens. That is what Islamists are preaching to Muslim immigrants, from the day they arrive in the United States.

At home and abroad, American elites simply assume that the Muslim Brotherhood speaks for Muslims everywhere. As a journalist and researcher, I would meet leaders in D.C., some Republicans and certainly all the Democrats, who insist that we cannot designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. They all say doing so would lose allies in the Middle East.

When President Barack Obama went to Egypt and delivered his shameful speech, and later supported the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and then President Mohammad Morsi, it seemed to many Egyptians that the United States had sided

with the Islamists, and against them. The Obama's administration was viewed, perhaps correctly, as playing a role in Muslim Brotherhood's oppression of the Egyptian people. Yet now, with the Islamists removed, we can count on the Egyptian government as an ally against Iranian meddling.

While it is outside of the immediate topic of Islamists and American Muslim assimilation to consider the broader implications of U.S. support for foreign Islamists, it has played a role in uniting the Islamists and the far left.

Selecting Ilhan Omar to sit on the House Foreign Affairs committee was reflective of the growing unity between the left and Islamists on foreign policy issues. The left is comfortable allowing Omar to antagonize Israel—our greatest ally in the region. She's also sought to alienate the United States from Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, which together with Israel are working to stop the Iranian aggression in the Middle East.

One way to challenge Islamists is to expose their hypocrisy. For example, many in the Somali Muslim community are frustrated with Rep. Ilhan Omar and her very public scandals. These sorts of hypocrisies help highlight that the Islamism is ultimately a political movement, not a religious one. Islamists really only care about power.

There is a sense that opposing Islamists requires abandoning cultural and historical institutions. Of course, people can always leave and stop going to the services or stop going to mosque, when they disapprove of the influence of Islamists. But the problem is, especially for mosque-goers, even if they disagree with the Muslim Brotherhood, they don't have the courage to stand against it. This happens in part because of the pressure of family and community ties, which the Islamists successfully exploit.

In the United States, Islamists maintain control primarily through this shame and community pressure, but overseas there is real fear.

Six years ago, I was in Beirut, Lebanon on a program on the BBC. The program consisted of four women: a singer, an activist from Algeria or Tunisia, a Lebanese artist, and myself. All three of them were too scared to speak against Shariah law. This was in Lebanon, the most open, secular, country in the Middle East (after Israel of course). So, I was the only one who was willing to say "why do I need to get killed? Why is it okay for me to be murdered if I change my religion?"

It's supposed to be a free country, and part of that is feeling that I am free to make my own choices as an individual. In religion, to be able to say "Okay, this didn't work for me as a person, let me try something else." But for the people of the Middle East, there isn't that option because Shariah does not respect basic human rights. Shariah runs counter to the natural instincts of people, and so it can only be maintained by fear and shame.

From my own experience I know that it is possible for Muslim Americans to live secular lives and not drag religion into their politics. Personally, I keep my faith at home. It's nobody's business whether I pray or not. In my campaign, I've emphasized being a Muslim and former refugee because it immunizes me from the identity politics pushed by Islamists like Omar. While I'm a secular Muslim, the Somali Muslims upset about Omar's behavior don't care about that. Because I'm not a Somali Muslim, so I'm not reflecting on their community. As far as they are concerned, I can be whatever I want, and at least I'm not a hypocrite.

Ironically, sometimes it's folks on the right who struggle with this. Particularly those who have a superficial understanding of Shariah. They've read some books on Shariah, and they just assume that everyone who is Muslim believes it. But it has more to do with how a person identifies themselves, not just how someone was born. Do they identify themselves as a Shariah-adherent Muslim? When I identify myself, whether I'm visiting my hometown in Iraq, or traveling to Europe, or anywhere else I go I don't say, "I'm a Muslim," I say, "I'm an American, period." That's who I am and that's how I feel.

I ran for office because I wanted to represent the people of the fifth district in Minnesota regardless of their faith, color, sex, or political affiliation.

I understand people's concerns that Islamists will make their way into their institutions. Trust me, I've experienced that, and I know how frustrating it is. But we need to get serious. Those of us who oppose Shariah and who are fighting against Islamists, want to help defend the very same American principles that you do. We're not your enemies, we're your allies. Take a moment to understand who your friends are. Who identifies as an American first and foremost, and who is acting because they hate America and what she stands for?

Building Institutions, Opposing Identity Politics: by Zuhdi Jasser

It has been almost nineteen years since the September 11th attacks and we have come a long way. We had a lot of teaching moments which has evolved our focus. With terms like political Islam and Islamism becoming the focus of our strategies, we're no longer simply focused on terrorism as a symptom or technique. Understanding that the threat is Islamism allows us to focus on the instruments Islamists use. And one of those is Shariah. Shariah is one of the main instruments by which the Islamists interweave control of our communities.

We formed the American Islamic Forum for Democracy in 2003 under the mission not to fight terrorism –the symptom—but fight the idea of political Islam. We took as our mission to separate mosque and state and to protect the U.S. Constitution, freedom and liberty.

That has evolved into programs that have included our Muslim Liberty Project, which engages youth that agree with those principles. Our public engagement project reaches out to media and academics, universities, and conducts interfaith work. Lastly, our Muslim Reform Movement that developed a two-page declaration that we think should become part of the mainstay when it comes to trying to delineate who are the Islamists –those that believe in shariah supremacism—versus those who are Americans and just happen to be Muslim and reject Islamism.

At the American Islamic Forum, we teach our youth that there is nothing more human - -more preferable to live in—than a country that's a secular, a liberal democracy. We're encouraging them to actively reject an Islamic state, or one that flies an Islamic flag. We teach our youth and others that it can be both very Muslim, but obviously very American to reject theocracy.

One of the most interesting things about doing this work now is that we are going through a period –call it the Trump Era—where every day Americans are having a battle with the so-called 'establishment'. It has been a significant gift to our work, because as Americans are struggling to understand this idea of the 'establishment,' and how "The Swamp" isn't responsive to them, and hasn't kept up with the times, we're able to say this is what we reformers in the Muslim community have been facing. We've been fighting against an establishment for centuries. In its current incarnation it is the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, a global

hegemony of Muslim dictatorships, including Iran and Qatar and the Islamist groups, that up until two years ago included Saudi Arabia and others.

We launched these efforts over the last nineteen years, but we have to remember that when it comes to institutions for American Muslims, the Islamist movement had a fifty-year head start. In the late 1960s the Saudis and others funded the Muslim Student Association (MSA) which then sprouted the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA). From these groups the Islamist lobby emerged.

Not only did their mission included not only sprouting these organizations but keeping Muslim communities which had immigrated to the United States separate. Not only as communities, but also in consciousness. Islamists sought to create a separatist mindset for Muslim Americans that this was not our land, not our country, not our flag. In fact, their movement came here to evangelize political Islam and shape 'western' policy to their needs globally in their supremacist aspirations.

It is no coincidence that the leading faces for the Muslim community today are Islamist politicians like Rep. Rashida Tlaib and Rep. Ilhan Omar. Consider Ilhan Omar and her rampant anti-Americanism and especially her hate for the U.S. military. When Omar tweeted out two years ago that we, the U.S. military, were the villains in Somalia, as an American former Naval officer who personally served in Operations Restore Hope in Somalia, I took that very personally.

Where does this sentiment come from? It comes out of the political Islamic movements and groups that Omar associates with. It is a sentiment bred by imams in mosques, who accuse (libel) American soldiers of committing war crimes in Iraq and elsewhere, which is part of the radicalization process.

These are the kinds of people leading the Muslim community in America, meaning leading the Muslim organizations that are identified as the leading Muslim organizations in America.

We're continuing to educate Americans to realize that the Ilhan Omars of the world aren't coming out of thin air. They're coming out of a farm team that's been part of a massive global lobby that includes Islamists' interests. And out of this lobby they produce through every academic and media platform this idea, this obsession, of victimization. They make being a Muslim not into an idea but into an identity, as if it's a racial or skin-color issue. So, Islamists deny any diversity of

thought, while demanding that Muslims be treated as a single monolithic group for purposes of racial diversity. Yet, obviously being Muslim is an idea, not a race.

Our Muslim Reform Movement is about bringing folks to the table. We aren't trying to suppress the freedom of speech of Islamists as they often accuse us. We're trying to have a seat at the table to expose Americans to the fact that there are many other Muslims and they need to know the playbook of who are and who are not the Islamists. There are Muslims that are pro-American and reject Islamism.

Americans often get bewildered because they are trying to wrap their heads around, "how do I determine who is an Islamist and who isn't?"

In the Middle East, it is pretty obvious. They form a party, whether it is the Muslim Brotherhood, or the Salafi parties or otherwise push their agenda. But in the United States, Islamists will not come out and say, "Oh, we're Islamist," because they realize that in America, there are no religious parties. Although in London, the Muslim Brotherhood did set up shop quite publicly. So, where they can, where there is no prohibition or cultural obstacle from forming a religious party, they will.

This may change if the Islamist alliance with the far left fails to deliver results. When Bernie Sanders pulled out of the race for the Democratic Presidential nomination, some of the Islamists linked to CAIR in Arizona did begin talking about forming a new party because they are so upset that their man pulled out of the race.

But in the West, the best way that you can identify Islamists is that they talk about Muslims in a way that is collectivist. They treat all Muslims as if they somehow think alike. They use Islamic Centers, places of worship, as places to advance their political agenda, for collective political interests and for lobbying.

They focus on shame and dishonor. So, for example, when they criticize Muslim reformers taking on the Islamists, they will not target our message, they will target us as individuals. They will often target the messenger as being a traitor. In my own experience I have had sermons condemning me said from the pulpit of the mosque I attend in Scottsdale, Arizona. Simply because I was critical of Hamas, they said that I was an agent of the Zionists and I was working with enemies of Islam. They quoted excerpts from the Koran saying because of my activities, I was a traitor of the faith, and they used language from the Koran referring to those

historically that had pretended to be Muslim and were not really Muslim but traitors inside the community.

They use the “us versus them” mentality to do away with their strongest opposition. And of course, they use intimidation. They are constantly trying to intimidate their opponents. They focus on America and Israel and the West in a very bigoted, anti-Western, antisemitic way. They are almost uniformly anti-Israel and anti-Zionist. A great litmus test, which my organization uses to pick up on Islamists, is whether they support the state of Israel or not. And you’ll frequently find them swimming in the same pool as the BDS movement and the other antisemitic pro-Palestinian movements.

They express themselves as an identity movement in a way that is very clear and wrap themselves in victimization. You will see that they are constantly complaining about this or that act of bigotry. Their entire platform is based on how their rights have been opposed or denied, versus an agenda focused on things that Americans care about, such as healthcare, taxation, national defense and other things. Their agenda is on a completely different agenda, which is part of what the Islamist parties typically have.

You can recognize them based on who you are. How does a capitalist know within five minutes who the socialists or the communists are? Because they know who the free market people are, and they know what free market beliefs are. It is the same way with the theocrats in the Muslim American community. As a pro-American Muslim, you learn to spot them quickly. You do not have to be a Muslim to figure it out who the pro-American Muslims are – it is easy to see if they share the same pro-American principles that you do.

There is a really important point on patriotism. There was a debate in Texas about a vice-chair of a county Republican party who happened to be Muslim. Questions were asked about his background, and then the Bush family came to his defense and it was a huge ordeal.

Oftentimes, questions arise much later in the process than they should have. Many of these candidates or officials come up through the system and nobody really challenges them to find out what they actually believe.

Forget Muslims and Islamists for second, we do not even ask about their views on conservatism. Islamists easily camouflage themselves on the left. If you are a die-hard Islamist, you can very easily live with a Bernie Sanders presidency, and know

he will never challenge any of your core beliefs. But a conservative that truly believes in the Constitution and small government? That is not something an Islamist can tolerate. The Republican Party used to be the party of immigrants—those that came here to embrace American ideals because the parties in every other country destroyed those ideals. That’s why my family came here, and I think many other American Muslims will embrace that.

If you want to run for vice-chairman of a Republican Party, we should know what you believe on healthcare. We should know what your views are on the Second Amendment and gun rights. And yet none of that is vetted and Conservatives who question Muslim candidates on these issues are naturally suspicious because they haven’t actually been given any chance to vet these candidates.

That is not the fault of non-Muslims. It derives from the fact that Muslim Americans are being coddled, and we are not being treated as adults. Once we get criticized or questioned on Shariah, there is a big uproar about bigotry, and it becomes polarized on both sides. Instead of dealing with the basic questions about their stances on conservative issues very early on in their public life.

One of the programs we are working on now is called Future Muslim Leaders of America. We’re teaching some of the youth that came up through our Muslim Liberty project the core principles of Conservatism now that they’re done with law school, or their military education, or when they’re embracing American society. These sorts of programs are going to act as a filter for Islamists. This will create the opportunity for real vetting. And that way we can start to get a handle on these issues where people find themselves suddenly dealing with an individual in the party, who happened to be Muslim, but has never been publicly vetted before.

The idea of creating our own American conservative institution is relatively new, but has been a hard-earned lesson. When we started in 2007 or 2008, we thought we could basically start from the back of the mosque and work our way up. If you want to look at the cup half empty, we have not made as much progress as I would have thought in resisting Islamists. But we realized those demographics are not going to work in our favor.

The majority of people that go to mosques regularly and most of the board members of mosques are heavy-duty Islamists. I have never been physically thrown out of a mosque—though I have certainly been threatened verbally—and . But I have never been physically thrown out, so we cannot cede that space to them. To

think that reformers are a majority movement within the mosque is foolhardy –yet it is not futile. We create a debate by going to the mosque.

By showing up, we figuratively put our declarations on their doors in a Martin Luther-esque way, as we did when we formed the Muslim Reform movement. We push them about free speech, push them about women’s rights, push them about liberal democracy and how Shariah is not only anti-humanitarian, but it is incompatible with all the things that we should know to be right as moral, sentient human beings.

Ultimately, reform is not going to begin inside the mosques where the Islamists dominate.

Only 20 percent of Muslims go to mosque regularly. Those 80 percent of American Muslims that do not, so far are anesthetized and not motivated or activated as they should be.

I remember my grandfather telling me what Syria was like before my family fled. The mufti of Damascus was Sunni mufti, but the Assad family is part of a heterodox Alawite movement, which is an offshoot of the Shia community. The Sunni mufti claimed to be a moderate Sufi, yet that Sunni imam claimed to be Sufi, claimed to be moderate and all these kinds of things, because he answered to a secular military dictatorship. He wasn’t a reformer – he was a tool of the dictatorship. You could not ask any tough questions in Syrian mosques because everything went the way the Ba’ath Party wanted it to go.

So, the problem is, when you look at the Middle East, the issue is, if it’s an Islamist country like Iran or a Wahhabi-controlled country like Saudi Arabia, if you don’t follow the dogma of the government and the judiciary that’s running the legal system, you don’t have much oxygen in which to disagree and present alternative opinions. Or you’ll find yourself in jail and otherwise unable to articulate these things. You may even find yourself beheaded. Just ask the family of Raif Badawi, or the many prisoners of conscience in Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Egypt and elsewhere.

Consider al-Azhar University in Egypt as an example of this question of reform from within. I think it’s interesting to ask, whose reform are we looking at? Al-Azhar’s scholars recently said that ISIS cannot declare jihad because only the government of Egypt can declare jihad. So, al-Azhar said that is the modern way of looking at jihad. Of course you are never going to reform jihad and destroy that

idea if Al Azhar still thinks that if the Egyptian military went to war—even if it’s against the Muslim Brotherhood—it should do so under the pretext of a jihad declared by the al-Azhar scholars. As long as you empower an Islamic state to have a military that goes to war for jihad, which is what Erdogan’s trying to do and others, you’re giving oxygen to this concept of religious-inspired military conquest based in jihad rather than defense based in secular national identity.

Reform is going to have to start in Western free society that allows push back. There’s so much inbreeding between al-Azhar and the Egyptian government and the Brotherhood—and it’s the same in every country. Why does the secular leader that’s running the Pakistani government bow his head to the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Islamic party in Pakistan? Because, from a tribal sense, Imran Khan wants to always make sure that the Islamists aren’t going to start a revolution and topple him.

Indonesia is probably one of the most secular governments in the Islamic world and yet the Islamists are beginning to make inroads. A Christian mayor was recently imprisoned for two years on charges of blasphemy. The Islamists can make that happen because they have so much influence and the government didn’t want to take them on. This is why reform has to happen in the West—so that we can begin to build institutions that can start to spread these ideas in what are otherwise dictatorships.

Confusing pronouncements from Al-Azhar are a reminder that we have a lot of tough work to do regarding the theology. We can’t be in denial that the core Shariah interpretations of Koranic passages talk about whether it’s okay to raise your hand to strike a woman. Or to cut off hands for stealing. That the testimony of a woman in a shariah court is not worth the same as a man. All of these things are not compatible with the 15th Century let alone the 21st Century. We need to address these issues openly and publicly as a community—but that is not going to happen until the rest of America stops treating Muslim Americans as an identity group.

The biggest perpetrators of identity politics, for all groups, but especially for Muslims post 9/11 is the U.S. government.

The government has viewed the 3 to 4 million American Muslims myopically—seeking to make sure the influencers within the community are happy. Since Islamists run our community, inevitably they seek to please the Islamists.

Placating Islamists in America has a big impact on the quarter of the world's population that is Muslim. The Ilhan Omars of the world have a huge influence on what happens in Qatar and Saudi Arabia and Somalia and elsewhere. We saw Ilhan Omar's relationship with Erdogan in Turkey picked up quickly because a lot of what happens in America guides what happens elsewhere.

Who the U.S. government works with domestically has a huge impact on our foreign policy. Turkey, even though they might be in NATO, is not our friend. But the Islamists are very pro-Turkey. US foreign policy in the Middle East before the Arab awakening in 2011, we have constantly seen the Islamists favored over other groups—especially secular liberals. The dictatorships in the Middle East helped the Islamists, which increased their influence, but now the American government is doing the same thing.

One of the toughest meetings I participated in as a commissioner at the US Commission on Religious Freedom was in Egypt in 2013. Anne Patterson was the Ambassador to Egypt, and we were to visit with the Brotherhood leadership. She basically shook her finger at me and said, "Who are you to tell us not to work with the Brotherhood because they were elected democratically?" I responded, "Well, ma'am, Hamas was elected democratically and they're still on our terrorist list because they are a bunch of terrorists. So, the Muslim Brotherhood has an ideology that's incompatible with our values and they're a terrorist group."

The bottom line is, the U.S. government, for various reasons, thinks these groups should become the anointed leaders of our community. This is happening in mosques here in Scottsdale, Arizona and in Dallas, Texas. In Brooklyn, New York City, Siraj Wahhaj is an imam who raised tons of money for CAIR. I'm trying to expose that not only did his son end up running a terrorist camp in New Mexico, but he has on multiple occasions said things that are horrifically antisemitic, anti-American, and that pro-jihad. Yet the government funds his causes and the media listens to him because it's the lowest hanging fruit. Working with men like Siraj Wahhaj basically checks the box for the government to say, "Oh we've helped Muslims," when, in fact, what it's doing is empowering our enemies abroad and also allowing them to continue to have a stranglehold on our communities here at home.

When the government supports Islamists even the Muslims in the back of the mosque that support reform will say, "listen, Zuhdi, these are the people that our congressman is talking to. These are the people that CNN is talking to. So, therefore, we're going to talk to them because they have access and you don't."

As we continue to work to find the Muslim reformer leaders of the future, I admit that 10 years ago, I would have said by 2020 we'd have big conventions of 20,000 or 40,000 Muslim reformers who agreed with us and that we'd see a massive movement that was anti-Islamist. Admittedly we haven't seen that in the same way we're seeing it in Tunisia, and elsewhere in the Middle East. But in Tunisia and in other countries, they've been fighting Islamists for some time, they had a huge motivation to push back against Islamism after the dictators went away and the Islamists were now running their governments or on the verge of doing so.

But in the United States, Muslims have gotten such a pass and been so coddled, it's been hard to light a fire under their feet. It has been very hard for us to get a populous anti-Islamist movement going. This movement's success would have likely been very different had there been a coordinated Cold War like strategy empowering anti-Islamists and confronting Islamists at all levels.

We need to begin to have other pressure points to push this debate, be it at universities or in media. Somewhere, we are going to have to wake up the media and to hold the media to their own stated principles.

For example, consider the #MeToo movement, which was a major issue in the media and on the left. I wrote a piece in which I talked about how many of courageous women had been testifying regarding the domestic violence and sexual abuse of some of these famous imams, from Tariq Ramadan to Nouman Ali Khan in Dallas. There was an imam a Scottsdale, Arizona mosque that had two hundred pages of depositions or affidavits done on his actions against women at the mosque and elsewhere. I wrote an op-ed about it for the lead Arizona newspaper and they would not publish it because they were afraid of defamation and other things. I told them, if this were a Catholic church, you would have been all over this. The title of the op-ed was "Me Too: Except for Muslims".

Reform will happen when Muslim Americans start to engage our community on the same issues that are being debated by the rest of the American public. We also have to the people to have that debate—so right now we're focusing on creating more leaders. More of the Dalia al-Aqidis of the world, the Asra Nomanis, and the Raheel Razas and others, so that we can begin to show folks that if we have twenty, thirty anti-Islamist Muslim pundits to show that we are a diverse community. Later with ever more prevalent role models, we will be able to begin to build larger more grass roots-based organizations that can create new identities for Muslims that are separate from the mosques, separate from the Islamist

movement. To help educate Americans that being Muslim is not always synonymous with being Islamist and in fact quite the contrary—a very American rejection of theocracy.

Decision Brief: A Commission on Radical Islam

Decision: The President should appoint a Presidential Commission on Radical Islam consisting of experts on radical Islam/Islamist ideology¹, members of the American Muslim Reform movement, and members of the U.S. Counterterrorism and Homeland Security community, in order to review the U.S. Government’s approach to addressing the ideology of radical Islam, identify points of failure and make recommendations for how the U.S. government should address the role of Islamist ideology in indoctrinating American Muslims to fight abroad or become what the U.S. government currently, but inaccurately, describes as “Homegrown Violent Extremists” (HVE).

Reason: [During his campaign speech](#) in Youngstown, Ohio in August of 2016, then candidate Donald Trump declared that one of his first acts as President would be to establish a Commission on Radical Islam which would undertake to examine the threat posed by radical Islam and address failed policies of the Obama administration, particularly the “Countering Violent Extremism” program which inadequately addressed the nature of the radical Islam threat, and routinely partnered with groups beholden to the very radical ideology the program was intended to address.

President Trump noted,

“The goal of the commission will be to identify and explain to the American public the core convictions and beliefs of Radical Islam, to identify the warning signs of radicalization, and to expose the networks in our society that support radicalization. This commission will be used to develop new protocols for local police officers, federal investigators, and immigration screeners.

¹ Radical Islam, as used here, refers to an ideology sometimes identified as Islamism or political Islam, and referring in the broadest sense to a political movement seeking to order all elements of society in accordance with Islamic Law (Sharia). As the 2017 National Security Strategy identifies the belief system of the various jihadist terror groups against whom the U.S. has fought since 2001 as, “a barbaric ideology that calls for the violent destruction of governments and innocents they consider to be apostates. These jihadist terrorists attempt to force those under their influence to submit to Sharia law.”

The Trump Administration has moved forward on improving immigration screenings, particularly following implementation of [Presidential Proclamations 9645 and 9983](#) imposing travel restrictions on countries of concern. There has still be minimal movement on training immigration screeners to identify signs of adherence to Islamist ideology however. The administration has also taken limited steps to address issues with the CVE program, by emphasizing a new terminology of “Terrorism Prevention,” and ending some DHS grants of concern. But the program makes no mention of radical Islam and does not specifically identify radical Islam as a threat.

A Commission on Radical Islam, as the President called for during the campaign, would help realign American homeland security priorities on the most significant terrorism threat, provide resources for training and education for the government on the nature of the threat, and provide a platform for reform-minded Muslims to combat the ideology of radical Islam in their local communities.

Background: Following the events of 9/11, the U.S. government instituted The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (the 9/11 Commission). The commission emphasized the importance of successfully defining the threat posed to the United States:

“But the enemy is not just “terrorism,” some generic evil. This vagueness blurs the strategy. The catastrophic threat at this moment in history is more specific. It is the threat posed by Islamist terrorism—especially the al Qaeda network, its affiliates, and its ideology.

The Commission noted that this ideology existed within the Islamic tradition stretching back to at least Ibn Tamiyyah (d. 1383), and noted the particular influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Brotherhood thinker Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) on its dramatic spread. The Commission recognized Al Qaeda (and related terror groups) operated within a broader network of ideologically aligned Islamists, represented most significantly by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Opposition to this view began towards the second term of the Bush Administration and reached its zenith in the Obama Administration. Military and law enforcement trainers who lectured on this threat were censored or removed. Analysts and investigators were told they could not consider religious motivations of Islamist terrorists or use the appropriate terminology to discuss the phenomena in favor of less accurate alternative terminology. Investigations into Brotherhood networks in the United States were shut down. The Obama Administration promoted the concept of “countering violent extremism,” highlighting the

“vagueness” which the 9/11 Commission warned against. The CVE narrative conflated the threat from radical Islam with a wide variety of both ideological and non-ideological threats. Instead of viewing Islamist terrorists as operating with the milieu created by “networks supporting radicalization,” as President Trump accurately described the threat, CVE treated ideological supporters of radical Islam as allies in helping to deradicalize violent extremists, resulting in the delivery of U.S. government grants and statements of support to groups which had previously been investigated as part of the terrorism-supporting network. This has continued to take place throughout the U.S. government despite the President’s demonstrated strong public call to address and correct these policies.

Pushback: Expect pushback from across the government bureaucracy, which has continued to insist on utilizing violent extremism language despite the Trump administration’s shift in language and priorities.

Governing Laws and Regulations:

The President has the ability to establish a Commission on Radical Islam through executive order. The operation of Presidential commissions is largely governed by the Federal Advisory Commissions Act (FACA).ⁱⁱⁱ

Rebuttal of Policy Objections: Policy objections will hinge on the entrenched bureaucracy’s intransigence to consider addressing the motivations of jihadist terrorism and the broader ideological threat posed by radical Islam. Commission on Radical Islam will provide a valuable resource to advise the president on these matters. It will provide an important platform for Muslim reformers, providing the stature necessary for them to oppose the spread of radical Islam in their communities.

The Bottom Line: The president should move immediately to fulfill his campaign promise of establishing a Commission on Radical Islam, and staff it with knowledgeable experts.

ⁱ AbuSulayman ed., *Islamization of Knowledge*, International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1989, 3rd edition, pg. 17



ⁱⁱ Uri Shavit, *Islamism and the West: From “Cultural Attack” to “Missionary Migrant”*, Routledge, 2014, pg. 139-140

ⁱⁱⁱ 5 U.S. Code, “Federal Advisory Commissions Act as amended,” General Services Administration, <https://www.gsa.gov/cdnstatic/FACA-Statute-2013.pdf>