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Tolerance and Intolerance in the Islamic World

Panel featuring

Zeyno Baran
Stephen Suleyman Schwartz
Irfan Al-Alawi
Veli Sirin
Khaled Abu Toameh
Tarek Heggy

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ZEYNO BARAN

Zeyno Baran is the Director of the Center for Eurasian Policy at the Hudson Institute. Formerly, Baran directed the International Security and Energy Programs at The Nixon Center and the Caucasus Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. She was awarded the Order of Honor by Georgian President Shevardnadze, and has been a Distinguished Visitor at the American Academy in Berlin.

Thank you all for coming. We know that there are many activities taking place right now and I promise to make your time worthwhile here. We'll talk about some of the concerns we have with the Durban Review Conference documents—both what was mentioned in it and what was left out. We'll also discuss some issues critically important for the implementation of universal human rights standards for all, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion or gender.

Who are we? I would say we're some of the voices of the silent majority most of you have never heard of. We are Muslims from different backgrounds, different political views and also different Islamic traditions. What unifies us, however, is our commitment to the freedom to think on our own and our refusal to accept any dogmatic thinking. We do not claim to speak for anyone and we refuse to let others speak in our name, especially when it comes to Islam. We are open to honest debate and we will speak the truth, which is one of the most fundamental aspects of being Muslim. Islam commands one to speak the truth – even if it means going against one's own tribe or family – to avoid the sins of lying, deception and slander and we will follow these principles in our discussions here today.

Before I turn to the panelists, who will each speak for about ten minutes, I'd like to make a few points.

I believe the ongoing disingenuous conversations between Muslims and non-Muslims and among Muslims themselves is at the core of our problem. It also seems to me that everyone is pretending; pretending to be talking to each other, and pretending to care about the lives of others suffering from racism, discrimination and religious intolerance.

I cannot help but constantly think about the saying that many of the holy books and ancient teachings and sacred knowledge have taught us: “people have eyes but cannot see; they have ears but cannot hear.” I see today many people’s minds are totally confused and their hearts have been turned into stones. There is very little love or compassion. Instead, many people are mostly acting out of fear, which quickly turns into anger and hatred.

That is why so many men who call themselves Muslim lose all of their senses over some cartoons, yet they cannot bring themselves to have any kind of compassion or any kind of feeling when they see women and children being raped or tortured or brutally abused, including in the name of a religion. We see this in country after country. These issues are left unaddressed. Some of the most innocent, most helpless victims, children and women, are systematically oppressed in so many parts of the world. Yet when we talk about racism or discrimination, or when we talk about intolerance, most of us somehow cannot seem to bring ourselves to talk about these people and these realities.

If you stop and think about all this craziness, it would be funny –if it was not so tragic because what is happening is so real and horrific. It is also so tragic because a religion that means "peace" is now equated with terrorism, with radicalism, and with intolerance of all kinds.

Let me tell you what kind of Islam I was brought up with. I'm originally from Turkey. I live in Washington now. I was taught that Islam teaches us that we are our own masters. We surrender or submit only to God, not to any kind of religious authority or political authority that wants to control our hearts and minds. The “submission” of Islam is not mindless submission to a dogma or a person as the Taliban or some authoritarian leaders want people to believe. No, “submission” is to the natural rhythm of life. This is very similar to what the yogis believe. It is also what the Native Americans believe. I believe this is the universal truth understood by many people, regardless of their racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds. It means respecting nature, respecting and protecting the environment, animals and all that is around us.

As a child, one of the Islamic teachings that most appealed to me was that one is not even supposed to kill an ant—let alone kill a human being—because God is manifested in everything and everyone. In other words, like millions of others, I was taught that we are all part of the One. This also meant that our intentions mattered more than our outwardly actions, since God knows what is in our hearts.

Sadly, there is little of this understanding, of this spirit left in what has become mainstream Islam today. Today’s mainstream is all about politics. All talk revolves around fear, anger and hatred. In fact, what used to be extremist has become mainstream.

We see many leaders claiming that they have the truth and only they know the answers. They consider others “ignorant”, as President Ahmadinejad of Iran said at the start of his controversial speech at the Durban Review Conference. His speech clearly showed his mental state: while attacking the West and Israel, he also used words like love, compassion and human dignity, and even talked about “the valuable elixir of love and compassion”. If you listen to these words and then stop and think of what is happening inside Iran, again, I would call his performance a comedy, if things weren’t so tragic.

For too long the truly moderate and knowledgeable voices within Islam have been silenced—or simply have not been heard. That is one of the reasons why today so many people, including Muslims themselves, associate Islam with the kind of a radicalism, tribalism, violence and hatred that we see.

I think it is sad but true that Islam has been hijacked by men who care more about their own power than the religion or its true teachings. Their narrative, the narrative we have been hearing for a long time now—and by long I mean centuries—is all about victimization and humiliation. It is part of a deadly mixture of feeling both politically and economically inferior with feeling morally and ethically superior.

This is sadly also reflected in the various statements issued this week at the United Nations by Muslim countries and organizations. They seem to be approaching the issues related to xenophobia, discrimination and racism from the same one side. Their tone suggests that these problems target only--or primarily--Muslims, and that the perpetrators are all non-Muslims.

How about the racism that we see within Muslim countries from one ethnic group to another ethnic group? Or discrimination by one Muslim group towards another Muslim group? What about the rights of the non-Muslim minorities living in Muslim countries? Or the difficulties Muslim minorities experience? Nobody really addresses these concerns.

The statement of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), for example, is full of accusatory remarks towards non-Muslims but there is not a single criticism of practices within

Muslim countries. The goal of Durban should be to eradicate racism and discrimination not only against Muslims but against everybody. The fight against racism, xenophobia, and discrimination is not a one-way street, and it cannot revolve only around the grievances of Muslims.

Now, since I am the only Muslim woman in the panel, I will briefly say a few words about the situation of Muslim women. Many men are in denial—maybe not my co-panelists, but many Muslim men are in deep denial. It is not possible for men to call themselves Muslim and say they follow the Prophet and his ways and then treat the women the way they are currently treated. I would send President Ahmedinejad's statement back to him and say that he is the ignorant one. If he really understood the teaching of Islam and truthfully followed the Prophet's ways, there is no way he would allow the abuse and oppression of women in his country.

Again, it is not possible for a man to call himself a Muslim and then not allow women to get an education. The Koran clearly gives the command, "read!" and is constantly telling Muslims to learn, and be educated in the various sciences—these are commands for both men and women. The equality of man and woman, and the duty of every Muslim to learn as much as they can so they come as close to truth as possible, are among the most important aspects of Islam—yet these are also the most abused aspects of the religion.

Muslims are doing many things wrong today. They say they do these things in the name of Islam or by referencing the Prophet, but they must know that they are worse sinners than the people whom they call apostates or whom they want to silence by preventing free speech.

Even some of the most educated and most respected modern Muslim men seem to be primarily concerned about the image of Islam these days rather than the ethics. Most Muslims simply do not know what is really going on, what the self-appointed "Muslim spokesmen" really are doing. Today this panel will talk about what is really going on.

We will talk about the malaise that has affected pretty much all Muslim communities and countries—and how the continued denial in turn has led to things like Islamophobia and racism.

I recently spoke about some of these things at a U.S. Senate hearing. Before ending my remarks and turning the floor to the first panelist, I'll just mention one thing Senator John Kerry, the chair of the hearing, said and how it relates to our subject today. He had just come back from Syria and he was really surprised that there were so many more women wearing the headscarf now than the last time he visited. When he asked his Syrian interlocutor, the man said, "Well neither my mother nor my grandmother ever wore the headscarf. This is a whole new phenomena." This is the reality, though the Islamists and their propaganda would make you believe women who do not wear the headscarf are not "real" Muslims.

Many of these new understandings of what it means to be a "real Muslim" are a direct result of the oil money starting to influence education, especially Islamic education. The Islamic understanding we increasingly find today in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and elsewhere increasingly, all point to the same starting point: Saudi Arabia. It might be wishful thinking on our part, but it is time that the UN deals with what has been coming out of Saudi Arabia—and I am not referring to oil.

STEPHEN SULEYMAN SCHWARTZ

Stephen Suleyman Schwartz is the author of 20 books, including The Two Faces of Islam (translated into Bosnian, Albanian, Indonesian, and Farsi) and The Other Islam, both of which have gained wide readership in the Muslim world as well as in the West. He also worked as a consultant for the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia.

Bismillahi Rahman ar Raheem. My name is Stephen Suleyman Schwartz. I was not born a Muslim. My mother was the daughter of a Christian minister. My father was Jewish. Both of them were anti-religious so I was brought up without any religion. I became Muslim in Bosnia in 1997 and I founded the Center for Islamic Pluralism (CIP) as a transnational network of moderate Muslim scholars and intellectuals and journalists in 2004.

The Center for Islamic Pluralism functions with the participation of my colleagues here: Sheikh Irfan Al-Alawi, who is our United Kingdom Director and International Director, and Brother Veli Sirin, the CIP Director in Germany. We're about to publish a major survey of shari'ah in Western Europe in May.

I would like to start with a couple of comments that have been made by representatives of major Muslim powers at this conference. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the leader of a powerful country with a great culture and history and a great Islamic legacy, commented that in the Middle Ages scholars and scientists were sentenced to death, and that later on the world witnessed the transatlantic slave trade, with the hunting down of innocent people, separating them from their families and taking them in bondage to America in the worst conditions.

Well, Islamic figures were also sentenced to death, by Muslim authorities. Some outstanding Islamic thinkers were killed in this way. And slavery was not an invention of the Renaissance or the Medieval era. Slavery existed among the Greeks and Romans and it existed among the Muslims and there's even an Islamic legal tradition dealing with slavery.

So I ask the question: why is it that President Ahmadinejad seeks to put the blame for these historical atrocities – for racism, slavery and suppression of free opinion – only on the West? This is equally a part of the negative history within Islam, which we need to correct, in dealing with these bad, anti-human practices.

I see also that in the official statement of the permanent UN representative of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Abdulwahab Attar, he condemned “the defamation of all prophets whether it be Muhammad, Ibrahim, Moses, Jesus, ... or others.” Attar continued, “therefore in this forum we are calling for effective and practical steps to address this issue in such a way as to curb the phenomenon of intolerance and xenophobia.”

In other words, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is asking for an international legal standard against negative opinions. Well, I'm an American and I'm also a Muslim. And I'm a Muslim strong in my *iman* (belief) and I don't run from and I'm not afraid of criticism. I'm not such a weak Muslim in my *iman* that somebody saying something negative about any of the prophets makes me cry or require legal protection against criticism. We should be willing to face criticism and we should be prepared to talk with those who criticize us.

All religion as we know it today is based on criticism. The Jews criticized Pharaoh. The Christians have their criticism of Judaism as it was practiced at the time. Islam criticized the

polytheists who had taken over the Haram in Mecca. There is no religion without criticism – even Buddhism is based on criticism of the society that existed during the Buddha’s life.

So I would ask: are certain Muslims happy to have it said that they have put themselves on the side of those who oppressed Moses, those who oppressed Jesus, those who oppressed Muhammad? Is that what they want to be on the side of, by calling for an end to discussion and criticism? Again, there is no religion without criticism.

Calling the criticism of certain aspects of Islamic societies or the criticism of Muslims or even negative criticism of all of Islam, stereotyping and hate speech, is false. There may be stereotyping, there may be hate speech, but there is no reason to respond to it by attempting to suppress it and attempting to prevent people from expressing themselves.

Whether you are of no religion or whether you are a monotheist or a Buddhist or something else, if you believe in your religion you must be prepared to argue in defense of your religion. And the Koran commands us that when we debate with the People of the Book, we argue in a quiet and a pleasant way because God hates wrath. So we don’t argue against those who say things that may hurt our feelings about Islam by saying, "Oh, there should be a law and they should be arrested and imprisoned and they should be suppressed and silenced."

Here's a little folder I picked up in this building: “Geneva in Flames” on the epic of John Calvin. This is Geneva, the city famous for its support for Protestantism, and a city that prides itself on being the birthplace and later the refuge of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. But today a special meeting is taking place here. There will be a week of meetings of people who want to abolish the tradition of a refuge for Protestantism and of a refuge for Rousseau.

Why are these people here in Geneva? Why does Geneva accept these people here when they come and attempt to destroy the tradition of Geneva, the tradition that encourages free dialogue inside religion and among and between religious people? They try to destroy the honorable tradition of giving a shelter to Rousseau, their born son. I don’t understand this. I don’t understand why Geneva would permit this.

I think what we have seen and what we are seeing in the Durban Review Conference is an attempt to protect radicalism and intolerance under the pretext of combating stereotyping and incitement. Why is this necessary? Why is it necessary to engage in this double dialectic, this double dialogue, this double language, by saying that any criticism of Islam is stereotyping and hate speech? The aim is clear: to do away with pluralism, to do away with dialogue, to do away with discussion.

In traditional Islam, the glory of our religion is that it is like Judaism in that it encourages debate among its scholars. As the Prophet Mohammad said, the differences among the scholars of religion are a blessing and a mercy. He also said that the scholars of Islam, the scholars of religion, are like the stars in the sky; if you choose one, you'll be guided. That's traditional Islam. Traditional Islam is not afraid of criticism either from within Islam or from outside of Islam.

Diversity must not and cannot be used as a pretext to deny diversity and above all freedom of opinion. That's the bottom line.

I have only been given ten minutes and these are obviously topics I can talk about at great length. But I wanted to include a little bit – maybe a little bit extensively in talking about my own experience in the Balkans.

I first went to the former Yugoslavia in 1990. As a journalist I reported on the war in Croatia; I reported on the war in Bosnia; I reported on the war in Kosovo. I was just in Kosovo this week. And I have seen many things that changed me as a human being. When you have seen the coffins of twenty-four infants killed in an ethnic massacre, you don't walk away from that feeling the same as you did when you first saw it.

And I asked myself about the United Nations, because the United Nations rules Kosovo, just as the United Nations played a role in Bosnia when it was subjected to attempted genocide. (The genocide did not succeed, it was an attempted genocide.) The UN speaks endlessly about the tragic situation of the Israelis and Palestinians. Believe me: for a person coming from a Jewish father, who has become Muslim, nobody feels this the way I feel this, the tragedy of the conflict between these two peoples in the Holy Land.

But what does the UN say about Tibet? What did the UN say about Bosnia? What did the UN say about Kosovo? What did the UN say about the Chechens? What did the UN say about the Georgians? I demand that the United Nations, if it is what it claims to be, a defender of humanitarian values and ideals, that it not simply remain and perpetuate itself as a platform for attacking Israel and the Jewish people, trying to pretend that it is the only conflict in the world, and that it address all the conflicts in the world where people are victimized because of their ethnicity, because of their religion, because of their gender and because of their opinions.

I'd like to add a point that is of interest to me. Everybody who is literate in any way about religion knows that there is immense diversity in Christianity. If somebody says, "I've become a Christian," and I say, "Oh, you must be Catholic," they may say, "No, I'm a Baptist," or a Methodist." If somebody says that they're Jewish, and if I say, "Oh well then you must be Orthodox." They might very likely say, "No, I'm Conservative or Reform." If somebody says, "I'm going to go to the lands of Buddhism," we know that Tibetan Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism and Korean Buddhism are quite different from each other.

Why is there supposedly only one Islam? And it's the Islam that's dictated from Riyadh. And it's backed by oil money. And it's intolerant and hateful. And it's supporting extremism all over the world. I protest against this. I refuse this. I will not allow anybody to say to the Muslims that there is only one Islam and you must follow this one Islam. We want the same rights that Christians and Jews and Buddhists and every other one of the universal religions has, the right to diversity within our community, the right to differences in our community, the right to discussion within our community, the right to be respected for those differences.

I spoke earlier about the ghosts of Geneva. I spoke about Calvin – whom I don't happen to admire very much, but I do understand Geneva as seeing itself as the protector of Protestantism. I do happen to admire Rousseau because I'm a reader of French literature. But there are other ghosts in this building and I saw the traces of them here – the ghosts of the League of Nations.

The League of Nations did not act against Japan when Japan attacked China. The League of Nations allowed Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie to be shouted down and insulted when he came as the leader of an independent country fighting against Italian fascism. The League of Nations did not act against Germany when Hitler occupied the Rhineland. And the League of Nations presided over the death of the Spanish Republic.

The United Nations bears that legacy, and those ghosts are here too. This is what I say in conclusion: I am an American. There was always a flaw of the League of Nations. There was

always a flaw in the United Nations. They put peace before freedom. But freedom comes before peace. All the rights we're talking about – the rights of the old, the rights of different religious groups. The rights of the man from Neturei Karta to speak for himself, these are the rights of freedom. Freedom comes before peace. If you want to change the United Nations you must make it an organization built on the defense of freedom and end this discourse in which peace is more important than freedom, by putting freedom before peace.

IRFAN AL-ALAWI

Irfan Al-Alawi is a barrister in the U.K. and has a Ph. D. in Islamic Studies from Al-Azhar University, Cairo. He is currently Executive Director of the Islamic Heritage Foundation UK. He is a widely recognized historian of Mecca and Medina and co-author of an important work with Shaykh Yusuf Rifa'i.

Bismillahi Rahman ar Raheem. I would like to address issues which affect all of us, regardless of whether you are Muslim or non-Muslim. The crisis of Islam is in large part caused by the Saudi Wahhabis who demand a monopoly on discussion and who prevent the normal, fruitful controversy that is mentioned in the Koran, and which was praised by the Prophet Muhammad as a blessing and a mercy. And it is necessary for the health of Islam that free discussion and investigation are protected.

The “crescent of normality”—all the countries from Kuwait to Yemen—have general religious freedom, and encourage expression of opinion in the media and criticism of negative social practices. Why doesn't Saudi Arabia do this? For example, Saudi Arabia does not permit churches and synagogues, and so they are in a very poor state. As a matter of fact, I have been to these synagogues and churches which had been there prior to the fall of the Ottomans, and which were maintained until the Saudi Wahhabis took over and started demolishing them.

King Abdullah clearly understands the need for changes in this area, for greater freedom of opinion in the media and for criticism of negative social practices. As Muslims, we are strong in our belief and in our faith. We don't need government laws to protect us, because Allah states in the Koran that he protects those who have complete faith.

I think we should name and shame the radical Imams and clerics who are inciting hatred against other faiths, other religions, as well as those who are inciting or practicing domestic violence against women. This is against the laws of Islam. I'd like to ask the United Nations: what have they done against domestic violence, in particular in Saudi Arabia, where a 19-year-old girl was gang raped by seven Saudi men and then sentenced to six months in prison and 90 lashes. Her lawyer, to whom I spoke, a human rights lawyer, was suspended from the Saudi Bar Association. He was not allowed to leave Saudi Arabia. The authorities took his passport away.

We should also realize that Islam is a religion which gives protection to its neighbors. Our Prophet Muhammad said that if your neighbor goes hungry, you will be held responsible on the Day of Judgment. He did not say the neighbor has to be a Muslim. Your neighbors down the street from where you live have rights you must respect. The city next to you has rights you must respect. The country next to you has rights you must respect. As Muslims we give protection to our neighbors. We don't punish them.

I'm interested in discussing shari'ah law. Many people talk about shari'ah law. And we at CIP have completed a survey on shari'ah law in Western Europe which, as Stephen has mentioned,

will be released in May 2009. As part of our shari'ah survey, we stressed that traditional Islam respects the law of the land, and that's what the Prophet had taught us, that when you go and live in non-Muslim lands you should accept the law of the land and respect it. Traditional Islam doesn't say that you have to enforce shari'ah in the west, or even attempt to reintroduce shari'ah in the Muslim world, except regarding prayer, *Halal* meat, and other rituals of the Muslims, in which, like other religions, we have our private practices.

I'd also like to mention cultural vandalism. What has the United Nations done about Saudi cultural vandalism? It's reported in media that the historic legacy of Islamic society is under threat, and significant monuments are being demolished. In the end, no one thinks about the cultural vandalism taking place in Mecca, the cradle of Islam or, regarding the holy Kaaba, which was dismantled in 1996. Or the fate of the house of Prophet Muhammad where he lived for 23 years, with his wife Khadija and their children who were born there, the same house where the Archangel Gibril (Gabriel) revealed verses of the Koran for so many years. It was demolished in 1989 and today the largest latrines of the Grand Mosque stand over the area.

Why don't the Muslims talk about that? Why is it that I don't hear any Muslim leaders condemn this extremism? I think we should understand that Saudi Arabia focuses criticism on Israel while they themselves are demolishing the old, historical Meccan Prophetic heritage.

Why is the United Nations not concerned with these issues? We have United Nations preservation of certain sites: Madaen Saleh in Riyadh, and an old house in Jeddah, which don't have anything to do with Islamic history, and yet when we approach UNESCO to help preserve historical monuments belonging to the Prophetic heritage in the Kingdom, they decline. They say no, the country itself has to register the monuments for preservation and the Saudis always reject this.

The problem lies in that the Saudis have petrodollars. And the Saudis are pumping these petrodollars into numerous institutions. Where I come from in the United Kingdom we have many universities to which the Saudis have donated millions of pounds, for example Kings College and the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London.

Therefore, if I was to try to deliver a lecture against Saudi Arabia there, I would be barred. I would not be allowed to deliver such a lecture.

How and why are we told in the media that Saudi Arabia is the center of Islam? Yes, it is, but it does not represent the majority of the Muslims in the world. It represents a very, very small minority. They are a threat to Islam, and the threat is serious: it is Wahhabism.

Someone asked me the other day what about the situation in India and Pakistan: What do I think of the Taliban? Is there a difference between the Wahhabis and the Taliban? I said No. The name for the Wahhabis in Pakistan or India is Taliban or Deobandism/Tablighi Jamaat. They have the same ideology. They want to go on missionary tours, propagating their vicious campaign for dismantling holy monuments, while criticizing other religions.

Consider a prime example of the Taliban ideology: the Bamyán idols that were dynamited. The Prophet Muhammad never said to dismantle or bulldoze the Egyptian pyramids; neither did any of his successors, the caliphs Abu Bakr, Umar, Uthman or Ali, or the successors after them. Recently the Saudi muftis said, let's go and demolish the pyramids. No one should keep anything monumental, related to the Pharaonic era, according to them.

Islam is not against protection of our cultural legacies. You learn from history, preserve history, and respect religions. You respect other religions.

And that's the issue about which we have to be careful. I think the United Nations does not realize that we are in a dangerous situation, and that if we are not careful now we are going to sink. If we do not stop the flow of petrodollars to finance radicalism, and if we do not stop Wahhabism, then all of us are going to suffer.

I think King Abdullah, given the time he has had, has done a lot of good work. He is bringing in a lot of changes. But he needs people from outside the Kingdom to support him. He cannot do it alone. And if he dies soon, God forbid, what will happen? The outcome will be dangerous for the many Muslims and non-Muslims across the globe. Thank you very much.

VELI SIRIN

Veli Sirin is a graduate of Islamic studies of the University of Bochum. He is a leader in the Alevi Youth Movement, a journalist and German Director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism.

My topic is “Alevi in Turkey: Victims of Islamist Discrimination.” Alevi are a religious, sub-ethnic and cultural community in Turkey, numbering in the tens of millions. Alevism is considered one of the many sects of Islam. However, Alevi worship takes place in assembly houses rather than mosques. The ceremony, *âyîn-i cem* or simply *cem*, features music and dance which symbolize the main planets revolving around the Sun (with men and women turning in circles), the liberation from ego, and unity with God. Unlike most other Muslim practices, Alevi rituals are conducted mostly in Turkish, and some in Kurdish.

In contrast to Sunni as well as to the Shia Muslim orthodoxy Anatolian Alevi do not accept shariah, the Islamic judicial system for religious and worldly problems. In addition, Alevi call for a renunciation of violence and equality of women and men in their communities, which differs significantly from the teaching of Sunni Islam in Turkey and Shia Islam in Iran.

There was suppression and violence against the Alevi under the Ottoman empire, however, I will deal, because of the lack of time, mainly with the massacre in Sivas, Turkey, in 1993. But before I begin to talk about Sivas, I will say something about the rumors.

“Mum söndü,” which means, “the candle is extinguished,” is an Alevi principle, expressed in their religious meetings and their ritual sexual practices. Once these and other rumors were used as pretexts to crush the Alevi, who in Anatolia exercised a major influence on the population during the period when the Bektashi Sufis were a pillar of the state. Sunni rulers felt threatened by the power of the Bektashis and after the spread of rumors, there were pogroms and killings which have not ceased today. Even now, although 20 million Alevi live in Turkey, they are not accepted as an independent confessional community. The Alevi are regularly denounced as devil worshippers and classified as “sects,” so that they are deprived of state subsidies. The Turkish state promotes Sunni Islam from the Turkish budget and pursues a religious ministry, because Sunni Islam is the Turkish state religion. By this non-acceptance of the Alevi, and the construction of Sunni mosques in Alevi villages, the Turkish regime obviously intends to reeducate the Alevi as Sunnis, which amounts to an attempt to destroy the Alevi as a whole.

Now, about the Sivas massacre. The 2nd of July 1993 has become a synonym for the inhuman face of the state.

This date reveals the weakness of democracy in Turkey. To honor the poet Pir Sultan Abdal, poets, authors and publishers gathered in a hotel in the city of Sivas . Best known among them was Aziz Nesin, an author and satirist who criticized Islam and the Koran publicly in Sivas and described a large part of the Turkish population as stupid. Religious circles were stirred up by religious fanatics. A mob of up to 20,000 people assembled before the Madimak hotel.

There is a video of the massacre of Sivas which was taken by police who only stood and watched, refusing to stop the mob. It is many hours long. They did not intervene, and they fired no warning shots. The state has appeared as an accomplice. This is an impression which increased in the months after the massacre. None of the perpetrators was arrested. The Islamists put on trial showed neither remorse nor compassion for the families of the victims. They grinned at the cameras and made statements supporting the action. Only three years later the Refah party, to which many of them belonged, became the government party.

The martyrdom of several hours was broadcasted live on TV. Thousands of Sunnis appeared before the Madimak hotel in Sivas. They said that for generations, Alevis have been unbelievers and heretics. The Sunnis declared, with “fists heavenward in God’s name, we say we have had enough of you.” They had just come from the Friday prayer.

The Alevis in the burning hotel had a choice: die in the flames or jump into the mob. The police and fire department intervened hours later—why, is unknown today.

Before the Alevi festival was held pamphlets were distributed throughout the city to the Sunni public. Sunnis were summoned to denounce and demonize Aziz Nesin and other participants in the festival, which were providing alleged Quranic citations supporting violence.

The dominance of the Sunni clerics, their values, norms, and behavior patterns in Sivas made this distortion of their frame of reference possible, justifying, for them, violence on the pretext of religious differences, against alleged enemies of Islam as defined by small, personal cliques and groups.

After Friday prayers and the assembly of fanatics in front of the hotel they shouted “Turkey is Muslim!,” “We want shariah!,” “The Republic was established here and here it will be crushed!” Turkish media treated the victims as culprits. The chief columnists of the biggest newspapers held Aziz Nesin responsible as a provocateur and exculpated the murderers.

The killers are still free. Many of them now live in Germany. The Turkish state speaks of a sad incident. Many Turkish officials would be pleased if the massacre were forgotten. But Alevis do not forget. They demand justice—an investigation of the massacre and a museum honoring the 35 dead victims. The Sivas massacre remains in Alevi minds and souls. The graves of the Sivas victims in Ankara and Karsiyaka were desecrated in November 2007 and a commemorative wall was destroyed. This act of destruction showed that the memory of the victims has not vanished.

Remembrance of Sivas is criticized by the state. They say it promotes hatred among Alevis. The memory of Sivas is an important condition for Alevis and Sunnis to live together in peace. A peaceful community existence cannot be based on forgetting. Today the Alevis continue to demand the erection of a memorial at Sivas. Thank you.

KHALED ABU TOAMEH

Khaled Abu Toameh is an Israeli Arab journalist and documentary filmmaker. He is the West Bank and Gaza correspondent for U.S. News and World Report and the Jerusalem Post, and has been the Palestinian affairs producer for NBC News since 1988.

Thank you very much and good afternoon.

Today I would like to focus more on current political affairs, rather than on the threats of radical Islam. I will talk specifically about the Israeli-Arab conflict and the status of Israel's Arab citizens.

Before that I would like to tell you a bit about my background. I have been working as a journalist for the past 27 years in the Palestinian areas. My career as a journalist started by working for a PLO newspaper in Jerusalem. For the past 20 years or so I've been serving as a consultant, advisor and facilitator for most of the foreign journalists who come over there and want to go to Ramallah and Gaza and talk to Fatah and Hamas. And for the past eight years I've been also writing for the Israeli media and specifically *The Jerusalem Post*, reporting on Palestinian issues.

I'm an Arab Muslim living in Jerusalem. I am also an Israeli citizen, not because I'm a collaborator with Israel, but because my father belongs to the Israeli-Arab community inside Israel. We're talking about nearly 1.4 million people living inside Israel. And I also happen to be a Palestinian because my mother is a Palestinian from the West Bank. So if you're confused you can call me an Israeli-Arab-Muslim-Palestinian. We have a crisis of identity over there.

Now as I said, for the past eight I've been working for *The Jerusalem Post* and one of the questions that people often ask me is, "why are you working for a Jewish paper? Aren't you seen as a traitor because you work for a Jewish paper?" I tell people "absolutely not."

There's never been a decision by the Palestinians to boycott the Israeli media. The only talk about boycott comes from American and British university campuses.

For a period of 15 years I was also writing for a Hebrew paper and among the people that I used to interview were most of the Hamas and Fatah leaders, including Yasser Arafat and Ahmed Yassin. Even most of the wanted Palestinian gunmen who were on Israel's list gave interviews to the Israeli media.

The Arabs living over there are not stupid. Although they have lived under occupation and despite the tensions, they have also learned some good things from Israel.

We Arabs have been exposed to many good things inside Israel. I'm not ashamed to say that we learned from Israel. We learned about democracy. We learned about the freedom of debate. We learned about the freedom of the media.

That's why the Arabs had high hopes on the eve of the Oslo Accords. They were hoping that when they finally have their own Arab government over there, it would be a democracy like the one in Israel; that we would have our own Knesset where someone can criticize the Prime Minister and government. And we would have a free media where someone could write about corruption.

When I used to work in the PLO newspaper, we used to say that we hope one day we will have a free media like the one these Jews have, where a writer can bring down a minister through an investigative report.

But things have been going in the wrong direction ever since the peace process began. Why? Not because of the peace process itself or the principles of the Oslo Accord. The concept of the Oslo Accord and the two-state solution is wonderful, although it's not practical and will never work. The idea of Oslo is good, but the way it was implemented brought disaster to both Jews and Arabs. And the way Oslo was implemented is responsible for the fact that Hamas is now in power.

Why? Because the assumption back then in Israel, in America and in Europe was that if we bring Yasser Arafat into the West Bank and Gaza, give him billions of dollars and guns, he will do the job for us and there would be nothing to worry about. Arafat will even fight Hamas, prevent terrorism and foil suicide bombings.

So they brought Yasser Arafat over there. He established this thing called the Palestinian National Authority and the show began. It was actually a one-man show run by Arafat and his corrupt cronies. The international community poured \$6.5 billion on this Palestinian Authority between 1993 and 2001. Most of this money literally went down the drain or to support the shopping sprees of a lady who was sitting in Paris.

Instead of building a hospital, Arafat built a casino, as if the Palestinian revolution has been aspiring for 40 years to build a casino.

Now by depriving his people of the international aid, Arafat drove many Palestinians into the open arms of Hamas and Islamic Jihad. The people lost faith in him and the peace process. By establishing a corrupt regime, by cracking down on human rights activists, newspaper editors and political opponents, Arafat actually boosted Hamas' popularity among the Palestinians.

Palestinian academics who signed a petition calling for an end to financial corruption in the Palestinian Authority in 1997 were targeted and silenced by Arafat. Some were shot, beaten and arrested. Others had to flee the country. They were targeted by the same Palestinian security forces that were being trained and financed by the United States of America and Europe.

So all these things boosted Hamas' popularity to the point where when Hamas finally challenged Arafat's Fatah Party in a free democratic election in January 2006, Hamas won. Why? Hamas was very clever—it ran under the banner of Change and Reform. Hamas came to the Palestinians with a message that said, "Listen folks, the PLO and Arafat have stolen your money, why don't you try us now?"

I know Christians who voted for Hamas in the January 2006 elections. I know secular Palestinians who voted for Hamas. I even know PLO people who voted for Hamas because the name of the game was, "Let's punish the corrupt PLO guys."

One of the reasons why Hamas became so popular was the incitement. The international community gave Yasser Arafat money to open a TV and radio station and in this media Arafat said jihad, jihad, jihad. Arafat used the media to tell his people how bad and evil the Jews are. So the Palestinians said to themselves, "Well, that means Hamas is right about the Jews. If these Jews are so evil and so bad, why are we making peace with them?" So that's one of the reasons why the Oslo process brought Hamas to power.

Hamas owes its victory to the corruption of Fatah. Now the mistake that the international community made was that they poured money on Fatah unconditionally, without holding them accountable. Fatah was squandering the money while Hamas was building schools and hospitals. One of the reasons why Hamas won the hearts and minds of the Palestinians was that ever since the movement was established, it managed to establish a vast network of social, economic, health and education services. Hamas was establishing orphanages and charities while Arafat was giving his wife \$100,000 a month so that she could do her shopping in Paris.

Now if you ask many Palestinians over there, they'll tell you "look, the international community corrupted the Palestinians and created this elitist group that actually distanced itself from the Palestinians." Hamas came into this vacuum that was created. So the international community is responsible for the fact that Hamas eventually came to power.

The international community, sadly, has not learned from its mistakes and is continuing to support the same Fatah guys who lost the election and they are even encouraging them to go and bring down the democratically elected government of Hamas.

And this is playing into Hamas' hands because it's boosting its popularity even more. When a Palestinian sees the U.S. Administration and the Europeans trying to bring down their Hamas government, their sympathies go to the Hamas government. And on the other hand, when the Palestinians see that Fatah has not drawn the conclusions from its defeat in the January 2006 elections and is continuing to block reforms, the Palestinians don't see any reason why they should support Fatah. I'm convinced that if there were a free election tomorrow morning in the West Bank and Gaza Hamas would win. They would win for two reasons. One, the US-led campaign against Hamas has turned the movement into a victim in the eyes of the majority of the Palestinians. Many Palestinians don't hold Hamas responsible for failure because they say, "Oh these poor Hamas people, they won a free election but no one is giving them a chance."

So that's reason number one why most people would vote for Hamas.

Reason number two is that why should any Palestinian vote again for the same Fatah people he/she voted out three years ago if they haven't changed? It's the same faces. You go to Ramallah and it's the same Abus: Abu Mazen, Abu Ala, etc. It's the same guys who failed their people under Arafat. They are continuing to run the show with the help of the Americans and the Europeans as if nothing happened. So the international community has to wake up and go to these Abus in Ramallah and say, "Hamas is in power because of your corruption and incompetence. Why don't you guys reform yourselves?"

When the United States demanded that the Palestinians go and have a free and democratic election, the Fatah people went to Condoleezza Rice and said, "Listen. We can't have free and democratic elections in Palestine" and she asked them why. So they said, "Well, we are corrupt, we are thieves, we are thugs, we stole the money. And Hamas is running under the banner of change and reform and it is very risky." She said "Don't worry. Go and have a free and democratic election and I assure you that Hamas will not win." And when they asked her "how do you know?" She said because I just warned the Palestinians if they vote for Hamas, we the United States of America will punish them. That warning on the eve of the election, by the way, was one of the main reasons why Hamas won the election.

The only way to undermine Hamas is by offering the Palestinians a better alternative to Hamas and not by giving Fatah guns so that they can bring down Hamas. We tried it and it didn't work.

But what's been happening since Hamas came to power is also very interesting. The same international community that pushed the Palestinians to go have a free democratic election, after Hamas came to power, went to the guys who lost the elections, the PLO people, and said folks, "Here are guns and here is money. Go bring down this democratically elected government of Hamas."

And Hamas is sitting there saying, "Hey, what do you guys want from us? We were voted in, in a free, democratic election. If you don't believe us, ask Jimmy Carter. He supervised the election."

Fatah's refusal to accept their defeat and Hamas' insistence on clinging to power has created a power struggle that's been raging for the past three years and has claimed the lives of over 1,500 Palestinians, some of them killed in the most brutal, ruthless ways. Thousands of people have been injured in the power struggle between Fatah and Hamas. Contrary to the U.S. administration and the United Nations, I don't think that this is a power struggle between good guys and bad guys; this is a power struggle between bad guys and bad guys.

I wish they were fighting over reforms and democracy and a better economy. All they are fighting over is money and power.

So this is the situation in the Palestinian areas today. I said before that I support a two-state solution. If you think of it in the end we did get a two-state solution over there. The Palestinians got two states: one in Gaza and one in the West Bank. And it's not good news, by the way, because it means we don't have a clear address on the Palestinian side today.

Now the funny part is that the Obama Administration is now putting pressure on Binyamin Netanyahu to accept the two-state solution. Let's assume that tomorrow morning Binyamin Netanyahu declares that he's going to give the Palestinians a state. Where are the Palestinians going to set up their state? Fatah can't go to Gaza and Hamas can't go to the West Bank. We're talking about two separate entities. So it's a stalemate.

Now with regards to the Israeli-Arabs. On my way to Geneva I read in one of the newspapers that an Arab Knesset member who came here has said: "I'm a Palestinian living in Israel and suffering from apartheid and racism."

Now some Israeli-Arab leaders, like this Knesset member, they run in the elections on a platform that promises their constituents equality and better services. They come to us the Israeli-Arabs and say, "Vote for us. We'll bring you equality. We will make sure that the government starts investing more in the Arab sector."

And as I said, there are very serious problems facing the Arab sector inside Israel. Ehud Olmert the Former Prime Minister of Israel, recently said that the Israeli-Arabs are suffering from a policy of systematic discrimination, especially when it comes to the allocation of public funds.

But when these Israeli-Arabs Knesset members come to the Knesset, instead of dealing with the real problems of the Israeli-Arab community, what do they do? They go to meet with Hamas and Hizbullah leaders. And they will use any available platform to attack Israel and provoke the Jewish public. Why do they do that?

I think they do it in order to grab headlines in the newspaper. Because if they are dealing with sewage and classrooms and paving roads, no one in Israel is going to write about them. But if an Israeli-Arab Knesset member comes out in favor of suicide bombing, for example, he will get a

lot of coverage in the Israeli media. As far as he's concerned, "I don't care what you write about me as long as you spell my name right."

Now in the course of doing this these radical Knesset members are causing the Israeli-Arabs huge damage. These are not the issues that they should be dealing with. We should not be in favor of Hamas or Hezbollah. We want to see these leaders deal with equality inside Israel. I want to see the leaders of the Israeli-Arab community inside Israel fighting for our rights from the Knesset in Jerusalem and not from Damascus or Beirut or Gaza. And why do they forget that when they were elected they made a statement of oath to the State of Israel. And then they come here to tell us that Israel is a state of apartheid?

Excuse me. What kind of hypocrisy is this? What then are you doing in the Knesset? If you're living in an apartheid system, why were you allowed, as an Arab, to run in the election? What are you talking about?

We do have problems as Arabs with the establishment here. But to come and say that Israel is an apartheid state is a big exaggeration. I'm not here to defend Israel, but I think that Knesset members like this gentleman are doing huge damage to the cause of Israeli Arabs. I want to see the Knesset member sitting in the Knesset, in Jerusalem, and fighting for the rights of Arabs over there.

These Knesset members are responsible for the fact that many Jews today see us the Israeli Arabs as a fifth column, an enemy from within.

I'm very worried about the deterioration of relations between Jews and Arabs inside Israel more than I'm worried about the deterioration of relations between Jews and Palestinians.

It is easy to solve the problem with the Palestinians because, at the end of the day, there is going to be separation between Jews and Palestinians in one form or another. But what do we do with the 1.4 million Arabs living inside Israel? That is something that we should focus on.

I really believe that we the Israeli-Arabs can serve as a bridge between the Jews and our Palestinian brothers. And it is a huge mistake for us to side with one side against the other. We are playing into the hands of those radical Israeli right-wingers who are trying to depict us as a fifth column and a cancer and we are actually giving them the ammunition to attack us.

So we should be very careful about how we present our case as Israeli Arabs.

Our dilemma is that our state, Israel, is at war with our people in the West Bank and Gaza. And by the way, we have no problem being Israeli citizens. I mean many of us are even proud to be Israeli citizens. If you go to Ramallah and Gaza once, and you come back into Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, you will see what I mean. Sometimes I say "thank God we have Israel."

Israel is a wonderful place to live and we are happy to be there. Israel is a free and open country. If I were given the choice, I'd rather live in Israel as a second class citizen than as a first class citizen in Cairo, Gaza, Amman or Ramallah.

TAREK HEGGY

Tarek Heggy studied law at Ain Shams University in Cairo, followed by a degree from the International Management Institute of Geneva University. He taught law in Algeria and Morocco and went on to become Chairman of Shell Companies in Egypt. He has lectured at universities throughout the world.

Ladies and gentlemen, having written many articles and books about the Arab and Muslim cultures, I have no doubt that Islam, or more precisely the prevailing interpretations of Islam, is the principal factor that affects and influences Arab culture and Arab environments.

So I come from the Arab culture standpoint, and I see a big difference between the word Islam, and the understanding of the interpretation of Islam. I believe that any understanding or interpretation of any religion is a cultural subject; it depends on the quality, education and the cultural level of the intermediate between the religion's literature and the receivers, i.e. people. So when somebody asks the very important question: Is there compatibility between Islam and the values of modernity, human rights, women's rights, progress, pluralism, otherness, and coexistence? my answer is: you can say possibly no, or possibly yes. It depends on what you mean by Islam. If you look at it from a certain angle, you will come to no, they are not compatible. But I think that we do this only because we, so far, continue to accept that Islam is represented fully and solely by the prevailing Wahhabi, anti humanity, petrodollar Islam. Islam has many sects, many schools of thinking.

There are tens of interpretations. These interpretations have enormous different impacts on all these values. Today, the world makes the mistake of accepting and dealing with an extremely hard line interpretation of Islam, as if it were the only possible representative of Islam.

While scholars realize that such a harsh interpretation of Islam prevails only because of the unlimited financial resources that stand behind it and continue to mark it and advocate it in societies that have been made most vulnerable by dictatorships and corruption, the world must know that Wahhabi Islam is the only sect that (based on oil wealth) is capable of building hundreds of Islamic centers around the world—centers that advocate the most aggressive, isolated and harsh interpretation of Islam. These centers also recruit people to preach values that are totally contradictory to civilized societies' value systems. Wahhabi Islam that monopolizes the representation of Islam advocates what is in total a clash with human rights, women's rights and the values of coexistence.

I personally think that Islam could be presented in a way that is compatible with all the values of modern/civilized societies. Nonetheless, this depends on who represents Islam and the Muslims.

The challenge today is that the world (supported by the moderate Muslims) must not allow a single sect to claim ownership of absolute reality. It is an imperative step, however it is a rather difficult one. The Wahhabi institution with billions of dollars has been proactively playing on the theater for more than half a century. The agony is that they have been doing it in a patent clear manner for decades. Their education curricula over the past 50 years are the evidence of the crime they have been committing against humanity, Islam, and the Muslims for a long while. The world must have noticed, Europe and the USA must have noticed, and finally the UN must have noticed that a number of those countries have been spreading the seeds of fanaticism, violence, and a culture of hate via their educational programs in a manner that can only produce the most dangerous terrorists.

So we all share the responsibility of letting one school of thinking (a very extreme one) become the role model of Islam. The advocates of this model, most unfortunately, enjoyed the availability of unlimited financial resources, and managed meanwhile to establish a global network which enabled them to nearly negate the presence and role of any moderate interpretation of Islam such as the interpretation which prevailed for centuries in Turkey, Egypt and the Levant region. The marginalization of moderate interpretations of Islam was easy to realize in societies that witnessed an overall collapse of standards, with their autocracies and military juntas.

In my opinion one could say that yes, Islam could be compatible with values of modernity and progress. Yet this depends on who represents Islam, i.e. who (for instance) will be talking about the status of women, the status of minorities—being Jews, Christians or others—and coexistence in a problematic area such as the Middle East.

The core of the current challenge is to change the following picture: the hard-line Islamic group financed by endless resources spreading via cultural centers and schools its harsh interpretation of Islam, building hundreds of mosques everywhere and recruiting hard-line preachers. In parallel, the many moderate Islamic schools of thinking are being ignored and marginalized. This is the picture that ought to be changed if we want Muslims to live in peace with others on the face of earth.

There are Muslims who could surprise you with open views on equality, diversity, coexistence, pluralism, modernity and human rights. The members of such open and moderate schools would enable you to see what happened in the history of the Muslim societies that enabled the clergy to convert Muslims to caravans of followers and deprive them from the use, benefits, and dynamics of the critical mind.

So what is needed is to work for the inception of a new dialogue not with those who dominated and monopolized the representation of Islam, but with the other schools of thinking that accept to live in peace with the rest of humanity.

Last week, I was in Italy lecturing at a number of universities. Let me say a few words on Italy as an example of the catastrophe Europe might be heading to: in Italy there are slightly less than 1,000 mosques. This in itself is not a problem. But when we discover that 90% of these mosques were built by Saudi money and resourced by Imams that represent the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam (that ultimately produced the current leaders of Al Qaeda)—when we realize this, we realize how negligent the West has been. Many of these mosques bred and shall continue to breed extremely fundamentalist men and women who would never accept the values of the Italian society, and shall even endeavor to breach these values.

This Italian example is replicated in every single European country, a phenomenon that urges us to ask: why this enormous amount of negligence?

Why? ... The answer is simply three letters: O I L

If it wasn't the oil syndrome, what would it be that led the world to close all eyes and ears before thousands of tales such as the following. Last year (2008) a female professor at one of the Saudi universities was imprisoned for committing the following crime: sitting at a public café with a colleague who happened to be a professor at her university but not her husband. The lady professor was arrested and handed to her husband after she and the husband signed a certificate

stating that she would not repeat such a disgraceful and anti Islamic behavior, i.e. to have coffee with a colleague at Starbucks.

Inside the educational and religious institutions of a country such as Saudi Arabia, the seeds of destruction of the values of civilization are being cultivated, employed, marketed and globally spread.

My colleague on the panel today, from Turkey, talked to you about the moderate and nearly secular Islam that she witnessed in her own country. I, in Egypt, lived a similar experience with a very moderate interpretation of Islam, till the harsh interpretation came, some 35 years ago, on the back of the oil barrel that penetrated Egypt's religious and educational institutions until they were mostly ruined.

It is our joint responsibility to discover, dialogue with, and promote the moderate Islamic schools of thinking that made countries like Egypt, Syria, and Turkey (for decades and centuries) embrace a tolerant and moderate interpretation of Islam that allowed diversity (in all of its forms) to prevail.