



## Rescuing Islam by Donald K. Emmerson

August was a bloody month. On Aug. 5, a suicide bomber destroyed the front of Jakarta's J.W. Marriott hotel, killing 12 people. Many more died on Aug. 29 in a blast outside the Imam Ali mosque in Najaf, Iraq. Between these explosions, deadly bombings filled the calendar: UN headquarters in Baghdad, a bus in Jerusalem, two blasts in Bombay. And these were but the latest in a chronology of carnage running back in time from Casablanca through Riyadh and Bali to Manhattan's crumbling towers.

Different actors and motives made each of these atrocities unique. Yet all were attributed to a single global menace: jihad. For three years now, acts of violence done in Allah's name have made terrorism and Islam almost synonymous, not just in Westerners' vocabularies but around the world. It is hard to recall a time when the Muslim religion was more identified with violence. Who will rescue Islam from this blight?

The near-reflexive association of Islam and terrorism is not simply the creation of rush-to-judgment pundits and politicians. Not when the terrorists proudly proclaim religious inspiration for their acts. Jerry Falwell and others on the Christian right have maligned Islam. But it is, above all, the jihadists themselves who have distilled their faith to sacred hatred of Americans, Christians, Jews, and the millions of moderate or secular Muslims who resent this perversion of their religion from within. Who will rescue Islam?

Muslims respond differently to Islamist violence. In Jakarta a few days after 11 Indonesians and a Dutchman were killed in the blast at the Marriott, I met two Muslim friends. They were brimming with conspiracy theories. Why, they asked, had 20 Americans reportedly canceled their reservations before the bomb went off? Could these no-shows have known in advance of the attack? Why was the severed head of an alleged perpetrator later found on the hotel's fifth floor? Had the CIA planted it there? Why were arrests made so soon? Could the U.S. have staged the event?

Behind their questions lay an unspoken one: How could Muslims have done such a thing?

It would be convenient if my two friends despised Americans and were products of Islamist schools. But both men hold advanced degrees from top universities in the United States. They exhibit no obvious animosity toward Americans.

That two such people could express such dark misgivings about U.S. intentions shows that Islam is not alone in being associated with violence.

The underside of denial is demonization. For some in the West, the enemy is not jihadists but all Islamists. Never mind that the vast majority of Muslims who promote their religion do so peacefully. Reinforcing this tendency to think the worst are the PowerPoint charts of counterterrorism experts that deny the Muslim world's diversity by picturing the evil genius Osama as the master puppeteer of global jihad.

Al-Qaeda's responsibility is all too real. But context matters. For jihad to succeed, an outside agitator needs inside sympathizers. The latter's susceptibility to recruitment will vary, depending on their own local experiences and circumstances. Recognizing the autonomy and heterogeneity of Muslim societies is a necessary first step toward rescuing Islam from bin Laden.

It is helpful for public figures in the West to defend Islam by stressing that most of its billion-plus adherents are moderates who abjure violence. Such reassurance is far preferable to demonization. But understanding is not served by exaggerations that Islam or Muslims are always peaceful, or that jihadists entirely lack sympathy in the Muslim world. In Muslim communities, extremist and mainstream views intersect in schools, mosques, and organizations, in the doctrines of teachers and preachers. It is in these myriad local settings that Islam's link to violence will or won't be broken.

Sadly, reassurance sometimes lapses into denial. While I was in Indonesia, several prominent Muslims urged - warned - journalists to stop using the words 'Islam' and 'Muslim?' in coverage of the Marriott bombing. I have even heard Muslims object to the phrase 'moderate Muslims' because it implies that immoderate ones also exist. Islam will never be rescued by language inspectors who would substitute deflection for introspection.

Can reform rescue Islam? In principle, yes, but in practice, not necessarily. At least a few individuals and groups in every Muslim society are striving to make the practice of their faith more tolerant of difference and dissent, less restrictive toward women, more compatible with secular democracy, less preoccupied with imposing Islamic law. Liberal Americans are especially likely to celebrate these reformers as pioneers of the one best way to rescue Islam from jihad.

Yet the sheer diversity of Muslim societies suggests that efforts to liberalize Islamic doctrine face varying prospects of success. Before assuming that liberals and jihadists have nothing in common, one ought to remember that both advocate far-reaching changes that threaten the conservative views and habits of many mainstream Muslims. Certainly the liberals deserve American support. But as the goal of such help, preventing the status quo from getting worse may be more realistic than winning 'hearts and minds' for humanism - let alone making the Muslim world look as secular and democratic as, say, Turkey.

Is the U.S. responsible for Islam's predicament? Some U.S. actions have stoked jihad. The U.S. presence in Iraq could become a magnet for holy warriors comparable to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Muslims who are pressed by Washington to oppose the hijacking of Islam may instead decry the hijacking of U.S. foreign policy by hardliners around President Bush.

But jihadists were fighting their enemies long before the United States was born. The drive to create Islamist states is more than an attempt to check U.S. hegemony. Different U.S. policies might shrink Muslim hostility to what Washington does. But intransigent theocrats will not be assuaged by the compromises necessary to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Neither will either the failure or the success of the U.S. in Iraq remove the reasons for Islamist violence in other Muslim societies.

Also shaky is the notion that 'they hate us for our values.' The democracy that Americans espouse remains popular in the Muslim world. American notions of equal treatment for women, it is true, are less welcome. But a woman's life chances also vary among Muslim-majority countries, including those in Asia that preceded the United States in having female heads of state.

Americans are disproportionately responsible for a modern world most Muslims feel they never made. Extremists have used that alienation to warrant jihad. But it is not up to Americans to rescue Islam.

Non-Muslims can avoid unnecessary provocations and false reassurances. They can and should facilitate liberal reform. But it is Muslims, acting in diverse local circumstances, who will or won't break the cycle of jihadist demonization and denial that is ruining the image of their religion.

Worth watching in this regard will be the Tenth Summit of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), scheduled for Oct. 16-18 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

The OIC was founded in 1969 and has 56 member states. More than half of all Muslims live in Asia. Yet except for one gathering in Pakistan back in 1974, the OIC has never convened a summit in an Asian country. Prior to the Bali bombing, in Asian Muslims were often characterized as more tolerant on average than their Middle Eastern counterparts. It will be interesting to see if this stereotype is reinforced or undermined next month.

The summit will occur exactly when Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad is due to retire. Malaysia will chair and coordinate OIC activities for the next three years. Speculation has risen that if he does retire as planned, Mahathir will use the Conference as a global venue for his ideas. In that context he could help rescue Islam from its presently tarnished reputation by acknowledging the need for Muslims to help overcome jihadism. He could, for example, encourage Muslim governments to monitor and reform Islamist curricula that now instill racial or religious hatred. Or he could continue to decry perceived American and Western arrogance and insensitivity toward Muslim and other developing countries. Or both.

Or Mahathir and his presumed successor as prime minister, Abdullah Badawi, could use the OIC summit mainly to burnish their and their ruling party's Islamic credentials in the eyes of local voters. That would undercut support for the opposition Islamic Party of Malaysia in upcoming national elections. Those polls are expected to be held sometime not long after the Muslim heads of state depart, and in any case before the end of 2004.

Whatever happens in Malaysia next month, or in the OIC thereafter, the struggle among Muslims to define and defend their religion will go on. Hardliners will argue that if Islam needs to be rescued at all, it is not from jihadists but from Western crusaders against Islam. Soft-liners will be more open to introspection, including liberal reform.

The outcome will affect us all.

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