The purpose of the Forum on the Future of Islam is to debate and address the most critical questions, share ideas, and offer solutions to salient issues related to the future of Islam. The first meeting under the theme “Muslim Perspectives on Islamic Extremism” took place in Washington, DC, on December 5, 2015.

Forum speakers included:
Rethink Institute is an independent, not-for-profit, nonpartisan research institution devoted to deepen our understanding of contemporary political and cultural challenges facing communities and societies around the world, in realizing peace and justice, broadly defined.

The Institute pursues this mission by facilitating research on public policies and civic initiatives centering on dispute resolution, peace building, dialogue development, and education. Toward these goals, the Institute sponsors rigorous research and analysis, supports visiting scholar programs, and organizes workshops and conferences.

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Introduction
Why a Forum on the Future of Islam?

Fevzi Bilgin
President, Rethink Institute

We founded Rethink Institute four years ago as a policy research organization with a focus on issues in realizing peace and justice in the world, broadly speaking. So far we have published quite a number of papers and held many events that have served this mission. We believe that every conflict has political, economic, and social dimensions and must be addressed accordingly. We also believe in value-oriented research, meaning that while we lay out the facts on the ground accurately and professionally, we also strive to come up with solutions and recommendations that could benefit all and be implemented by governments and communities in a sensible manner.

In the light of these aspirations, we are now launching the Forum on the Future of Islam. We are considering the forum as a research program with a flagship event component. We hope to hold this event annually with different themes.

Since the end of the Cold War, unfortunately, Islam has become one of the top global concerns. Political, social, and sectarian fault lines in Muslim geographies continue to produce conflict and violence, affecting not only domestic but also regional and global power dynamics. In addition, in an age of fast, cursory, unfiltered information and a continuous news cycle, any misdeed committed by any Muslim anywhere, at any time, with any motive, is haphazardly attributed to Islam. It may not be far-fetched to argue that the future of Islam is also the future of Muslims. And given the magnitude of the issues surrounding this people and religion, the future of Islam will also determine the future of humanity at large.

The purpose of the forum is to debate and address the most critical questions, share ideas, and offer solutions to salient issues related to the future of Islam. This first meeting aptly took up the issue of extremism and the violence it produces, which has dominated the news cycle for a while now. The brutality of ISIS, massacres by Boko Haram, and sporadic murders in the US and Europe are among the latest episodes of violence committed in the name of Islam. Although Muslims across the world have condemned these killings, massive public outrage has effectively blurred the line between the religion of Islam and the sociological unit of Muslims in the global public sphere. Consequently, the notion of “true Islam” and the distinction between Islam and acts of Muslims have come into question.

This forum considered: (1) the challenge of extremism and radicalism in Muslim communities around the world; (2) the failure of Islamism to address social, political, and economic issues; (3) identity crises and the social predicament of Muslim minorities in Western societies; (4) radicalization of Muslim youths; (5) the conflict between modern values and institutions and the tenets of Islam as conceived by some Muslims and non-Muslims; (6) conflicts among state, civil, Sufi, and political manifestations of Islam; and (7) coexistence of Muslim and non-Muslim communities.
The forum featured prominent American Muslim scholars and experts from the DC area and other states who have been working, writing, and teaching on these issues. There were others could not join us due to scheduling conflicts.

I would like to thank our distinguished speakers for joining the forum. I would like to thank my colleagues, staff, and volunteers for putting this event together. I also would like to thank the individuals and area businesses that made this event possible by their generous financial support.

Summary of the Event

The forum took place on a cold Washington Saturday (December 5, 2015) in the conference center at the American Psychological Association building where the Rethink Institute offices are located. The forum was marked by insightful and thought-provoking presentations and lively discussions. It featured a keynote address and three panel discussions addressing the problem of religious extremism from Muslim perspectives. Forum videos are available at our website (www.rethinkinstitute.org) and Rethink Institute’s YouTube channel.

The keynote speaker Azizah al-Hibri touched upon several critical issues pertaining to religious extremism today and set the stage for further discussion. She lamented that religious intolerance and violence have reached the level of insanity, something unknown to her in her youth in multi-faith Beirut, where everyone was respectful of each other’s faiths and celebrated holidays together. Those days are gone, Hibri noted, but not forever. They can be brought back with collective effort and commitment to developing a deeper understanding of Islam, which would liberate it from its misrepresentation at the hands of extremists as well as its hateful detractors.
Islam is not new to North America, and it has been part and parcel of intellectual debates since the colonial period. However, Hibri noted, Islam has always been viewed as “oriental” and “other,” and suspicion of Islam is deeply rooted. Current events are not creating new attitudes; rather, they are awakening old preconceptions about Islam. European debates about Islam in the eighteenth century, in which Islam was represented as a false religion and Muslims as vulgar, despotic, and bloodthirsty, were enthusiastically followed by the American intelligentsia of the time, who didn’t have many opportunities to learn about Islam from firsthand sources and meet Muslims. This left a lasting mark on the public perception of Islam from the early days of the new republic.

The Founding Fathers, however, made every effort to educate themselves about Islam. Thomas Jefferson famously had a copy of George Sale’s Koran in his library and remarked on Islam and Muslims in his letters and writings. Some Islamic constitutional precedents, as well as practices of the Ottoman Empire, played a part in constitutional debates in the colonies. But even then, Hibri argued, the Founders’ knowledge of Islam was mostly based on inaccurate sources and incomplete information about Islam and Muslims. Thus, Islam has always been an ‘other’ that was greatly misunderstood and misrepresented. Islam has never had a true voice in America. It is time for the faithful of this country to confront those preconceptions and take a compassionate stand with each other.

The first panel discussion was moderated by Leila Piran and took up the question “Is Islamism(s) prone to produce extremism?” The question of Islamism is salient today, because many observers place the blame for current Islamic extremism on the political and totalitarian aspirations of Islamism. In fact, some scholars propose the term “Islamist extremism” to denote the association between Islamism and violence committed in the name of Islam.

The first speaker, Shireen Hunter, presented a comprehensive view of Islamism. Hunter argued that Islamism is a modern ideology and actually has very little to do with religion. It is essentially about the power aspirations of the Islamic elite. Since Islamism is an ideology, it also creates ideological fervor among its recruits. Ideologies are always totalitarian and exclusivist. They do not allow tolerance. When religion is ideologized, it becomes very intolerant. The exclusivist nature of ideologies manifests in Islamists’ claims to truth. Islam is increasingly shaped by Saudi ideology (Wahhabism) and money.

Ozgur Koca expounded on the ideological features of Islamism. Islam is a comprehensive category, a religion. A religion can produce different ideologies. Contrary to some Sufi, traditional and Salafi interpretations of Islam, Islamism, Koca argued, accentuates political activity. Also, Islamism is demanding in the sense that its imaginary relationship with real conditions of existence is more prone to produce radicalism. The most basic assumption of Islamism is that the problems of Muslim societies are political and mandate public implementation of sharia – which developed in the premodern period – through the agency of the modern nation-state. This leads to sacralization of the state – a leviathan that overshadows the spiritual and moral basis of religion.

Birol Baskan, in his presentation, pointed out nuances in Islamism. Islamism, Baskan argued, is essentially an interpretation of religion. If some forces led you toward violence, you would understand Islam that way. Did Seyyed Qotb essentially advocate a violent ideology? Not really, but his followers interpreted his ideas that way. Islamism was an intellectual reaction to modernism and colonialism, but it had become totalitarian by the time of Hasan al Banna. For some Islamists, the Islamic state is not an end, but a means to live Islam fully. Some subscribe to a bottom-up approach that involves strategic rejection
of violence, while others espouse top-down approach that is essentially radical and revolutionary. Either way, Islamism offers no solutions to the problems of the Muslims in the world. Islam must rather return to the private sphere.

The last speaker on the panel, Nadia Oweidat, took a contrarian approach to explaining the current tide of extremism and violence plaguing Muslim countries. Oweidat contends that it is not always Islamism or the political situation that explains extremism in the Muslim world. The history and culture of Islam are replete with examples of extremism. Muslim countries have become frustrating places to live. Intellectuals are harassed and suppressed in the name of religion. Narratives of victimhood, invasion and crusades have conquered the Arab public sphere. The Islamic world needs space for freedom. Fortunately, a generation that thinks critically and is technology-savvy is emerging; they may bring about the change – an Islamic Spring – that is much needed in Muslim countries.

The second panel discussion focused on the historical and jurisprudential roots of extremism and ways to overcome it. Mustafa Gurbuz moderated the panel. The first speaker, Zeki Saritoprak, emphasized the importance of education for the future of Muslims, especially those in the United States. Saritoprak lamented that Islamic education is still understood as traditional madrasah education, not only in the Islamic world, but also in the United States. If students are exposed to religious sciences without being exposed to modern sciences, Saritoprak contends, the result will be literalism and fanaticism.

Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad added that madrasah education is based on memorization rather than critical thinking. One way to battle extremism is to think critically about the jurisprudential sources that have been handed down to us. Ahmad emphasized that he brought up this point because defenders of Islam avoid challenging certain jurisprudential positions that are frequently cited by violent extremists as a justification for their atrocities. One particular such claim is the one put forward by ISIS that raping prisoners of war is justified in Islam. It should be noted that, historically, it was Islam that introduced humane treatment of such prisoners in the first place.

Mehdi Aminrazavi presented a larger historical account of the shortcomings of the Islamic tradition, which eventually produced Islamic radicalism. Aminrazavi argued that religious orthodoxy formed very early in the history of Islam, which led to suppression of rationalism and critical thinking. While Mu'tazilites defended the superiority of reason and science, Ash'arites thought too much rationality was detrimental to Islamic civilization. The Ash'arites prevailed. Hermeneutics, exegesis, and interpretation were later discouraged. As a result, the Islamic mind was eclipsed. External intrusions such as colonialism and imperialism made things worse. All these elements contributed to the rise of radicalism and extremism. Resolving this problem would, thus, require a two-pronged approach: elimination of both internal and external reasons for extremism.

The final speaker on the second panel, Ahmet Kuru, maintained that current extremism and violence in the Muslim world is a result of the authoritarianism that marks most Muslim-majority countries. Then the question is why these countries are authoritarian. Kuru argued that the reason for authoritarianism is neither colonization nor the religion of Islam. Rather, it is how the political system is structured. During the Golden Age of Islam, trade was important, merchants moved freely, and so did ideas. After the Mongol invasions, security concerns took over. Politics and religion became centralized. This
whole legacy, Kuru contends, has been inherited today. Politics is centralized and religion is at service of government. You cannot have a good product from a bad structure.

The third and final panel of the forum discussed the challenges posed by extremism to coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims. Margaret Johnson moderated the session. The first speaker on the panel, Asma Afsaruddin, argued that what is at stake are ideas. Bad ideas generate extremism and good ideas would eradicate extremism. So how to replace bad ideas with good ones? We should, Afsaruddin maintained, read the scripture with fresh eyes. An inclusive reading of the Qur’an shows that the scripture actually mandates embracing existing diversity among peoples and promotes a pluralist worldview; this is imperative for people of faith to combat intolerance in their midst.

Abdul Karim Bangura mentioned that, in fact, many Muslims are raising their voices against extremism and are engaged in peace education. But this is never mentioned in the Western media. Education should involve education not only of the mind but also the heart. Bangura also noted that both Muslim extremists and anti-Muslim individuals suffer from similar shortcomings as they misrepresent Islam. Anti-Muslim rhetoric not only fuels hate but also serves as a potent recruiting tool for extremists.

Arsalan Iftikhar pointed out a recent poll conducted in Iowa among registered Republicans. Thirty-three percent said that Islam should be illegal, and 24 percent said Muslims should carry a special identity card. As a result of extremist groups like ISIS, Muslims are collectively losing in the global marketplace of ideas. The grey zone of coexistence diminishes every day. The bigger picture says different things. Of the 350 mass shootings that happened in the US in 2015, Muslims committed only 1 percent. Moreover, Muslim extremists are usually shunned in their own communities. Most Muslims in the US do not even attend mosques. In sum, neither Islam nor Muslims are monolithic.

Finally, Asma Uddin presented the cases of blasphemy laws in Pakistan and Indonesia and how these laws produce extremism. Uddin argued that many Muslim-majority countries do not provide adequate protection for religious or political dissent. Blasphemy laws are often abused to suppress dissent and make Muslim and non-Muslim coexistence impossible. Lately, Muslim countries have jumped on the bandwagon of initiatives to counter violent extremism. Such initiatives produce unintended consequences, since the relevant legislation often allows state authorities to bypass judicial oversight and disregard individual rights and freedoms.
Keynote Address
Islam and the Current Global Upheaval

Azizah al-Hibri
Founder of KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights and professor emerita at the T.C. Williams School of Law at the University of Richmond

As children, Rose and I competed in writing poetry and various school activities. We played together, laughed and cried together, and ultimately grew up to go to university (the American University of Beirut) together. We experienced each other’s family celebrations and crises, for we were as close as sisters, and that was over half a century ago. A few weeks ago, Rose and I met again over a cup of coffee at Le Pain Quotidien in this city. A few words were exchanged, and then quiet sadness and anger started to grip us. Our beautiful world in Beirut has been demolished. The Age of Innocence has been replaced with unimaginable ugliness and our lives have spun out of control. For Rose and I grew up in Lebanon.

In those beautiful days, we shared the same values and honored each other’s traditions. Rose was Greek Orthodox, but I also had other friends (as she did). Lilly was a Maronite, Najla was a Shi’i, Jermain was Jewish, and I am a Sunni. We never defined each other by our faiths (and rarely asked about it), but we celebrated each other’s holidays. I always had a part in the Christmas play at school, and sometimes preached at the Assembly gatherings.

Even when we studied about the protracted Crusader Wars, it never occurred to me to ask Rose whether Christianity was prone to violence, nor did I raise such questions with Jermaine, despite the hot conflict that was developing in the region at that time. And what did Rose ask me when we met almost half a century later, here in DC? She did not ask me whether Islam was prone to violence. Rather, with sad eyes she asked me how could we bring sanity back to this world; how could we share with people our happy childhood experiences of celebrating our diversity, rather than damning it. Rose and I decided that we should start a campaign to bring back the beauty of the Age of Innocence.

So what is wrong with being dreamers? The world was not so ugly when we were young, and it is time, past time, to repair it. That we can only do together. So let us talk a little bit about religion and violence.

The reason that we in Beirut in the Age of Innocence did not ask whether any one religion was violent was because we were all people of deep faith. We were born on the very holy land where all these faiths were revealed. This is why when I read an article questioning whether Jesus really existed, (and I read such an article) I can only laugh. We know his street address. Moses and Abraham are as much part of our lives and collective memory as Ashtar, Europa and Elisor. The Prophet Muhammad passed through this land in a miraculous journey. His Caliphs wore simple clothes and moved freely among their people. The story of Khalifah Omar coming into Damascus is quite famous. And he was welcomed by the Christians there). They inspired respect and affection, not fear and
destruction. These are the Caliphs whose title is now being dragged into the mud by a gang of thugs and misguided youth kept in darkness about their religion by oppressive totalitarian regimes and other dark forces.

I was born in the land that really knows what all these religions are about, and each one of them has its own flavor and attraction. They are all ours, and none of them scare us. Only the extremists do, whatever flavor they come in.

As heavenly messages, these religions can only bring about the Good to humanity. My religion, Islam, for example, demands education for all Muslims, male and female. It demands that people elect their own leaders freely, and demands that the judicial system be just to all. For, as the Qur’an tells us, God gave dignity to all the children of Adam, not to certain individuals or groups. Most importantly, the reason that my religion and Christianity and Judaism prohibit usury is not only because of economic considerations. More importantly, it is because injustice (economic or otherwise) sooner or later gives rise to conflict. Conflict is despised in Islam. Any contract (even a marriage contract, an oath or a business contract) that is likely to give rise to conflict is deemed invalid because Justice and Harmony are our core values that flow from the unity of a Beneficent God.¹

These murderous gangs, mysteriously financed, armed to the hilt with the latest technologies, dressed in the freshest outfits, and equipped with caravans of Toyotas, present themselves as the protectors of Islam, as they slaughter thousands of innocent Muslim civilians. The Prophet says clearly that only God can punish with fire, so that not even an anthill can be burnt in Islam. Yet these gangs burn a young Muslim pilot and are proud to videotape it to the world. Where are their Muslim values? The world cringes in disbelief, but not much happens. Financing continues, supplies arrive on time, and so do the weapons. What mysterious forces are supporting them that cannot be stopped,

¹ For more on this, see my book, The Islamic Worldview Volume I: Islamic Jurisprudence: An American Perspective (Chicago: American Bar Association, 2014)
sanctioned or even sued for war crimes? Or have we started believing in magic? Yet, the easy refrain is to blame it all on Islam and move on. Not this fast, this time the price is just too high for everyone.

To understand the present, it always helps to understand the past. So, let us examine the history of the American view of Islam. Islam is often viewed as an ‘Eastern’ or ‘Oriental’ religion, which is in its very essence incompatible with democracy and disrespectful of human rights. Its recent visibility in the United States and Europe does not appear to ameliorate this view. American Muslim immigrants, for example, are viewed even today as somehow alien to our system of democracy and human rights, and hence perhaps suspect. The recent occurrence of ISIS-like activities in our land has only given fodder to an already bad situation.

The suspicion of Islam and Muslims is deeply rooted and had historical manifestations in this country as early as the eighteenth century. In other words, current events are not creating a new attitude. They are awakening an old Orientalist predisposition. During that period, several American novels featured either fictional Muslim spies in America or oppressed Muslim women in the seraglio. These are the precursors of some Hollywood films and TV programs today.

Many eighteenth century authors, from Voltaire to Prideaux and Volney, wrote important works about Islam that were eagerly read in the United States. Unfortunately, some authors were not quite concerned about historical accuracy. Various books about Islam, which appeared in the eighteenth century, created an atmosphere of disdain, hostility and distrust of Muslims. Amongst them was a book entitled The Nature of the Imposture. The message of the book was that false religion and military power could combine to subdue people. Another book, entitled Cato’s Letters, an English work, which became highly influential in this country, pronounced the Prophet Muhammad a tyrant and argued that tyrants like him prevented the free expression of ideas.

In support of their Orientalist views, authors cited the example of the Turkish Empire and other Muslim states, which they claimed frowned on printing and other forms of mass communication. Other authors supported these views directly or indirectly. Even Volney, who was a great admirer of old civilizations, spoke of the state of apathy and indolence that he claims had permeated many Muslim countries.

Volney and many other writers were concerned about the reason for the decline of Islamic civilization. They wanted later civilizations, especially the American one, to avoid a similar fate. Their conclusions varied. Some blamed what they perceived to be the Islamic attitude of fatalism. Others blamed what they believed to be the Islamic lack of encouragement of free thinking. There was, however, general agreement that tyranny fostered by religion, and the Muslim people’s acceptance of it, were at the heart of the problem. Subsequent discussion centered on how the American system of governance could avoid such a fate.

Nevertheless, Islamic constitutional precedents played a part in the constitutional debates in the United States. For example, Alexander Hamilton argued for giving the federal government the right to impose taxes by referring to the example of the Ottoman Empire. He noted that the sovereign of that empire had no right to impose a new tax. As a consequence, he permitted the governors of the provinces to impose these taxes, and then squeezed out of them the sums he needed for his and the state’s expenses. Hamilton concluded “[w]ho can doubt that the happiness of the people in both countries would be promoted by competent authorities in the proper hands . . . ?”
In the debates of 1787, anti-federalists, using what they judged to be the example of the despotic Turkish government, argued against a strong central government, and demanded guarantees of individual liberties and religious freedom. In particular, Webster, Henry and Dollard spoke of what they described as the evils of Turkish despotism. Alexander Hamilton, on the other hand, saw deeper into the Turkish example, recognizing a complex power structure. He argued that, from one perspective, the Turkish sultan was in fact weak and had limited powers. Hamilton then concluded that a strong central government would protect people from oppressive local governments.

The West, looking from the outside, viewed Muslim regimes as embodiments of Islamic principles. Nothing could have been further from the truth. This Western outlook made it more difficult for most authors to understand or present Islam as it was truly revealed in the Qur’an. This problem has persisted in various degrees in this country for the last couple of centuries. Today, it is at a crisis level.

While Islam and Muslim countries were understood by the American population from the point of view of the “Other,” some Founding Fathers made serious efforts to educate themselves about Islam and its civilization. Despite these efforts, the Founding Fathers’ attempts to avoid what they saw as the underlying reasons for the failure of democracy in Muslim countries were ultimately misdirected. They were based on inaccurate or incomplete information and unreliable analysis.

Many Founding Fathers were not as uninformed about Islam as the rest of us may be even today. Indeed, some made a special effort to read about Islam and related ancient civilizations. For example, Thomas Jefferson’s library contained at least one copy of the Qur’an and was rich with books about ancient civilizations, including Islamic ones. Jefferson appeared to consider his knowledge of these matters important for the development of the American model of political governance. In that approach, he was not alone.

Madison, for example, read about ancient confederacies before formulating his own proposal for a federal system in the United States. The resulting system, however, was decidedly American. It is therefore not surprising that T. J. Barlow reported to Jefferson from Paris that the “federality” of our system of government “is not at all understood in Europe even in theory. Their best writers don’t (sic) know what we mean by it.” (I, on the other hand, find the federal system easier to understand because I am familiar with the Charter of Madinah, executed by the Prophet over a thousand years ago. It bound him and the various tribes by an early form of federalism and a compact that protected religious freedom and freedom of conscience.)

It is sometimes easy to forget how exciting was the period in which our Founding Fathers lived. It was a period in which they felt that they could design a system of governance from which the rest of the world would greatly benefit. They took that responsibility seriously. So, while the general public was referring to the Prophet Muhammad as an “infidel” and an “impostor,” Jefferson was reading the controversial books of Volney on ancient Middle Eastern civilizations, as well as corresponding with him. He even quietly translated parts of Volney’s controversial book entitled The Ruins, which discusses Islamic civilizations, among others. Jefferson asked Volney to keep this fact confidential, a testimony to the political pressures of the time.

Not all that the Founding Fathers read about Islam was negative. Despite popular opinion, some concluded that they needed to have a better understanding of Islam in order to reach a correct analysis. For this reason, Jefferson and others read many books.
that the public found highly controversial. Furthermore, as I already mentioned, Jefferson owned at least one copy of the Qur’an, which incidentally was translated by Sale. The first volume of Sale’s Koran consisted of the author’s exposition and own assessment of the Prophet Mohammad and the religion he professed. In a gesture towards public opinion, Sale refers to the Prophet as an “infidel” and an ‘imposter.” The thrust of his discussion, however, is to provide a fair assessment of an individual and a religion, which was grossly misunderstood in this country. In an introductory statement to the reader, Sale stated:

I shall not here inquire into the reasons why the law of Mohammed has met with so unexampled a reception in the world, (for they are greatly deceived who imagine it to have been propagated by the sword alone) or by what means it came to be embraced by nations which never felt the force of Mohammedan arms, and even by those which stripped the Arabians of their conquests, and put an end to the sovereignty and very being of their Khalifs.

A few pages later Sale added in language that appeased his audience: “for how criminal soever Mohammed may have been in imposing a false religion on mankind, the praises due to his real virtues ought not to be denied him.” Later Sale concluded that the Prophet’s “original design of bringing pagan Arabs to the knowledge of the true God was certainly noble and highly to be commended.”

Sale embarked on a long admiring description of the Prophet’s personality and moral character, followed by long detailed chapters on Islamic history, theology and law. In the course of discussion, he disposed of many negative myths about Islam. He also compared Islamic law and Islam’s historical track record with that of Christianity and Judaism, pointing out that Islam has done no worse than the other two religions.

One point made in this manuscript is particularly salient in light of Jefferson’s writings. Sale stated that the Prophet declared that his “business was only to preach and admonish, that he had no authority to compel any person to embrace his religion.” This point is reiterated by the Qur’an itself, which is translated in the second volume of Sale’s Koran. Jefferson expressed a similar point of view in his writings about freedom of belief.

In fact, in one of his writings Jefferson argued that society should be tolerant of the religious practices of others so long as they do not harm the good of the state. He gives the example of killing calves or lambs. This appears to be a reference to the Islamic annual custom celebrating the event where the son of Abraham was spared by God and a lamb was sacrificed in his stead. If so, then Jefferson must have been thinking of slave practices, since most Muslims at that time were slaves who were brought forcefully from Africa. This raises a further question of the extent of contacts and exchange of ideas between Jefferson and other Founding Fathers on the one hand, and their slaves on the other, and how many of these slaves were Muslim.2

I mention all this to bare the historical roots which, combined with the current madness of violent acts here and around the globe, have given rise to a surreal climate where questions such as “Is Islam prone to violence?” can be presented as a serious academic

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2 Further discussion regarding attitudes towards Muslims in 18th century America can be found in my article “Islamic and American Constitutional Law: Borrowing Possibilities or a History of Borrowing?” University of Pennsylvania Journal of Constitutional Law 492 (1999), also at www.karamah.org/articles.
subject of discussion. Of course no one would entertain the same question about, say, Christianity. Why? Because we know Christianity. The Pilgrims were Christians. The Founding Fathers were either Christians or Deists of Christian roots. So, Christianity is not a stranger to this land. So, if acts of violence are committed by Christians, we know that these acts are not “Christian,” and that the perpetrators are just violent extremists.

But Islam is a stranger in this land, and despite the many centuries Muslims have been here, Islam has remained the Other. So long as it remains the Other, we in the United States will continue to react with irrational fear and condemnation of Islam and Muslims whenever an act of violence is committed by an extremist who happens to be a Muslim. For example, it appears that George Pataki of New York has declared war on radical Islam. He said in a tweet yesterday, “I am declaring we kill them. Go ahead, arrest me.” The tweet is sort of unclear. Does he want to kill American Muslims or ISIS, or both? Or has he conflated one with the other? Is the Constitution put on the shelf for now? Will Muslims be interned to “protect them” from the wrath of the rest of the population? Will we see a domestic Guantanamo that also knows no due process nor recognizes established rights?

“Well, Scoundrel time” that haunted this country during the slavery period, World War II, McCarthyism, and September 11, has returned yet once more to our shores. It is up to us to deal with it, and on our actions depends the very future of this country. Will we continue to blossom as the modern counterpart of the beloved Andalusia under whose skies thrived a diverse group of interfaith leaders, thinkers, scientists, authors and artists? Or will we shrink in fear into ourselves and abandon our lofty principles? Living a principled life requires courage. We need to fight for what we believe in and protect it from harm. This means that we need to hold each other’s hands and form a protective shield around this country based on faith in each other and on compassion (not suspicion). This requires a lot more than mere coexistence. Can we do it? You bet. Just ask me and Rose.

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3 I am borrowing the title of a book by Lillian Hellman about her experience during the McCarthy years.
Panel I
Is Islamism(s) Prone to Produce Extremism?

Leila Piran (Moderator)
Policy Fellow at the School of Policy, Government and International Affairs at George Mason University

Shireen Hunter
Research Professor at the Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University

Ozgur Koca
Assistant Professor of Muslim Studies at Bayan Claremont Graduate School

Birol Baskan
Assistant Professor at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar

Nadia Oweidat
Non-residential Senior Fellow at the New America Foundation
PIRAN: Hi everyone, I’m Leila Piran and I’m a policy fellow at George Mason University. It’s my pleasure and privilege to be here with you today, and we have planned a fantastic and hopefully a really dynamic and vibrant discussion here. So without further ado, let’s go ahead and start with the first panelist, Dr. Shireen Hunter from Georgetown University.

HUNTER: Thank you very much. Let me also offer my personal congratulations to the Rethink Institute for organizing this very timely, I think almost one could say, urgent panel and discussion. And secondly, my thanks for including me with the number of distinguished scholars on Islam—including my friend Dr. Afsaruddin.

I have to also say I am not a religious studies expert. I have come to religion actually through the political science and international relations discipline, and so, therefore don’t ask me many theological questions or whatever interpretations of various verses of Qur’an.

I have to say that Islam as religion has very little to do with what we are seeing happening, and certainly with the phenomenon of Islamism. Islamism—like beauty is in the eye of the beholder in many ways, therefore—you will have, as many perhaps, definitions of Islamism, as you have experts on Islam, or the sociology of Islam, or the politics of Islam. So the only thing that I am not claiming in any way, to offer the definitive, or you know, definition of Islamism. It is simply that what my own reading, but also my own real life experiences, and so on, has brought me to the conclusions that I am going to share with you now.

To begin with you have to say that Islamism is an ideology. I think that is an ideology that is claiming to be based on religion, but in many, many ways has very little to do with the religion. And I think that the approach of Islamists, I am not talking about the recruits. Recruits may be believers, and may really believe that what they are doing is for religion and in the name of religion, otherwise why would anybody, a 20-year-old, go and blow himself or herself up?

But the people that are the masterminds of this thing, they are basically using this instrumentally. I have never seen any of the masterminds of these Islamist groups go and volunteer to do a suicide bombing themselves. I mean, you know, uh Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, or Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. None of them blew themselves up.

So I think, this is what we have to make a distinction. This is a, it’s an ideology. And, therefore as an ideology, it also creates a certain fervor in the recruit, in the believer. And we have seen this in the case of some secular ideologies. I don’t think that we should blame this all on religion. Although obviously the power of religion is more, but we have, in the past, we had leftists that did certain things, you know, fascists that did things, and others that had very little to do with religion.

So to begin with, Islamism has a very tendentious relationship with Islam. They use Islamic symbolism, they use Islamic language and so on. The other thing to remember is that Islamism is a modern phenomenon; it is a direct outcome of the encounter of the Islamic world with what we call modernity. This—I have done some work on, and I think this—is absolutely the case. And we have had similar events and similar phenomena in the other religious context as well.

The destruction of modernity has created the situation. And particularly important, it has, was, and still is this battle that is still going on, was the divisions that it created both culturally within Muslim societies, the duality, the cultural duality in Islamic societies
began in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century, and of course became accentuated in the 40s, 50s, and 60s. And this created a major, major break in the societal, the fabric of society, and the unity of society.

But the second thing was that the modernity changed the power relationship. So, a lot of the stuff that we are talking, people justifying in terms of religion is really to vindicate the mood of Islamist counter-elite. They want their share; they feel that the seculars had it for a long time, and it is now our share, we want a piece of the cake, so a lot of this had to do with that.

And the other thing in the context of modernity that we have to understand—but unfortunately not enough attention has been paid, although the latest versions of Islamism are somewhat different—is the impact and the importance of the left on the evolution of this, whether it was Sayyid Muhammad Qutb, which obviously is the grandfather of the ideologization of Islam, and later you know, in the Shia context, Ali Shariati. And you don’t have to believe me; you have to read his own writing. He said our greatest success was that we turned religion from culture into ideology.

So these are just what we need to discuss, but I only have ten minutes, which five of it is already gone. I would like to say a couple of attributes of ideologies, generally—and here liberalism is different, because by essence, liberalism cannot be ideological, because it allows the scope for others to come. But ideologies, like for example communism, fascism, and so on, have several characteristics. One of them is that they are totalitarian. They are totalitarian and exclusivist. They cannot allow room for something else, for the other. The concepts that before they were talking about, the tolerance, and so on, and so forth: ideologies cannot allow that. And of course, when religion becomes ideologized, then it becomes even more intolerant than anything else. Because while religion, it is good, can be a force for terrorists and so on, but if it is not, then I don’t think that you can find anything more intolerant, whether it was the Pilgrims in Massachusetts, or, or you know some of the others, or various other groups.

The other attribute of ideologies is that they are generally utopian. And in my humble opinion, I always said that the world has suffered more from idealists than pragmatists. The great crimes of the history have been committed by idealists. Because if they want to create the ideal world, what it means is that they have to destroy whatever it is. For example, whether this utopia is a socialist utopia of Lenin; Lenin, for example, said that kill hundred Gulags, just as a lesson to others. So I think that if you look at the even operations of Daesh, or some of the others and so on, you really do see, almost like, you know, streaks of Leninism, or Maoism. Mao killing one million opium addicts, you know, I
don’t think that any other context you could do that, unless you want to create utopia—or the French Revolutionists. If you want to create utopia, you have to let go of that.

And the other element of that is exclusivism. We are the only holder of the truth, there is no truth, but whatever that we are saying, no matter. So there is a problem here, referring to the comments made earlier, that sometimes it is very difficult to argue with these people. Because they will say you are not the true believer, you are not this, and in all this so called *takfiris*, and so on—that’s what it is. There is no way of reasoning with somebody that just so ideological—is simply that you couldn’t discuss with the fascists, or the communists, or whatever—because to discuss you need to have, at least, grant the other side some form of legitimacy, and so on.

The other thing of ideologies is that they generally develop for themselves a ‘bête noir’ or favorite enemy. For instance, for the communists it was the capitalists that they were going after; for French revolutionaries it was the French aristocracy, and so on. Currently, unfortunately—you know me and you know where I’m from, so I’m not indulging in any secret, but the way that, for example—whether it was from Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the others, and so on, that they have made, for example, the Shias their enemy. I mean, the things that they are saying. You know, this has nothing to do with Islam—well with certain streak of Sunnism it is, and I’m sorry to say that Wahhabism is perhaps the most intolerant of them, and the spread of Wahhabism, opposed to, for example, traditional Hanafi Islam, but also even Shafi and Maliki. The Hanbalis: you just read any book on that, you know, from the even the time of the caliphs, they were the most intolerant, the most intrusive in terms of their interpretation of many Islamic concepts, and so on.

So, I think that they have a ‘bête noir’ and then they justify everything on the basis of that. You look at, for example, in Pakistan, now for at least for twenty-five some years that ‘killing Shias has become a weekend sport. And so you decide who is the Muslim and who is not a Muslim. I think this is a very significant thing. We did not have these things. There were sectarian tensions, but at least since after the Ottoman/Persian relationship, Ottoman/Safavid relationship stabilized, for more than four, five hundred years, they had no wars. And the sectarianism as such never really played any role—as far as, in fact in my own memory, didn’t play any role—but it has become. But this is because, in my opinion, of the ideologization of this.

The other thing is that of the ideology, is that ideology is very directly related to power. Any power structure needs a legitimizing force. And this legitimizing force either can be the consent of the people—which is what we have in societies that are what we call democratic, variations of democratic system—or it has to be based on some sort of ideology. And religion in some societies has come to play the role of ideology. As such, therefore, it has become far more intrusive than it has ever was. For example, I grew up in Iran—but mostly, well actually, most of my life has been abroad unfortunately, not by choice. But the point is that never ever, either the Shia Ulama or Islam was not so intrusive. They never went into people’s homes, they never said there was any banning, and so on. So all I’m trying to say is that more than fourteen hundred years, or at least seven to eight hundred years of Shiism in Iran was not true and only the Ayatollah Khomeini and Khamenei know what Shiism is that now they go to everything! But this is because they became ideologized, and their ideology is not driven either from the imams or from the early ulama; it’s Ali Shariati who gave them the blueprint with his strong leftist element.
So, we have to talk about the various elephants in the room, and to talk only to say that Islam is religion of peace, and Islam is for freedom of this, and so on, it’s just not going to get us anywhere. Every religion in many ways is neutral. You can use it for peace; you can use it for war. You can find elements in every religion that will push you to aggression or it will push you towards peace. So let’s not focus on Islam, but we have to focus on the elements that are using this as instruments of power, and in place, and so on, and deal with that.

So, therefore, my solution is obviously, it has to be multi-faceted. I’m focusing only on Islamism. To realize that to find solutions to the problems of Islamism, we really have to look at the social, political, and economic conditions of Muslim countries and of the way that these countries interact with the international system, and also the impact that actions of other countries have in generating this phenomenon. So, thank you very much, and I apologize to other members if I have taken a few seconds of their time.

PIRAN: Thank you for your wonderful and very detailed presentation on the topic of Islamism. You mentioned a very valid point about Islamism being an ideology. What are your policy recommendations for the US government and any Western powers that are currently grappling to combat ISIS terrorism abroad?

HUNTER: Well, to begin with, I think that they have to take a very honest look at their own policies that have contributed to this development, I'm sorry to say. I will have to say here, for example, that in the Islamic world, the concept of jihad was almost dormant for centuries. And that the concept of jihad became popularized during the Soviet-Afghan war. I mean that when in fact jihad and mujahed became almost like a celebrity, it was romanticized—and that is one thing.

The other thing is that even, unfortunately, not just the United States’ regional allies, but at times, the US itself has indulged in tolerating, and even in some cases, using these groups. I was one of the first people to say that Taliban are a dangerous thing. And so, I think that we have to be a little bit questionable, for example, the origins of Daesh, and so on, I'm not going to get into that. But, I think that, at times, great powers have used these groups for short-term tactical reasons, and I think that this has contributed. And as long as we are not honest about this, I don’t think that we are going to go anywhere.

You don’t have to believe me; you have to read, for example, Benazir Bhutto’s memoir. She says that French, English, and the Americans gave weapons to the Taliban. I mean, it’s not something that I am making it up. So, I think that to lay all these things only on Islam, and the aggressive nature of Islam, is just not right, because this is not a religious phenomenon. As long as we don’t grasp that Islamism and Islam are two completely different things. Vatican was opposed to liberation theology until recently, because it said that it was Marxism. So, I think that we need a greater tolerance, and frankly, analysis by people who are educated in these matters. Unfortunately, commentary on television and everything just tends to confuse rather than inform.

PIRAN: Okay, on that note, let’s move the discussion to Professor Özgür Koca, who is waiting patiently. Go ahead, please.

KOCA: Thank you. I would like to thank Rethink Institute for organizing this very timely panel, and also I will let you know that I’m coming from California, Los Angeles, Claremont School of Theology, which is located very near to San Bernardino, where a recent shooting took place. So, when I was writing this, I’m afraid I wrote this in a state of emotional intensity, so if it reflected itself in this article or in this paper, please forgive
me. I usually want to put a distance between me and the object that I am studying, but this time, you know, I’m a human being, and that’s only possible to a certain extent.

So, what is Islamism? Let’s start with that, you know the question posed for us, for this panel, is whether Islamism is more prone to extremism or prone to violence? It’s a difficult question; it’s a difficult answer with a simple yes or no, but we have to answer some preliminary questions to answer that question. First of all, what is Islamism? I want to thank Dr. Hunter for providing the ground for this discussion, actually she answered some of the questions that I wanted to answer.

But very briefly, what is Islamism? So, Islamism is difficult to define because it refers to a complex system of ideas and representations that presents points of convergences and divergences.

The only way to come up with an acceptable definition of Islamism is to map out what is distinctive about the generality of Islamic discourse produced by those who define themselves Islamist or widely perceived as Islamist. Thus, we should concentrate on broad tendencies, and family resemblances, that intervened to form, as Wittgenstein, the famous philosopher puts, “complicated network of similarities, overlapping and crisscrossing.” Sometimes, overall similarities, sometimes similarities in detail. Now, we don’t have time to conduct with such a detailed analysis in ten minutes. But let me just tell you, and after this research, what I came up with, what I take Islamism to be.

Islamism, in my view, refers to contemporary movements that attempt to return to the scriptural foundations of Islam, the Quran and Sunnah, excavating and reinterpreting them for application to present-day social and political world. Islamists aim to restore the primacy of the norms derived from the foundational resources, in collective and political life, to liberate Muslim individuals and societies from the domination of Western norms, and political, economic, and ethical life.

What differentiates Islamism from other contemporary tendencies within the Islamic tradition, such as Salafism, or modernism, or traditionalism, or Sufism, seems to be the accentuation of political activism, which is perceived as almost divinely ordained and mandated. Mainly that, Salafism seems to focus more on the correct aqidah, or ibadah, or beliefs and rituals, practices, religion in its pure and unaltered form; whereas Sufism accentuates a deeper connection with the divine, spiritual depth in practicing religion, a higher understanding and love of the divine, the assimilation and reflection of divine character in life. And traditionalism, traditional Muslim ulema, will focus more on the construction of contemporary Muslim religiosity as a continuation of the cumulative past experiences of Muslim societies. And modernists seem to be more willing to negotiate with the modern alternatives and appreciative of Western civilization’s achievements in many fields, establishing Islam’s compatibility with Western norms and institutions. And
these are of course, you know porous categories, you know. A Sufi can be politically active; a Salafi can be very spiritual, you know. What we are talking about is dominant tendencies here, you know, family resemblances, it’s the question of accentuation, not of privation, of course.

So, nevertheless there seems to be, okay, Islamism differs from these tendencies with its explicit intents, intentional and organized political engagement, and multifaceted critiques of all those peoples, institutions, and practices that do not meet their standards of this divinely mandated political engagement. So, question arises, Islamism and ideology. Dr. Hunter answered this question for me, yes: it is an ideology. Because what is an ideology? An ideology, as—you know Althusser, a French philosopher—defines, the imaginary relation to the real conditions of existence; or more concretely, a set of ideas or standards that are followed by individuals, collectivities, and governments that defines their goals and means to reach these goals. These ideas may be possessed consciously or unconsciously, but they constitute a comprehensive normative vision, an ideology is about the public matters; thus, it is, you know, inescapably political. You know, with these caveats in mind, I think we can say, yes Islamism is an ideology, because Islamism also articulates and defines a range of identities and norms, organizes human experience into a compelling, interpretive framework, and specifies a range of meaning and acceptable and desirable practices.

But also, it is very important to differentiate between religion and ideology. A religion is a more comprehensive concept or category. So, a religion can produce different ideologies, or different ideologysts can justify themselves by referring to the foundational text of that religion. But, religion is a comprehensive category. So, what I’m going to say about Islamism does not apply to Islam. So, since I’ll do the critiquing of Islamism, I want to make that distinction.

So, how to evaluate Islamism as an ideology? So here, I think, this paper is offering an original contribution here. I want to give you two options to evaluate the nature of an ideology. You can either, you know, the question is what is the relationship of Islamists and Islamism, or Marxists and Marxism, or fascists and fascism? Okay, what is the relation, what is the nature of that relationship? And, how can you approach that question? There are two possibilities. You can either say “that ideology is a neutral thing.” The attributes are ourselves, or will reflect ourselves in that ideology. Alright, let me use this rather popular example, maybe, blunt. Probably watched Star Wars, right? There, you know, Luke Skywalker and, you know, Master Yoda? Master Yoda takes Luke Skywalker to a cave, and there the conversation took place, Skywalker asked, you know, “what am I going to find in the cave,” and Yoda says, “you are going to find what you take yourself—you know what you take, you know into the cave, right, you are going to find yourself in the cave.” But, our ideologies are like that. Are we finding ourselves in ideologies, or are ideologies imposing certain things on us? So, what we find is a combination of the cave and ourselves. So, Yoda seems to be referring to ethical view of ideologists, saying that an ideology is a neutral category, you know, you find yourself in it, right?

But, I will suggest we should approach Islamism from a different perspective. It is a metaphysical category, it has values, it is theory-laden, it imposes certain things on you too. So, it constructs. Islamists construct Islamism, but Islamism also constructs Islamists. There is a dual, there is intertwined, a complex relationship. So, we should be able to criticize Islamism as well. So, it’s like using, to give another example, using a baseball bat. A baseball bat, you can use it for, you know, to hit a baseball and have some fun, or you can beat someone with it, you know. The baseball bat doesn’t have real
values, it’s neutral. But, when it comes to things like more complex technologies, such as Twitter, you know, Twitter imposes certain ethical steps to you, because it’s gonna ask you to refrain your thoughts in 140 characters—you know, it’s an imposing category. You’re going to have to think sloganically, you cannot really say things in detail. So, it asks you to behave in certain ways. So, it’s not neutral, it is demanding.

So, what is Islamism, Islamism is a demanding category. It’s like that. Why I say this? Let me then briefly summarize. I argue that metaphysical view of Islamism, in contrast to ethical view, metaphysical view of Islamism provides the most explanatory framework to explain the dominant tendencies of Islamist individuals and parties around the globe, and that because of its fundamental assumptions, Islamism is may be more prone to produce authoritarian forms of governments than other competing ideologies, if you will.

So, let’s ask this question, what is the most basic assumption of Islamism, what is the most basic goal and means? So, the most basic assumption is the problem: the problem of Muslim societies is political, and to fix that problem we should, you know, implement Islamic law through the agencies of state. This is the basic thing that, you know, we can find in all Islamic discourse. You know, of course, not all of Islamists are willing to resort violence to implement this, to achieve this, but the goal is there. So, that goal, I believe, is problematic, that is imposing. Why? Just to name a few, and some of them are actually mentioned by Dr. Hunter:

First, the project of wedding nation-state and Sharia, nation-state and Islamism, seems to be a fundamentally problematic project, because it’s going to lead to an inescapable monopolization by Islamic law. And, let’s also not forget that Islamic law was produced in the context of empires. An empire is a more loosely organized structure. A nation-state is more uniform, and more demanding, and more penetrating. So, the wedding of Islamic law and nation-state is problematic. You’re actually taking Islamic law from its natural habitat and putting it into a cage—that’s what is happening, when you wed, when you integrate, when you put together, nation-state and Islamic law. So, it is a problematic project from the very beginning.

Secondly, public implementation of Sharia in tightly controlled contemporary states inescapably binds the class of ulama, religious elite, to the state. That is inescapable too, because you are implementing Sharia through the agency of state. You cannot escape this conclusion, and that binds ulama to the state. And traditionally, we know that there is this dichotomy between ulama and the state. You know ulama is producing the law, and state is implementing the law, but this time, this distance between the class of ulama and the state will be lost. But we know that the state is functional in the Islamic tradition, but they always limited the role of government and the ruler to protect the borders, to provide safety, to assign those who can produce law. And this has never understood to be that the ruler, ruling elite/class, should offer the absolute interpretation of law, or the distance between politics and statecraft, and ulama and law must be removed and the two should be identical. That is never the case.

Thirdly, the identification of state and religion inescapably ends in sacralization of the state. In this case, two things happen. If you sacralize state two things happen. Religion can easily be used as a cosmetic cover for the state’s mistakes, and I have more to tell you about this—but this is an obvious thing, right, I don’t even have to exemplify this. Secondly, the sacralization of the state is easily led to the utopianist view of state, so once you reinvent that utopian situation, and an ideal situation is possible. Everything
that you do is legitimized and justified. As Trotsky said, once, right, he was asked, you know, what do you think of this, all these, you know, people killed in the name of communism, and he said "regrettable, but a small price to pay for the revolution." So, it’s that state of mind, you know, everything becomes regrettable, but it’s okay.

So, fifthly, the Islamist project of recuperating authentic Islam and remaking the state in its image, which also seems to lead to a not-uncommon supreme confidence in discerning the true meaning and spirit of Islam through more or less direct encounter with the text. So, this is also inescapable in my view, because Islam is a living tradition, adapting different contexts for plural purposes, while preserving its eternal core, we know that.

But, Islamist project, by its nature again, demands fixation of Islamic laws, fixation of the perimeters of Islam once and for all. Because, if you want to make Islamic law, and impose Islamic law through the agency of state, you have to fix it, you have to freeze the dominant, the dynamic flow of Islamic law.

PIRAN: I promise I will ask you a really thought-provoking question. Your presentation was really interesting, indeed really provocative. It does have a lot of implication for not just the relationship between modernity versus the nation state, but also implications for the community of the believers. Throughout your presentation, I thought to myself, well the community of believers, or the Ummah, it seemed to me at least that they were stuck in between the dichotomy and the contentious politics between the nation-state and Islamist politics. So, what are the implications for the believers? What is it that the community of the believers in each Muslim majority country could possibly do to ameliorate? Because it does have, this kind of contentious politics, does have a lot of implications for the rule of law and for a just society.

KOCA: Beautiful question. In my view, we Muslims also should, at least for now, give up this project of the nation-state and Islamic law. That is not going to produce anything. Yes, every project has its positive sides. But, we should judge it with its dominant tendencies and dominant consequences.

I think that if a focus, an accentuation of religion's spiritual aspects, you know, the aspects of religion that constructs a more peaceful worldview, a worldview which is revolving around the central axis of mercy, and love, and compassion. I think that should be the dominant discourse now, and the discourse currently seems to be revolving around more political issues, and politics, you know, maybe we should judge some of the certain assumptions of, such as, you know, Islam being also a really, heavily dominant, a political project too. I believe we can all approach these issues in the context, but currently, I think the accentuation should shift towards spirituality, to shift towards ethics, these types of things. I think this is what we need.

PIRAN: Thank you. It looks like, Professor Aminrazavi, do you have a question?
AMINRAZAVI: Yes. Thank you for your remarks. You alluded to something very central here, and that is religions that have a legal side to them, such as Judaism and Islam, we have a problem. And that is what to do with it. And, at the risk of oversimplification, there are generally two camps. One says law must be implemented and these guardians and defenders of God are responsible for that. And, the other camp says, upholding the law is individual responsibility. I think at the heart of this whole discourse lies, really, what to do with, what to do with Islamic Sharia. And, without resolving that, we'll have the ISIS and Taliban and all these various sects who say it's their sole duty to implement it. But is that the case?

HUNTER: Well, I think that we have to really look at even the question of the Sharia, and I'm not talking about the modern times, and so on. The new Islamists have a very bloody view of Sharia, and how it should be implemented. Whereas, and they basically, very conveniently, ignore a number of conditions that is required, for example, including the ones that are embedded in the Sharia. Again, using from the experience of, you know, let's say that, but I am familiar with, let's say both the Turkish and Persian societies. The incidents of, for example, stoning almost didn't occur, whatsoever, at least for the past three hundred years. And, it's just that the ulama have a leeway in terms of interpretation of things. So, I think that one of the points that Dr. Koca mentioned, which I think is important, and that is the question of basically between the law and the agency that implements the law. The same way that you can have the most democratic laws, but if you have a corrupt judge, a corrupt sheriff, you know the law is not going to be.

And, I think that here we come to the question of the relationship between the power. It is the struggle over power and the fiqh and the sharia are used in this context. And, I think of all the Muslim countries, frankly, not just because I just worked on it, Iran is a very good laboratory to see how these discourses, really, have emerged. The state is supporting what it calls fiqhi Islam, Islam based on fiqh. Whereas the others, reformists, which includes the number of the ulama, have a much more broad understanding of Islam, including the spiritual dimensions of it, including the necessity of maslaha, and expediency that these policies are harming Islam.

Let's face it. The most significant victim, I think, in addition with all the sympathy and praying that goes through the victims of the incident in California, but the biggest victim of this has become the broader Muslim community. I mean that we cannot blame others for promoting a false image of Islam. I think that Muslims are doing a pretty good job themselves in promoting this Islam. Beheadings! I mean, I have never, ever, at least when I was growing up—and I am not a spring chicken as you call it—had the question of beheading, as far, at least in the society that I grew up. There was no beheading. And before that, there was no beheading either. I mean, it’s not just, say, the modern Iran, it was also the Qajar Iran.

We also have to really focus on the incredibly destructive impact that the spread of Wahhabi Islam has had. Wahhabi Islam is the most intolerant version of Islam, and it has been affecting it from Indonesia to Europe. One of the reasons Islam succeeded was because Islam allowed for the incorporation of local, whether it was Akbar Shah’s India or whether it was in Indonesia, and so on. They are imposing from the external appearance. Where in Qur’an is that to be a good Muslim your beard has to have a certain shape or that you have to wear a certain type of dress? This is the Saudiazation of Islam. This is what it is, and it has been going on since the 1960s. It is ideology married to money. And it is a lethal combination. And the same way, for example, the Soviets used their ideology and power when they had it. So, I think that it’s very, very complex, and even you can
have different forms of Sharia. You can have an enlightened Sharia, you can find anything you want in Islamic jurisprudence that would allow you to not to implement the most harshest of hudood. You know, it has to do a lot with the agency who is implementing the Sharia. It’s very, very important. Thank you.

PIRAN: Okay, now let’s turn over the discussion to Professor Birol Baskan. He is an assistant professor at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar.

BASKAN: Thank you very much for including me in this panel, which has distinguished speakers. I also have to say the same caveat Dr. Hunter said that I am a political scientist, and I am not really interested in really what Islam says, but how Islam is understood. So I am not going to say Islam is this or that, I mean, there are thousands of Muslims who understand Islam in the way they want, and then they live up to it, and then it’s a big problem for us. So I am not going to judge, whether this is Islamic or not, but treat them as Islamic.

So this is the start of my fundamental premises here. Islam is open to multiple interpretations, like all other religions. And so are its sub-schools. Sufism is like that, Salafism is like that, Wahhabism is like that, Shiism is like that. So all of these sub-schools are also open to multiple interpretations. From each of them you can end up in a very peaceful understanding of Islam, but from them you can also arrive at the very violent, very extremist Islam, so this is my first premise.

The second premise is that there are possibly reasons as many as each individual as to why a person can turn to violence. It can be psychological reasons, just psychopath, or some of them are playing Call of Duty and are very excited to kill people, so they end up in Iraq or Syria, and then because it’s a good place to kill people right now, or some of them are really rapists, they’re going to rape women, and then the war environment gives you that opportunity.

So what is the role of ideology here is that? Look, I am a good Marxist, like all good Marxists say, ideology or ideas do not drive people. But I’m not saying that ideology or religion is irrelevant to the question. Ideology, in my opinion, or identity, is endogenous to the process. As you go along over that process, you redefine, you interpret, you interpret, and reinterpret religion and your identity, and you end up in justifying or delegitimizing violence. So Islam is like that too, I mean, if some forces are leading you towards violence, you understand Islam in that way, you know, a violent way. It’s not that if you understand Islam is violent, and then you go, and then do violence. So, this is my second premise.

So violence towards whom? Violence towards fellow Muslims, violence towards non-Muslims living in Muslim societies, and non-Muslims living in non-Muslim societies? So there is violence—I am here equating extremism with violence by the way—so when I say how Islamism is prone to violence, we should think of, okay, how Islamism leads to, in an interpretative way, in a rhetorical way, how it justifies violence, for example, towards other Muslims, towards non-Muslims in Muslim societies, and towards non-Muslims in non-Muslim societies.

Islamism is also very open to multiple interpretations. You can understand Islamism in a way that’s going to be peaceful, I mean, we have very modernist Islamists. Mohammad Abduh was an Islamist, actually. Rashid Rida was Islamist, and I don’t think that they would really approve what Daesh is doing, what Taliban were doing. Or even Sayyid Qutb; I don’t think that he would really condone violence from those texts the contemporary
Islamism discourse allow in terms of violence. Because he wrote his text in Egyptian prisons, it should be terrible experience, I believe, and he was angry man, and then like all angry men, he said things that maybe he didn’t really think that were going in that direction. But later on, later generation really took from that those texts and interpreted them to justify their violence.

Islamism can condone violence, but, like, what, how, how it does so? This is what I am interested in. What is the rhetorical and logical step from Islamism to violence? This is what I am going to talk about. Both my fellow speakers gave a good introduction about Islamism. Islamism was born in the 19th century as a reaction to an intellectual attempt to make Islam irrelevant to modernity. So, Islamism was a reaction, and its fundamental premise was Islam was relevant to modern life. From this premise, and you can see this premise in the early Islamic intellectuals, like Namik Kemal, for example, or Mohammad Abduh, Afghani, or many other figures. But from this, Islamism came to a point with Hasan Al-Banna in Egypt that Islam is a comprehensive way of life. From that idea, Islamism came to the point of a totalistic view of life.

Of course, fascism in Europe was instrumental in this, because it was also, or communism was also instrumental in this, because Sayyid Qutb, for example, was very much influenced by fascism, you know. How they view Islam was very much determined by the exposure to fascism, and then they saw in an ideological way, Islam was an ideology that is going to regulate every aspect of life. You cannot escape from it. From economics, to society, to marital relations, and all the way to international politics, there is not a single field of human being which cannot leave, or should not be subjected to Islam.

Of course, the modern state must be Islamic as well, which means that in implementing every single policy, Islam must be the guiding principle. So, this totalistic view of Islam is, I guess, is an important step in the justification or the legitimation of violence. So, why the modern state must be Islamic? For some of Islamists, it’s an end itself. If Muslims are living under a non-Islamic state, it is, I mean, it’s a sin. That you should implement just as an end that God gives, orders you to establish an Islamic state. For some Islamists, the modern state, the Islamist state is not an end itself, but it is a means. Without an Islamist state, a Muslim cannot truly live up to his religion. So in order to live according to your religion, you have to institute an Islamic state.

So now how are you going to realize Islamic state? That’s the issue. So there are two approaches, and I find this approach, two of them, this categorization useful. One of them is bottom-up. The other one is top-down. Bottom-up approach is actually presented in general as a rejection of violence, actually some rejection of violence. It’s not a principled rejection of violence, it’s a strategic rejection of violence. Bottom-up approach rejects violence, because it’s not going to work, not because it is wrong according to
religion. So, here, at some point, I guess Ozgur (Koca) mentioned that, I guess this notion of totalistic view of state and society, eventually is going to lead to violence, not now, but in the future.

So, many Islamists, for example, who are peaceful at home, might propagate jihad, for example in Syria, or in Afghanistan, or in somewhere else, because violence in that case is permissible, but not in Egypt, not in Turkey. So rejecting violence in Turkey does not mean that they are going to reject violence there, because at the end of the day, it’s not a principled rejection, but it’s a strategic rejection of violence. Of course, there is top-down approach, which says it’s radical, it’s revolutionary, it condones violence. And here, of course, Muslims, non-Muslims, is fair game, because, it’s such an ultimate objective that God put in front of humans that in order to achieve that, you can sacrifice humans.

There are two strategies to do that. One of them, as Ozgur (Koca) already mentioned, which is you trivialize the killing of thousands, of thousands, of people. Actually, it’s, I guess, Ruhollah Khomeini, who said that we did this revolution not for the price of watermelon. It is, we did this for a higher purpose. So, what you believe do is that you can kill as many people as possible, just to achieve that. There is trivialization, but in addition to this trivialization of killings of people, there is another way, which Wahhabism does, actually, and Salafism does, too, which basically assumes that contemporary Muslims are so fundamentally deviated from true Muslim, they are not Muslims anymore.

So they are mushrik, I guess. And then, if you are mushrik, if you are blasphemous, if you are outside of religion, then it becomes permissible, religiously speaking, to wage jihad, and to convert you by force, and also to kill you. So, this is also another way, it’s not just trivialization, but also declaring the whole Muslim society as a society of associationists. This was not only embraced by Muhammad Abdul Wahhab but also by many Salafis too. Sayyid Qutb, for example, declared the Egyptian society jahiliyya society, which basically means you can wage war on that society.

Well, again, I am not very harsh on Sayyid Qutb, because Sayyid Qutb lived a very terrible life. I mean, he was writing this in Egyptian jails, and Egyptian jails are notorious, even today. Imagine that fifty years ago, and under Gamal Abdel Nasser, who’s a dictator, and I don’t know what kind of treatment he was subjected to, we don’t know. But we know Zaynab Ghazali, for example, who lived in these prisons, and the treatment of her as a woman was terrible. So in such a case, of course, Sayyid Qutb could not really understand how this society, Egyptian society, is letting this person to allow that kind of maltreatment, even adoring him. Well actually, in today’s Turkey, I guess some of our friends from Gulen movement are asking the same question about Erdogan. Erdogan doing all these injustices, and then look at the society, 50 percent is supporting him. Now, Sayyid Qutb asked the same question of how this society is letting this. The only answer he could come up with, they are not true Muslims, because true Muslims would not allow this to happen, they would not adore such a person to undertake such a great persecution of a Muslim like me, so he declared the whole society jahiliyya society, on which you can wage jihad.

If you can justify violence on Muslims, it’s very easy to justify violence on non-Muslims, both at home and abroad. Let me just finish this up. And just read Bin Laden’s letter to America, it’s a classical text, how you justify killings of non-Muslims.

PIRAN: Okay, thank you Professor Baskan for a wonderful, and again, yet another compelling presentation here, especially about a really prominent Islamist thinker, such as Sayyid Qutb, who probably unbeknownst to him, has inspired, even beyond the grave,
quite a few movements, and apparently some really unhealthy ideologies. One of the questions that came to my mind, and I’m really glad that you turned the discussion to Muslims versus Muslims, and I mean by that, the grassroots levels of Muslim-majority countries versus their leaders, and again the question of justice, and the rule of law that comes to mind.

Now that we’ve turned the discussion into Muslims versus Muslims, so apparently the problem, or the problems rather, which are, to some extent, ideologically related, of course there are other factors are happening on the ground within our societies. Do you have any proposals, any suggestions as to what needs to be done within Muslim societies? What is the responsibility of the so-called, you know, Muslim governments, which are doing all kinds of, and are making all kinds of decisions that are really unsavory, and sometimes dangerous and violent in the name of their own people?

BASKAN: I guess my answer is going to be short: total secularization. I guess this is what Muslim societies need. Religion should be privatized. Religion should not be a matter of the state, and any acknowledgement in this should be rejected outright. I don’t see any way how you can forcefully, by state intervention, implement Sharia, and then talk about democracy, or anything else.

PIRAN: Thank you for your response. Now, let’s move to our final presenter, Ms. Nadia Oweidat. She is a senior fellow at the New America Foundation.

OWEIDAT: Hello, thank you so much for having me here. So I’ve heard a lot, here, that this or that is so un-Islamic, like “where did they get this idea about beheading?” I mean, we are all experts on Islam and history, and I think we are maybe giving ourselves too much patting on the back when we say this is unprecedented in our history. How did a lot of the Muslim scholars from the medieval times die? I mean, Ibn Muqaffa, who was one of the greatest translators of all the great works of philosophy, was chopped into little pieces, and then eaten. So it’s not that violence is new, unprecedented. The Qur’an says “aqta’u aydeehum waarijulahum min khilaf,” cut their hands and feet in opposite directions, and I can quote you so many verses, I went to Islamic schools, I memorized parts of the Qur’an.

As somebody who also does counter-terrorism research, I look at people who join groups like ISIS. There are a lot of them with PhDs, master’s degrees, and undergraduates in theology, so we can’t just say this is un-Islamic. It has existed in our culture; it has existed in our history. So what is our responsibility today? So if you look at the Muslim world, and again, I grew up in that world, and it’s a place that is really, really frustrating to grow up in, because you have no right at all to disagree, even from within, let alone from without. And our greatest scholars and intellectuals are being silenced, persecuted, harassed, whether by the state, or the official religious institutions.

You have somebody, young scholars like Islam el-Beheiry, for example, Mohammad Abdullah Nasr, or Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. These are scholars who study the history, the religion, and want to present a new relationship with religion and with the religious history. We cannot deny what already is there. The text is there. The prophet beheaded 700 Banu Qurayda men because they violated the contract of Medina, so we cannot say where did they get that. They got it from the history books; so, but we need to reform. We have not yet truly absorbed the ideals of pluralism, modernity, tolerance; we do not have them even from within.
So if you look at our masses, the consciousness of our masses, there is a lot of condoning of violence. This is why somebody can draw a cartoon, and you have hundreds being killed, and you have millions of dollars of property damaged. You know, unless we change, and we become sensitive to violence from within, unless we have human rights from within, for us, the scholars within our communities, who want to disagree. In fact, I daresay, that unless people in the Muslim world can say, you know what, great, you believe whatever you want, and I choose not to be Muslim, and that person’s rights are preserved, and he’s respected, he’s not in danger, he’s not disowned, he’s not disinherited. Unless we get to that space, there is no countering extremism, there is no end to Islamic extremism.

So this is nowhere where our societies are. There is so much incitement, and again, I am a product of the Muslim world. I grew up in the Arab world. I went to Islamic schools. We have somehow wedded hate and violence to religion. This is what we’re exposed to, I mean I’m sorry, we don’t want to say this is all peaceful, but my experience, experience with my friends, my experience, experience with people who are still there, it says a different story than we would like to believe.

So, how does this look like? You know, the United States policy towards Vietnam is quite violent, but the Vietnamese people are not creating suicide bombings. So I really wanted to take responsibility, because we are not responsible for what the other does, but we are responsible for what we do. So if the Vietnamese people started to carry out suicide bombings, would they be justified? Absolutely not. Was the action against Vietnam justified? Absolutely not, either. So, one violent action does not justify another. Violence is violence.

So we have master narratives in our consciousness. You just have to turn the TV randomly in the Arab world, at least, to Al-Jazeera to hear these master narratives, over and over and over. Just get any textbook, and one of them is the victimhood, which does not, it takes away our agency. What can we do, what can we build, how can we create a citizen who, in response to a cartoon that insults us, draws a more brilliant cartoon that makes them look silly? This is the kind of citizen we want to create, the kind of consciousness we want in our communities.

So the master narrative of the invasions and the Crusaders. You know, if you look at the Middle East, there’s been a lot of invasions and counter-invasions. The Muslims themselves invaded, so, for example, when they invaded Tunisia, they took as slaves one million point three hundred children, children, not adults, as slaves, whether, as sex slaves, or to be soldiers. So, again, our history is not pure, so we have to understand that it’s not so black and white, we’re always perfect, and the other is always wrong, and if the other wronged us, we’re justified in the violence.
You know, modernity means human rights. **Today’s modernity, today’s values of human rights, of personal rights, we’ve never had them before.** So we’re not supposed to have had them in 7th century. It’s, even Europe came to these values. I mean, these are human values, came out of the human experience, and I want to stress this. And they came out of bloody history. They were only created after authorities abrogated that right to force people to do what they believe is right. So we need to change our educational system to allow for freedom, to allow for great scholars from within to challenge and to also look at our history, the episodes that make us uncomfortable, that make us feel like “whoa, maybe we were not angels.” It’s okay, even if the whole history was not angelic, we still can improve, we still can produce citizens who do not respond with violence, who respond with creativity.

And I want to end on a very optimistic note, actually. I want to say that there is truly an **Islamic Spring taking place**, because we have a young generation that has, and I want to quote a brilliant book called Wired Citizenship, that I teach in my class on Islamic thought at Georgetown. We have now generations that are growing up with intimate relationship to computers, and this is really brilliant, because the authority can tell you “Oh, this is unprecedented, we’ve never had beheadings, we’ve never had intolerance,” and they can go online, and they can print the online document saying, “Yes, Christians can live in Jerusalem, but they have to wear a special belt, and they can only walk in our streets.” It sounds like a document from Nazi Germany. So again it’s the tolerance of 7th century versus the values we have as humanity in 21st century.

So, you have young kids who are developing a much more mature Islam, honestly, than anything I’ve seen in the official Islam, who don’t know how to deal with these uncomfortable episodes, so they’d rather just deny. And don’t you dare, if you dare question, you’re outside the faith, and, you know, how are you dealt with as somebody who doesn’t quite say what we like? With violence. But these young kids are responding. They are drawing cartoons ridiculing this religious fanaticism that is really common, truly common. I analyzed YouTube channels. The most watched YouTube channels, again I focus on the Arab world, are ones that ridicule religious, political, and social authoritarianism.

So this says something about these young kids, who, yes there are some who are joining ISIS, but there are also some that are saying, you know “What, don’t tell me how I should believe, don’t tell me,” and they’re critiquing, and some of them are actually going all the way to atheism, and they should have the right to change religion, study their history, discuss their history, not to be religious. This is the kind of environment from within that would produce a different container for a different citizen to deal with this global challenge, it’s no longer just our own, but this imbalance. When the liberals have no space, whereas the fanatics have all the space in the world, you have an imbalance. Those who can really counter, don’t have the space. They are deemed apostates, like Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. You can’t actually find a scholar who attempted to reform who has not been persecuted.

So even Abdur has to republish his book to remove certain issues that were uncomfortable for the religious institutions. So unless this imbalance is changed, and the space is created for freedom of thought and expression, I don’t see us tackling this. This is going nowhere. And, also, we become irrelevant as scholars of religion, as states. They really risk being irrelevant, because they are not addressing issues with very candid and open way in which they can on the Internet. There’s nobody telling “Shut up!” They can
go anywhere they want and they can explore anything they want. So that’s it. Thank you very much.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Has there been a lot of literature developed in the last, I know some is being developed questioning the authenticity of what has been dished out to us? Ibn Kathir, Qutb, Mawdudi, Benna. We need to question the authenticity of the writings. Has there been a lot of scholarly work questioning that?

**OWEIDAT:** You know, I agree with you. We need to do that. We need to engage with our own history and culture, and yes there has been, but these people are marginalized. These people are persecuted. These people, their books are banned. Like, George Tarabishi, Mohammad Nasr Abu Zayd, Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, I mean, the list is long. We do have brilliant scholars. Do you see them on TV? No, you see idiots on TV, who, again, are for violence, take away your agency that you can only use your agency to exercise violence, and then you’re justified, then you are admirable.

For example, the day of Charlie Hebdo, the day Al-Jazeera said “Does this mean that the military might of the West is a paper tiger?” So how is killing people who are unarmed equate to defeating the military might of the West? This is the mentality that is propagated. Has anybody here heard of George Tarabishi? He’s a brilliant scholar. We don’t know our own scholars, because we have states, the CEOs of these companies, are really failing miserably, the educational system is irrelevant, and we need to celebrate the efforts of re-questioning and re-examining the past, and celebrate those who think, not just those who follow.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Do we have writings separating, dis-equating the writings of these guys with Qur’an. A lot of people equate the writings of Qur’an, and that needs to be denounced, and that needs to be written up.

**OWEIDAT:** I agree, we need to have space for freedom, and unless that space is created in the Muslim world, we will continue to have this extremism, because there’s an imbalance. If you wanna be an extremist, the road is paved. If you want to be a liberal, try tweeting one sentence, one sentence, like what happened for Raif Badawi, one sentence against religious extremism—mind you, not against Islam, otherwise you would have been beheaded—but against religious extremism, and you’ll land ten years in prison and a thousand lashes. This is what happens to you if you want to join the human family versus if you want to be a suicide bomber. So, for example, again, Saudi Arabia gives leave of absence to military men who want to join jihad in Syria with ISIS, al-Nusra, so, does that mean they’re also allowed to rape and destroy our civilization? I mean, there’s a huge imbalance.

**PIRAN:** Dr. Oweidat, thank you very much for your compelling presentation. We do have quite a lot of questions from the floor. Why don’t I start with Dr. Hunter first, and then move over to Dr. Aminrazavi, and please go ahead and keep it short. Thank you.

**HUNTER:** First of all, a point of correction. When I said they were not beheadings, I meant in the modern history of Islam, at least in the part of the Muslim world that I grew up. One of the problems studying Islamic world is the Arab centrism. We equate Islam with the Arabs, and I don’t think that that’s right. Ibn Muqaffa that you mentioned, was a Persian.

**OWEIDAT:** Actually, most of the philosophers and scholars, there were none when they came to Persia. I agree with you.
HUNTER: No, let me question that, but a few reservations that I have about your presentation is that, you know, the Islam, Muslims go from a kind of, it's almost like a streak of masochism, and they go from one extreme to the other extreme. One extreme of that masochism is that everything that has happened to us is our own fault. We are bad, we are terrible, we are the ones that have done this, and so on. And I think that your interpretation of history is also a little bit one-sided. You have completely absorbed the Western narrative of everything, and modernity, and so on.

But, the point I’m trying to say is there is no use from going one from exculpation, saying that Muslims have had no responsibility for what has happened to them, and then we go to the other thing that, you know, everything that has happened to us has happened because of others. There seems to be, there has to be a balance. These are situations of dialectics.

The other thing that you are, you said that I found it really almost naïve to say that we have to do this, they should be allowed to this. Modernity is not a project. It’s not a sort of build, operate sort of project. Modernity is a process. The fact of the matter is that the Islamic world’s modernity happened in the shadow of foreign intervention. A lot of the problem, for example, I think that even, you know, let’s say that if in England’s wars of religious wars, other countries had been actively involved the way it is involved in Syria, I think the situation would have been much more difficult.

If the, for example, independence movements in Scotland, and Catalonia, and others were funded from outsiders the way they had been done, it would have happened. If every protest in another country was responded to by military attacks, I think that, we have busted up societies. I think one of the things we have to understand, why the rise of radicalism? Part of it is that when a society is busted up, whether it’s Afghanistan, or it’s Libya, or wherever it is, so on, and so forth. These things create vacuum. We have to be analytical about this and not emotional. And not to go from one extreme of exculpation to the other extreme of self-flagellation. We have to look at these things as processes.

Islam needs reform. I have written of this, I have followed people who have done that, and unfortunately, the actually reformist works in the Arab world are the least of twenty-five in Turkey, and in Iran, and in places like Indonesia. So, I also think you shouldn’t equate the sort of Islamic experience with merrily just the, you know, your own experience. We have different thing. You are being a little bit too categorical.

OWEIDAT: Thank you very much, really I appreciate it, and I’d love a minute to respond. So I agree that modernity is a process, and we are going through it, and we are learning, and honestly doing great, when I monitor these young kids, and see how they are engaging with text, they’re honestly, if I didn’t have a PhD in Islamic thought, I couldn’t follow these debates. So to see kids in their twenties and thirties coming up with phenomenal arguments, it gives me hope.

And, second, you know, this is why I keep saying I talk about the Arab world, because that’s what I studied. I’m not just talking about my experience as somebody who’s a street vendor, with all due respect to everybody, but I am a scholar of Islamic thought, so, and I went to Islamic schools, and I specify, my experience is really based on the Arab world, so I couldn’t speak for Iran, I couldn’t speak for Indonesia, this is outside of the realm of, but I can speak about the Arab world. I have extensive network there. I, everything I read or hear 24/7 is to further my knowledge of my region. Thank you.
AMINRAZAVI: All right, so, thank you for your thoughtful comments. I generally, by and large, completely agree with you, by and large. The only part that I do disagree is to put all the responsibility on the shoulder of Muslims. You cannot separate the internal and external reasons from radicalization of Muslims. You cannot have Muslims watch another incursion of Israelis into Gaza Strip, in which they killed over 700 children, and tell the young people don’t become radicalized. You cannot tell Muslims to watch the invasion of Iraq on bogus reasons, and don’t become radicalized.

OWEIDAT: You know, what I agree with you that these are acts of violence against these nations. I am a million percent in agreement with you. Where I disagree with you is what can we do about it. Does it even serve our purpose to be violent? So I am just saying let’s use our agency to do something constructive... And violence is not constructive.

AMINRAZAVI: Okay, so what I do agree is absolutely important, imperative to realize, is that desperation breeds fanaticism. When you are desperate, you are not in a rational position. It is...

OWEIDAT: Not necessarily.

AMINRAZAVI: No, look. If you are a 20-year-old, you’re tired of centuries of despots, domestic, and centuries of colonialism, externally, you’re not thinking rationally. You want to pick up gun and shoot somebody. So...

OWEIDAT: Why not pick up a computer and do programming?

AMINRAZAVI: You could just say that in Washington. But you can’t say that if you’re living Gaza, if your parents and grandparents have been killed.

OWEIDAT: You know, this is beautiful, we have the right to disagree, and I believe we have enough creativity to answer and challenge with peaceful and creative means. And I agree with you. We should be able to disagree.

AMINRAZAVI: No, I agree that demythologization of us, nice, tolerant Muslims must take place. But to blame the Muslim youth...

OWEIDAT: I’m not blaming them. I’m just saying we have to use our agency to do something about it, not just say, well it’s them, so there’s nothing we can do.

BASKAN: Well, I mean, I understand the impact of the international interventions on the Muslim psychology, but, you know, all the way from Iran, Shah Reza, to Mohammad Reza, to Nasser, to others. These are Muslims, too, and then they inflicted unbearable violence on their own people. How are we going to explain this? I mean, this is what the America asked them to do, or Soviet Union asked them to do? No, I mean, she has a point, and I guess Muslims are violent, I mean, to a certain extent, and Muslim histories are violent. Muslim history is a violent history, and then the way to get out of it is to acknowledge that first, and then to search into the, its root cause. I mean, it is as if we don’t know what Mohammad Reza Shah did, or Khomeini did to his opponents. It’s a harsh regime. Mubarak’s was harsh regime, el-Sisi’s harsh regime, and now thanks to Erdogan we will now have harsh regime in Turkey, too, soon.

AHMAD: I’m sorry if this is a comment, but it will be very short. It's to Dr. Oweidat. I actually agree with what you said. I don’t disagree with any of it, but I think there’s the question of emphasis here. Yes, people should be allowed to become atheists, but that’s not the problem. The problem is people who should be allowed to dissent within the Islamic context. If you tell people who disagree with whatever it is that the government
policy may be, that you’re promoting atheism, you will be promoting atheism, and I think, for example, the Palestinian poet who is now being arrested, sentenced to death, sorry, not, sentenced to death by the Saudis is a case in point. He says he’s not an atheist, and I doubt his persecution will make him an atheist, but it will make many other young people into atheists.

**OWEIDAT:** I agree with you. We should have the right to dissent from within, and I agree with you that it’s really causing atheism, I agree. Please.

**KURU:** So, this is a fascinating overall debate. I am detail-oriented person, therefore, but Tunisia, because as I know, I recently double-checked the population of Tunisia at the time of conquest, it’s about one million, so it seems impossible to enslave, you know, 1.3 million children, it’s because it’s a small country.

**OWEIDAT:** We can exchange references... we can exchange information, and then we can go to the source.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** Thank you. I’m someone who’s studying terrorism, and not very much about Islam, but what I see here again, I’m sorry, you’ve been criticizing religion and society, I will criticize you. I see some self-orientalists here trying to explain and take the context within the region, and put everything, all the blame on Islam and faith. I think the major problem that I see in those panelists is that you make strategic reasoning with the faith. If it was not the TVs, Internet, social media that promote that violence, can we think of that ISIS is using and posting that violence? If it is the case, when you look at the history beheading in front of all the people, and hanging in Iran in front of all the people, all these violence are strategic reasoning, nothing to do with faith. If the strategic reasoning is not helping for those who’s committing these things, I don’t think they will commit this violence.

So, mixing this strategic perspective with faith, I think, is wrong. And, second of all, when we think of violence, and to whom they are addressing to, and the faith to whom they are addressing to, we need to make distinction. The violence, in especially in the cases of ISIS, addressed to the West and Western community. The way they dress in orange and all these things is a response to what is happening in Guantanamo Bay. And those videos are addressed to the Western society, whereas those faith, Islamic and Islamic ideology, are addressed to the local society. If we don’t make this distinction, and mix the faith with strategic reason, I think we are making mistake, and we cannot solve this problem. Thank you.

**BASKAN:** I guess you misunderstood us. We are not accusing here Islam; we are accusing Muslims of understanding Islam in a wild way. I guess there is a big difference between the two.
Panel II
Jurisprudential Roots of Extremism and Ways to Overcome It

Mustafa Gurbuz (Moderator)
Research Fellow, Rethink Institute

Zeki Saritoprak
Professor of Islamic Studies and Director of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi Chair in Islamic Studies at John Carroll University

Imam-ad-Dean Ahmad
President of the Minaret of Freedom Institute

Mehdi Aminrazavi
Professor of Philosophy and Religion at University of Mary Washington

Ahmet Kuru
Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Director of Center for Islamic and Arabic Studies at San Diego State University
GURBUZ: Hello everyone. My name is Mustafa Gurbuz, a fellow at Rethink Institute, and I am moderator of this panel on the jurisprudential roots of extremism. We have very distinguished speakers. Let us begin with Professor Zeki Saritoprak of John Carroll University.

SARITIOPRAK: Thank you. Before delving into the concept of moderation vis-a-vis the future of American Muslims, it is important to say a few words about the history and composition of American Muslims. Based on the 2014 Pew Research Center study on religion in America, **approximately 1% of American adults is Muslim and of these 44% are between 18 and 29.** This survey does not directly count those under 18, but based on the data from this survey, including the number of households with children and other information, we can assume that the number of Muslim children in the US is higher than 1% of all US children. It is also safe to say that the total Muslim population in the US is increasing in total numbers more than as a share of the overall US population. As a whole, Muslims contribute greatly to the social, economic and civic lives of the United States.

Given the important and lasting role that Muslims will play in American society, and given the tremendous global influence of terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS, the dire questions we must ask is ‘What do young Muslim-Americans need?’ ‘What is the most important need of young American-Muslims?’

Considering the statistics there is no doubt, education is the key to shaping the future of Muslims in America, looking for young generation of Muslims. An education that is based on the philosophy of moderation and inclusiveness. So I will explain that the **madrasa education is not a solution**—and what we see now is madrasa education in America and that is not the solution.

We need to have a new philosophy, a reformed education, basically, for American Muslims. We human beings by our nature seek to be educated; if positive education is not found then negative education will be. And that is very natural, our nature does not accept emptiness, it basically will be filled. In other words, if the Muslim community does not provide proper channels for the education its members, then the teachings of Al-Qaeda and ISIS will find receptive hearts and minds; and that is what is happening.

So what is the philosophy? I would like to make a quotation from Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, a prominent Muslim-Turkish scholar of the 20th century. He was criticizing the madrasa system, he was trying to make a reform and putting the madrasa system but with new modern sciences. He says, “The light of conscience is a science of religion, and the light of reason is the modern sciences.” So both should be enlightened, not only conscience but reason as well. If you do not have modern sciences your reason will be in the dark and that will result in fanaticism. And that is what we’re facing today, as many Muslims are becoming fanatics because the reason is unlit and or the conscience is enlightened but the reason isn’t. I think that is a great problem.

He said, with the mixing of these two, the truth is reflected, the two wings the students will fly with. When they are separated: from the former fanaticism emerges, from the latter doubt and deception emerge. So, actually, we need both to be combined. This was said over a hundred years ago and in different context. How can this be translated in our society today?

I would argue that **Muslim students are exposed to religion sciences without being exposed to the modern sciences.** This is a problem we face in the Islamic world, in Saudi Arabia, in Pakistan as well as in the United States. So there’s one thing that I want to
elaborate and that is the misconception that is leading to the confusion of Muslims and it is very, very important. **Many young Muslims confuse the concept of fanaticism with religiosity.** They are totally different in the Islamic terminology. My field is Islamic theology. In the Islamic theology, fanaticism is called taassub, which is rejected in Islamic theology. Religiosity is called taqva. When you have taqva you become more tolerant. Taassub is leaning to exclusiveness: mine is the right and the others are wrong. So there is a great difference between these two, and unfortunately many Muslims are confusing these, especially young generation.

**Two problems that I see in our education system: literalism and ignorance of the texts.**

Now, to say few words about the earlier discussions that ignorance—sometimes even you have knowledge of religion but that is not enough actually because of literalism. It becomes a problem and that was the case with Kharijites we had in early Islamic era. Today we have neo-Kharijites who are using the same arguments. There is a verse in the Qur’an, it says “If you do not rule according to what God revealed, you are an infidel.” Kharijites used this verse against Ali, the cousin of the Prophet; and eventually Ali was assassinated by one of these Kharijites. So this is a problem.

Another issue is the idea of moderation. **Moderation is actually coming from the Qur’an,** ummatan vasata, a community that is in the middle. But I was shocked when I watched a Muslim preacher, whom I would say hate preacher, saying that “Moderation means being a slave of Jews.” This is unbelievable and 1.5 million people watched that video. Now guess what a young person who doesn't know anything about the essence of the Qur’an and listening to this preacher—what would they get from this film? Well, they would think that moderation is a terrible thing, you are becoming a slave. And that is the problem, which is what we see today. And my argument is that through education we can overcome this.

Now, I will go to my final thoughts. We must remember that the first revealed word of the Qur’an was “read,” not fight, not kill, read. Is that all right? Do we agree on this? “Iqra,” (read) the first Qur’anic command. This is something that has been largely lost on American-Muslims. It is a real shame that I have shared this with all of you as Muslims: **I am saying that despite the long history of Muslims in the US, there isn’t a fully accredited Muslim university in the US.** There must be some attempts but Muslims in the US have mostly focused on political Islam or are highly secularized. Both of these are not part of the straight path.

It is only since 9/11 that most Muslims in this country have begun to take seriously the role of religious education in their lives. This shift, which I hope continues, has led to a greater awareness and understanding of the spiritual nature of Islam—which I would argue is at the heart of Islam. **We need more institutions that focus on education from spiritual Islamic perspective.** We have over 3,000 mosques in the United States. But Islamic institutions of higher learning are of as great an importance and are needed now more
than ever. I believe that if the education philosophy that I am arguing for here had been implemented by American Muslims, there would not have been the Boston marathon bombing, and all of the lives it left scarred would have been saved. To me, it is a tragedy to live in a country with the greatest education institutions in the world and not be aware of our own educational needs.

Muslims in America must establish educational institutions that will educate young people to be morally good citizens, while at the same time providing them with academic training that is top-notch and competitive with that provided by the top schools in this country. What is important is the quality of the Muslims, not the quantity. We Muslims generally say “our number is 1.7 billion people” but where is the quality of the Muslims? That is the important part and I think we are not aware of this case. It is a high quantity of low-quality, and by this I mean the poorly educated Muslims that are the prime targets for recruitment for terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda, ISIS and Al Shabab. Finally, we need to ask and answer this question: “In thinking of the future of Muslims in America, why does a new convert in America need to go to Saudi Arabia to become educated about Islam?” Why do we not provide a place in America where people can go and learn about Islam? If we can answer this question positively, I think that in this country we can overcome the future prospects of radicalization of American Muslims.

GURBUZ: Thank you Dr. Saritoprak. It was a bit tricky for me, for the moderator, to have “finally” and “finally.” But it was at the end. Thank you for your timing as well. Now we will have Dr. Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad.

AHMAD: As-salamu alaikum. Before I begin with my talk on the topic of “The jurisprudential roots of extremism and the Qur’anic antidote: Rape as a Case-Study,” I wanted to say a couple of words about education.

The most important law in the madrasa education system is that education is seen as an equivalent of memorization and not as critical thinking. Any education that we do is going to have to be along those lines. I say this not to add or contrast with what was said before but rather as a segue to my topic, because I think there is a problem with the spread of extremism, is that we do not look critically at the jurisprudence as it’s been handed down. At best what we do is “Let’s not talk about things that make us uncomfortable; let’s pretend that they don’t exist,” and of course, as it has been pointed out earlier, that the radicals will be very happy to point out that it does exist and to make us look foolish in the process.

Instead, what we have to do is contextualize that which is problematic. And the easiest, most important single element we can do is to distinguish the Qur’an from everything else in the Islamic jurisprudence. Because the Qur’an is the one thing where we cannot revise or amend, but we can discuss what it really means in the context of itself as well as in the context of the history of the revelation, and of course, the context Sunnah of the Prophet, sallallahu alayhi wa sallam, himself.

The Muslim community’s rejection of the atrocities of ISIS has been virtually unanimous. However, the defenders of Islam as a religion avoid challenging certain frequently accepted jurisprudential positions that have been cited both by the extremists and by the Islamophobes as a justification for such atrocities. Such positions flatly contradict Qur’anic verses when those are taken in context.
I have chosen to demonstrate this by discussing the question of rape, in particular the claim by ISIS that the raping of captives of war is justified by Islam. Now, I have a number of reasons for taking this as the case study. For one thing, it is something that we’re uncomfortable talking about; therefore, by diving into it, hopefully, we’ll make us more courageous about talking of other less uncomfortable subjects. But it is also because I think that the way this has been criticized so poorly—saying things like, “Well you know slavery is something we used to practice but this is not something we practice now, so this is removed.”

This is not an answer, first off, are you going to say it’s okay to rape slaves? Secondly, we do still have captives; we have captives of war, prisoners of war; we have people who have been imprisoned for criminal activity. Is it okay to rape them? So we have to actually address the subject itself, and not the periphery of the subject. The Qur’an has a general rule against coercion, la ikraha fiddin (no compulsion in religion) in Surah 2, but there are exceptions to this clearly, because if we could never coerce anybody, we could never take any prisoners of war, we could never punish people for their crimes. Obviously there are cases where coercion is permitted. What are those cases?

ISIS would have us believe that when someone is on the losing side of a war—or at least when they are fighting against us, or refuse to recognize our authority once we are in power—that those would justify not only taking away their liberty but also taking away their dignity.

It is interesting this word “ikraha” that occurs in the verse I just quoted occurs only one other time in that form in the Qur’an. It occurs in Surah 24 as a specific rule. In other words, we have a general rule la ikraha fiddin (no compulsion in religion) and then we have a specific rule translation reads, “Force not your maids into prostitution when they desire chastity in order that you may gain in the goods of this life. Yet if anyone compels them—yet even after such compulsion—God is all-forgiving, the most merciful to them.” Now, why did Allah feel it was necessary to point out having made a perfectly general rule against coercion? Why did he have to say and specifically don’t do it in this case?

Well, I think, that is very clear; as I said up until this time of history the coercion of female prisoners of war was not considered unjust. It was Islam that introduced humane treatment of war prisoners such as feeding them and clothing them as one would feed and clothe oneself. Therefore, if prohibition of sexually abusing them was a natural part of this novel code of conduct it had to be spelled out specifically lest anyone think that the hostility that led to their capture somehow excused this form of compulsion in the manner that it excused the captor’s loss of liberty in itself.
Now, this is especially important when we put into the context of a general historical tendency to oppress women, something that has not ended to this day, and I don't mean just in the Muslim world. It is very easy to say “Let us treat male prisoners justly,” and it is another thing to talk about treating female prisoners justly, because of this double standard by which we look at all issues. So this means that these are all related issues; it is not just that you cannot rape a female prisoner, which should be clear enough from this verse without any context, but there are related questions that come up onto how female captives can be treated.

For example, in the standard fiqh, you will often find that female captives can be forced into marriage. This cannot be justified. Forcing a girl into marriage is the equivalent of rape, because marriage requires the consent of both parties. This issue should be made clear as so obvious from the Prophet's discussion with Aisha—May Allah be pleased with her and the peace be upon him—where she said “O God's messenger, should a woman be asked for her consent to her marriage?” and he said “Yes,” and she said, “A virgin if she feels shy and keeps quiet?” And he said, “Her silence means her consent.” Now this hadith is sometimes quoted but not for the obvious intention of the hadith but rather for a kind of perversion of it, saying that if you can somehow intimidate a young girl to keep from speaking out, then this constitutes consent. That is obviously not what the verse means to me. What the verse means to me, if she is yelling or screaming “No!”—pardon me for modern terminology—“No means no.” That is what it means and therefore no exception can be made for a prisoner of war. To see that we understand that there is no exception let me quickly quote three verses, because I'm almost out of time. Sorry, four verses.

Let's start with Surah Al Baqara verse 221, which is translated “Don't marry unbelieving women until they believe. A slave woman who believes is better than a non-believing woman even though she allures you. Don’t marry a girl to unbelievers until they believe. A male slave who believes is better than a non-believing man even though he allures you. God sends unbelievers to the dreaded fire and believers to the garden of bliss and forgiveness. He makes his signs clear to mankind so that they may praise.” This verse seems very clear to make it absolutely uncontroversial that you can marry a slave woman and slave man also, this is very clear. And that constitutes a promotion once wanting to marry they are no longer a captive. This is not a matter of concubinage.

Surah 4 verse 3, “If ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly with the orphans, marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four. But if ye fear that ye shall not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or a captive, which your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice.” Again, it is to prevent doing injustice not to abuse or even to just have illicit sex, sex outside of marriage with a captive, but rather to marry a captive. That this is the correct interpretation that not as many Muslim jurists have said throughout history it is okay to have marriage with a captive without her consent.

Look at similar phrasing in the different context in the same Surah but verse 25,

> If any of you have not the means wherewith to wed free believing women, they may wed believing girls from among those whom your right hands possess: God hath full knowledge about your Faith. Ye are one from another: Wed them with the leave of their owners, and give them their dowers, according to what is reasonable. They should be chaste not lustful nor taking paramours. When they are taken in
wedlock, if they fall into shame, their punishment is half that for free women. This (permission) is for those among you who fear sin. But it is better for you that ye practice self-restraint. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.

It is pretty clear talking about marriage and the woman slave are not among prohibited people to marry. And, Surah 24, Verse 32 “Marry those among you who are single, or the virtuous ones among your slaves, male or female. If they are in poverty, Allah will give them means out of His grace, for Allah encompasseth all, and He knoweth all things.”

This verse is quoted sometimes that it is okay to force a married woman to marry you if she is a slave. That is not in context meaningful compared to the other verses. This must mean that the marriage of a slave can be annulled if “she” wants to marry you and her previous marriage to a non-believer hostile combatant is no longer to be honored. But it doesn’t in any way mean she is to be forced to be married. I think I am out of time, if there was anything confusing I hope you will ask.

GURBUZ: Thank you, now we turn to Dr. Mehdi Aminrazavi.

AMINRAZAVI: Salamun aleikum. My area of work is, I teach Islamic philosophy and theology and logic. And as such I am going to put forth an argument in the philosophical sense, a proposition as we call it. And that is Islamic radicalism (and I will support my argument with evidence) is not the problem; it is a symptom of a problem. And to get to see how and why such a problem has arisen, we have to take step back and look at a few historical precedents.

First and foremost, the soul of Islam is underlined for us. And unfortunately an apologetic approach does not work. In other words, while I completely agree with everything my colleague to the left said, by opening the book, reciting the verses, talking about Islam is peace and peace and so on, it is not going to work. At least, not for the ISISes, and the Taliban of the world as they are reading the same book but they are getting something completely different out of it. This is not exclusive to Islam. It is with regards to all religions—after all Ku Klux Klan and Mother Teresa had come out of the same Bible. It depends on how you interpret.

So we are beyond the point of reciting verses, engaging interpretation, exegesis and hermeneutics, and so on. Certainly sugarcoating the problem is not going to work: Either we are in a serious, serious historical mess—unless we face up to what is really wrong, we are not going to be able to fix it.

So let me go to the bottom of my argument as I call it. The future of Islam, as the title of this event goes, is not a new question; it has been a question since the inception of Islam itself. Islamic intellectual thought began by early mutakallimun or theologians who opened that book, like we do today, and asked such questions as “What is this verse mean, and what does that verse mean, how is this related to that?” Out of that came dozens of theological schools of thoughts, Kharijites, Murja‘un, Mujassamites, and so on. Discussion went on and on. Gradually it became into two camps: those who said “Let’s discuss it” and those who said “We should not discuss it.” Those who said “The book is open to interpretation” and those who took a literalist approach and said “The Lord works in mysterious ways, if the Qur’an says you have to love the hand of God. I do not know what type of hand God has. But it is what it is. Do not question it.”

And so two camps came out of these, which were crystalized into two major schools of theology, mainly, the Mu‘tazilites and the Ash’arites. Mu‘tazilites are the Muslim
rationalists. I won’t go to details, but they generally were receptive to interpretation, to reason, to rationality. And out of that tradition came the engine which pushed the Islamic civilization forward—mainly, the golden age of Islamic civilization, the Ibn Muqaffas, Avicennas, Averroes, Razis, Omar Khayyams, all the mathematicians and so on, came out of that tradition, those who embraced reason. And then, the Ash’arites came as an opposition to them, mainly that we should not be engaged in interpretation, too much reason is detrimental to Islamic civilization.

I will give you one example. **What is absolutely beautiful about this period is that whether these people were for religion or against religion, for interpretation or against it, the overwhelming majority of them lived and was not beheaded.** I give an example here, there was a man called Ibn Rawandi, very few people know about him. He wrote a book in which he made the following argument: “Either revelation is reasonable, or unreasonable. If it is unreasonable, no one should follow what is unreasonable. If it is reasonable, then we should study logic, mathematics and science. In either case, we don't need revelation.” This man was courageous enough to take this book, and wanted to give it to the Khalifah, and the vizier took it and read it and said, “Are you kidding, this will get you killed!” To which he said, “Either the Khalifah is a reasonable and just man or unreasonable and unjust. If he is reasonable and just, then he will see the merit of my argument. If he is unreasonable and unjust, then he should not be Khalifah.”

So the response of the vizier to this argument was to politely say “Go back and do your research.” He wasn’t killed, neither was Omer Khayyam for his Rubaiyat.

I wrote a book about Omar Khayyam called The Wine of Wisdom, I have written extensively on Avicenna, Averroes (Ibn Rushd). **Ibn Rushd says, “Religion is the philosophy of masses. Philosophy is the religion of the spiritual elites,” and he lived a long life and nobody bothered him. That kind of spirit, the spirit of rationalism, which aided the Islamic civilization to go forward, died.** The reason for the death goes beyond the scope of our work here, but the Ash’arite theologians, the orthodox folks who believed in a literalist approach, who don’t believe in interpretation, who are textually orientated only, took the upper hand after the Crusades and remained in power and the result was the stifling of rationalism and reason.

So the question we should be asking ourselves is, **“What conditions have created the ambience which led to the victory of orthodox, whether it’s the medieval period or not.”** My argument is that there are two reasons for this. **There are internal reasons and external reasons. Internal reasons are, we Muslim are to be blamed, our intellectuals are to be blamed for this. They did not do what Western intellectuals did.** A few blocks from here, there was a very famous president, Thomas Jefferson, who took the Bible and didn’t like what he saw. He literally took a razor and cut all the verses that didn't make
sense and produced what is called Thomas Jefferson's Bible as a symbol. I don't know a single Muslim who can do that and survive today, but Western intellectuals did that. Hermeneutics, exegesis, interpretations of all types was born in the West and they pursued that with no fear.

So that is the extent, which is our fault. Our intellectuals failed, our ulama failed, to agree with our previous speaker, our jurists in particular failed. We talk about beheading and cutting the hands off thieves. Very few people remember that these come from the Jewish tradition, not Islamic tradition. The stoning of adulterers to death came from the Jewish tradition, but they stopped practicing it. We are still practicing it, not them. Obvious reason is because they consider it to be medieval practices. They abandon them but these hoodlums continue that tradition. So our jurists failed and failed big time.

Finally there are external reasons. The external reasons cannot be ignored. I am an academic and have been in academia for a long time. The situation between Muslims and their anger with regard to the West is kind of analogous to the Native Americans and the West and the American government, and Blacks and American government or whites. For three hundred years, blacks here were bought, and sold, and lynched and raped, and today our university offers all types of grants and scholarships and so on, to tell the blacks “Bygones are bygones, forget it.” It is easier said than done. The general outrage the black American that is aware of his/her history was, is and will be angry for a long time.

So three hundred years of colonialism, imperialism, overthrowing governments, drawing borders on unnatural lines, which a few bad geographers did in England in the 19th century, either deliberately or out of sheer ignorance—these are all contributing factors. I have mentioned an earlier case: When we watched, about a year-and-a-half ago, the invasion of the Israeli into the Gaza strip. 2000 people were killed in a matter of two months, 700 of whom were children, and not only did the world not throw a tantrum, but when Palestinians went to the General Assembly to condemn this barbarity, the US vetoed it. If you are a Palestinian, or you are from Palestinian descent or you are a Middle Easterner whose parents or uncles and so on has been killed, good luck not being transformed by this experience.

It’s not just one, from the colonization by England to what France did in North Africa. I have utmost sympathy for what happened in France and I condemn these acts of terrorism, but do people remember the nice wonderful French have killed one million Algerians in Algeria, in 1960, what they did in Morocco and what they did in Algeria. So every event has a cause as we say in philosophy and the West has a lot to blame itself and unless we engage in a national debate about our foreign policy and engage in some introspection and self-reflection, it is not going to solve the problem. So we Muslims are at fault but so is the West.

GURBUZ: Thank you Dr. Aminrazavi. Now we have Dr. Ahmet Kuru.

KURU: I would like to thank the Rethink Institute for organizing this forum. As a political scientist, when I look at the recent literature about political violence, we see the increasing number of Muslim actors. That wasn’t the case in the early 20th century with the First World War and the Second World War and the communist and fascist activists. But in the 21st century, violence is becoming more and more a Muslim phenomenon as we have seen in the civil wars in Yemen, Syria and Iraq, also the state oppression of different groups in Egypt as well as certain terrorist organizations.
If there is one thing that the scholars of violence agree on, it is that it is a multi-causal phenomenon. There is not a single cause, but a major cause is authoritarianism. When you grow up in an authoritarian regime, the alternatives of opposition are limited and that will lead you to certain radicalization. And in a world where about 55 percent of the countries are democratic, out of 49 Muslim-majority states only 20 percent are democratic. So 80 percent of them are authoritarian and even the remaining 20 percent have many problems. And then authoritarianism is linked to social economic underdevelopment. If you put the oil revenues aside, Muslim countries are very poor; there is unemployment and other problems. So then, each problem is linked to another and there is a vicious circle.

This is puzzling to think why there is such a vicious circle in the Muslim-majority countries and it is extremely puzzling to think about their history. They had a golden era from 7th to 12th, 13th century in terms of intellectual vibrancy and then later on still certain military might under Ottomans and others. So “What went wrong?” is a right question, although sometimes some scholars gave us the wrong answers.

So when you ask this question in the Middle East and among many Muslims, the general answer is the colonization and blaming the others: They came and occupied and destroyed. Definitely I also give some credit to that, but when the Europeans came the Muslims already had problems. When the colonization began, the Ottoman Empire was already collapsing. So, therefore, also philosophically, you should start with your internal problem, rather than keep blaming the outsider.

Another group of people in the West—we call them Islamophobists, Orientalists, or in the Middle East certain secularists—they blame Islam, saying that Muslims have these problems because of their religion and culture. It’s Islam. But Muslims had a golden era, Islam did not create any problem, it was a very important motive for development. My argument is that it’s neither Islam nor colonization, but the way politics and religion were structured was the historical problem and still is the problem.

If you look at the Muslim history, it is divided into three periods. One period is from 7th to 12th century. As my colleague emphasized, there were philosophers, scholars better than Europe. Even a British king in 8th century printed a golden coin, which bore on it the print of La ilaha illallah Muhammadun Rasulullah, because at the time Muslim dinar was like a US dollar today. So Muslims had a brilliant time in terms of philosophy, economy, and bringing together a huge geography from 7th to 12th century.

It was the time when the merchants, today’s bourgeoisie, were emphasized. Because the Prophet himself was a merchant, and then the Muawiyah and then the founders of Umayyad dynasty was merchants, trade was an important thing. Plus, there was certain level of freedom of thought, there were thinkers, and it was decentralized.
But then came Mongol invasion and Crusaders, two centuries, even three centuries of security concern, and Muslims were obsessed with this idea of security. They established three military Turco-Mongol empires: Ottoman Empire, Safavids, and Mughals. They also had the technology, gunpowder. They centralized everything. Politics and religion became centralized. Although these empires, especially the Ottomans, revived the Muslim might, in terms of military to a certain extent, the economic revival was limited, and intellectually, there was no recovery whatsoever.

So this whole legacy is inherited today. When you look at 49 Muslim-majority countries, they are, 80 percent of them are totally authoritarian, and the rest are very problematic, like Turkey. Why? Because politics is very centralized. There is a patron-client relationship between the rulers and the people. It’s either based on oil, or other ways of producing rent. And intellectually there is not enough innovation, creativity, and competition. Why? Because religion really constitutes a major aspect of thought, and then religion is very much centralized and monopolized, even in a Caesaropapist way that Byzantium Empire produced. Religion is the junior branch of the government structure. Wherever you go, from Turkey to Egypt, you see the mosques are centrally controlled, and it doesn’t matter whether secularists are in power or Islamists.

I went to Cairo in January 2013, six months before the coup, and I had a discussion with their Director of Religious Affairs in Cairo. And I ask him about the mosque control. He said that “There are still some mosques that are outside our control, we are going to put everything under government control.” So this is Muslim Brothers’ mentality. See, it’s not very different from Kemalists in Turkey. Why? Because there is a very strong historical legacy.

So what is the result? The result is that, for example, when the printing press was invented in China, then became a fashion in Europe in 15th century, it took three centuries for Muslims to establish the first printing press in Istanbul. And even after its establishment, there was very little demand. In 18th century in the Ottoman Empire, the printing press printed only 20,000 books. In the same century in Europe, four billion books were printed. The literacy rate in England in 1688 was 60-64 percent, whereas two centuries later in Egypt, it was still 47 percent. In the Ottoman Empire in 1897, toward the end of the empire, there were about 300 public libraries. The total number of books was 100,000-115,000, which is shameful, because even a single library in Europe at the time has 100,000 books. And, if you go back in the history, 1,000 years ago in Cairo, in Andalusia, there were libraries with thousands of books.

So what I am suggesting is that, whenever I make this suggestion, people say “Oh, you are promoting Western liberalism.” No, this is not promoting Western liberalism. This is something reminding Muslims that in their Golden Era, there were peoples like Imam Azam, the founding fathers of Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi schools of law, and they were not civil servants. They were not paid by the government. Imam Azam was a merchant and an intellectual in his sense, and he refused to obey the government, he refused to be paid by the Caliphate.

So in a nutshell, we have the problems of violence, authoritarianism, and socioeconomic underdevelopment. These problems are neither coming from Islam nor colonization, but they are coming from the power structure, which is extremely centralized, extremely totalitarian in the Muslim world, and then the power structure also made religion and religious orthodoxy a servant of it. This is coming from the post-Mongolian-Turco gunpowder empires. It’s still reproducing itself through oil, through blaming
others, through authoritarian means, and this is a vicious circle that needs to be broken down. As long as this monopoly and totalitarian structure exist, the content of the religion does not matter, because the good product cannot be distinguished from the bad product, because you don't have free enterprise, you don't have free competition. You cannot see good product in terms of religion, in terms of economy, in terms of politics.

And finally let's look at Turkey, for example. Many people are amazed how quickly Erdogan brought together such a dictatorial power. Because somehow, I think, he is smart enough to understand that there are two sources of power in Turkey and many Muslim countries. One is putting economy under state control. It’s the Ottoman legacy. There was no private property; people were investing their money to vaqfs, foundations, to get rid of confiscation by the central government, because of the fear of the government. So unlike Europe—where there was decentralization, independent bourgeois, independent intellectuals—highly centralized state. And, today, Erdogan is using this state-controlled economy plus religious orthodoxy through the Diyanet. And when you combine these two, there is no way, no room for democracy, no room for innovation and creativity.

So we have to focus on the problem of this totalitarian monopolistic political and religious structure in the Muslim countries.

GURBUZ: Thank you Dr. Kuru. So we have now Q and A. I’ll start with our presenters here. Dr. Saritoprak, I'd like to start with the Kharijite and neo-Kharijite you mentioned, that “literalism.” And especially in terms of how to cope with Salafism. Is it the part of the problem of violence we're talking about? If we define it as the problem or part of the problem, should we make distinction among Salafis? Quietist Salafists, those who would be called as puritans. There are some politicos. There are some jihadists. Even there are some reports on quietist Salafism if it should be a cure to the jihadist Salafism. So, how to cope with Salafism?

Regarding with Dr. Kuru, indeed this is related with this. The core question is about the religious authority. So, in that sense, the youngsters are called to deny the religious traditional authority in the name of Salafism and some other forces and to go back to the roots, to go back to the original, that what we call “fundamentalism” in a comparative perspective. So, in that sense, I'd like have your opinion about the crisis of religious authority. You mentioned that “great imams were not civil servants.” And now, maybe we don't have great imams anymore, so the youngsters are vulnerable to the ISIS message.

Mustafa Gurbuz

And Dr. Ahmad, I’d like to, also, think about ISIS and the question of religious authority in your case because I’m thinking about the converts, those who are coming to the house of Islam and not having the traditional understanding of Qur’an, and may be not
having the ability to understand the Qur’an. There is a new report published this week, *ISIS in America: From Retweets to Raqqa*, by George Washington University, which is looking at those who are arrested for ISIS in this year, looking at their profiles. And what we see is that the converts are overrepresented among American ISIS supporters, if we add up the numbers in terms of those who are “born-again” converts to Islam. So, **how we should think about this challenge about the converts as “vulnerable population” to ISIS messages?** And the question of authority comes back here.

And finally my question for Dr. Aminrazavi about the *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) issue. What are the main obstacles in the Muslim world to take some steps toward what Tariq Ramadan calls a “radical reform”? From your talk, I’d like to also ask if the alternative to literalism is rejecting the religious tradition at all? In terms of the examples you give, you know: **Should we make a secular reasoning, rejecting all the religious authority? But then we may be losing the legitimacy as the authority to make ijtihad.** So please clarify for us. We start with Dr. Saritoprak.

**SARITOPRAK:** Thank you. The word “salaf” actually, in Islamic tradition, is very positive. Because we have the concept of “Salaf Salih,” the pious early generation, which is the Companions of the Prophet. And I think, because this is very positive, modern Wahhabis are using this term to attract more people. The Salaf, early generations were not literalist, they were really open-minded. So that’s why we have huge Islamic civilization that led humanity to the zenith of civilization. **I do not say that all Wahhabis are violent, but the idea is really easily leading to violence—can lead to violence and it leads to violence in many cases.**

I was giving a talk in St. Paul University on my book *Islam’s Jesus* and I focused on dialogue among Muslims, Christians, and Jews. A Muslim rose and said “I don’t accept dialogue with Christians and Jews.” I asked why. He said “Because the Qur’an says ‘do not take Christians and Jews friends.’” So that’s literalism. Well, that’s very clear in the Qur’an, “Do not take as friends” OK, we’re done! There is no way to come together. Then I said “The Prophet says that you can marry with a Jewish woman or a Christian woman. How you can marry someone that you cannot take a friend?” Well, he stopped, he could not answer that question. I said “I wrote an article, ‘Islamic Social Policy towards to the People of the Book,’ that was published in the *Journal of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. I recommend that you read this article and then come and we can talk about it.”

Because we have Islamic scholars who have interpreted these verses that this friendship, actually, is based on qualities. There are some Jews who have good qualities and they are much better than Muslims who have bad qualities. There are some Christians who have good qualities and they are much better than Muslims who have bad qualities. So the focus is not on individuals but on the quality of people. So this literalism is problematic. And I think, in order to get rid of this literalism, we have to educate people in a proper way. Otherwise, we will continue to face this problem.

**AHMAD:** Well, I wish you’d ask me a different question. Not that your question is not a good question but it’s too good of a question that I cannot answer in a short period of time, it requires too much nuance.

**GURBUZ:** But I know that you’re at American University engaged with youth. And you know these youngsters, I remember you talked about Halloween as well at American University.
AHMAD: Well, okay, I'll put it in that context. But let me start by saying I don't agree that literalism per se is the problem. Or that rejection of rationalism is the problem. But I think, rejection of tolerance is the problem. Consider the case of the person, the guy who says he can't be in interfaith dialogue because he does not want to be friends, cannot be friends with Jews and Christians. That's not literalism. That word in Arabic “awliya.” Well, it can be used to mean friends in a metaphorical sense. Technically, in Islamic technical-legal terms, that means senior allies, and protectors, guardians. It says nothing to do with friendship. If he wants to talk about interfaith dialogue, then he should be more literal and turn to the verse that deal with the dialogue, which is “Invite the People of the Book to Islam. And if they decline, invite them to follow their own religion. And if they decline to do that, say then peace, at least, we submit to the will of God even if you don't.” That's the verse that deals with interfaith dialogue.

Well, in the context of American University, what I find the biggest problem is again, what I was referring to in my talk, people who have been raised in this educational system, memorizing stuff but do not questioning. ‘ve had, you know, people—because this is recorded and released, I don't want to say too much about who they are—let me just say there are certain people, who if I would give a presentation just like here, would say “No, no, no, what are you saying? Scholars are unanimous on this.” And I would say that the scholars are not unanimous, they have differences on this and they would say “No, no, no,” because they were taught that the official state position is the unanimous position of Islam, and anything else is not Islam.

And therefore, they are not siding with the Ash’arites who were actually more tolerant than the Mu'tazilites in some respect. If some Westerners want to say that Islam is not tolerant, because we had no inquisition like they did, they would point to mihna, when the Mutezilites, who did not allow anyone other than Mutezilites to come into public office. It was the Ash’arites who started the Sunni compact, and said, “Look, you are Hanefi, Safi, Hanbeli, Maliki and we may disagree, and we may think that the disagreements are important, but we are still all Muslims, and Allah knows better and we will let him judge between us.” It was the Kharijites who were the intolerant ones. Why do you think the Kharijites today are only one percent of the Muslim population? And it is only the most liberal and most tolerant group of the Kharijites, the Ibadis, who still survived. It’s tolerance that made the Islamic civilization great.

AMINRAZAVI: All right first comes first, let me respond to my colleague’s comment. I do agree with you that tolerance is important. And tolerance comes from openness, and openness comes from embracing reason, allowing marginal error, “Even though I believe such and such, I could be wrong.”

And that is not something that the ISIS mentality or Taliban mentality, anyone else, allows for; they are right, they are absolutely right. If you should disagree, you should be dead, including all of us who are here. But let me address the question that the moderator asked, and that is the question of Ijtihad. As you know we have five schools of law in Islam, four of them in Sunni law and one in Shi'a law, Jafari law, of course there is options of them so on and so forth, we don't have time to go over all of them.

By and large, this division has been put for one thing, for reasons unknown to me, of course, babul tafsir, the gate of interpretation, in Sunni law is closed after the four schools of law. Supposedly everything that could have been said was said, and therefore, that was the case. Not all Sunni Muftis agree with that, not all ulama agree with that, but
certainly Hanbalites agree with that. Like all religious matter, you will not find a unanimous view on that.

But the by-product of that is important because you are either a muqallid, a follower or you are a mujtahid, a leader, an d’lim. So since the overwhelming majority of people are not d’lims they are therefore followers, and how dare to question a mujtahid who has spent his entire life studying in the field of jurisprudence. It’s like someone who knows nothing is questioning the professor of law basically. This has been detrimental to Islamic civilization; it has contributed to the closing of the Muslim mind in that realm. And that’s what I said our jurists and intellectuals particularly have failed to do, the daring thing, which is to either open the gate of Ijtihad, practice it or update some of its law. As I mentioned some of our laws, the large part of Islamic law comes from Jewish law, by-product of the Medinan period, whereas today contemporary Jews have updated it, they don’t practice all of it; we do, a lot of it. So that’s one problem.

As to the alternative to fundamentalism, I don’t think is secularism or atheism or so on. I think the alternative of fundamentalism is what has been there before the rise of the political Islam, namely traditionalism. Your average traditional Muslim fifty years ago in the streets of Cairo, or Tehran, or Karachi, if you paid them a million dollars to politicize a person who would say “No, I’m late for my prayer.” The overwhelming majority of Muslims in the last thousand four hundred years lived in the traditional Muslim life, which was the fulfillment of all sorts of obligations.

So the fact that suddenly, suddenly after Europeans have produced their own Nazis, we have produced our Nazis, goes back to looking at conditions, which breeds, which contributes to the rise of such things. The situation in Germany before the rise of Hitler was very similar to the situation of Russians when Lenin and Stalin came, which is similar to situation of Chinese under occupation by Japanese when Mao came, and so on so forth. And we can draw parallel from that the situation in Islamic world is very, very frustrating.

KURU: I think your question was leading me to talk about some recommendations, some solutions. So, my first book was on secularism and I compared the United States, France, and Turkey, arguing that the problem in Turkey was the French-type assertive secularism. If we somehow emulate the religious-friendly American secularism, Turkey will be a model and everything would be very nice. So the Arab Spring collapsed and my Turkish model project also collapsed. And now I’m writing about the failure of the Turkish model. So, I realize that the constitution is not the problem, political structure is not the problem. The problem is much deeper.

We need to go from secularism to secularization and Birol Baskan, I think, he is right to say that we need secularization. In terms of what? In terms of differentiation of spheres. Jose Casanova in Georgetown has a wonderful book explaining that. What happened in Europe and the West was the differentiation of spheres; and it was not done as a top-down project but as a result of the sophistication of life. The complexity of the life we live in requires specialization and division of labor. We don’t have Aristotle today. If Aristotle applied in our universities for a job, we wouldn’t give him a job, saying “What is your expertise man? You’re talking about everything. Then you don’t know anything.” But in the ancient times, that was normal. And the ulama are still thinking like thousand years ago that they can talk about anything and everything; because they are the mujtahid, the rest of men are muqallid, so they know everything. No, they don’t know everything, they know very limited things.
So, my suggestion is that the problem of central authoritarianism in the Muslim countries is directly related with the totalitarian understanding of fiqh. In that any faqih can talk about anything, from sex to politics to traffic, anything with no expertise. They only know Qur’an and hadith and they think they can talk about anything with little knowledge about the real world. So we have to differentiate politics, religion, art, science, sport, economy, academia. Otherwise, you end up with Tayyip Erdoğan. He thinks that he is the best sculptor, best architect, he can talk about the military issues, he can tell people that they should have three children minimum, not smoke, drink ayran, and everything. But Ataturk was not different. Ataturk also was appreciated as the best scholar, best teacher, best pharmacist. Because, this is the historical legacy. You have a monopolistic political power but monopolistic religious perspective, and we have to differentiate them; we need more intellectual and bourgeoisie, we need less military person and religious orthodoxy.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I wanted to ask you a question about education in the Islamic world. I noticed that after 9/11 there was an upsurge from programs of Islamic Studies in the United States. I guess a lot of the scholars thought “Wow, these people, if representative at all, have purely strong feeling of us, we in the West, let’s find out some more about them,” and there was an explosion of Islamic Studies programs in the United States. I’m wondering, at the same time, were there comparable thinkers in the Islamic world saying “Wow. Our sons and daughters have purely strong feelings about the West, maybe we should learn more about the West”? Well, I do not know, I need to learn about this. Was there any similar search in the Islamic world, and what are they in fact, and added programs let’s learn scholarly serious bases, let’s learn a bit more about the West?

GURBUZ: I would, with a note, turn to the panel in terms of the East in the West and the West in the East. What we have (in common) when we talk about the 21st century, because in the previous panel the discussion was more about 7th century vs. 21st century. Could we think about 21st century and this humanity, this legacy all of us not only West, but also these educational things within these spheres that could be revived?

AHMAD: The short answer to your question is “No.” They did not set up institutes of Occidental Studies or anything of the sort. A slightly longer answer is this ties in with my comment earlier about thinking and the attitude about thinking. Knowledge is seen in the Muslim world as memorization, not as research. Even in the fields where Muslims are becoming really good in modern sciences, in medicine, your doctor might be Pakistani, or in engineering; those are fields of practice not of research.

When I was an astrophysicist, I was one of the very few people in the hard sciences who was a Muslim. You have to break out of that context to think that knowledge is just memorization, and to think if I want to learn about the West then I go and look at what the Qur’an says about the other and that would apply. Instead, say no, you have got to look at as the Qur’an says of “the signs in the heavens and the earth,” travel through the earth and see what the faith of the other nations. We do not look at it that way unfortunately, so the answer is no.

AMINRAZAVI: Just to offer a different perspective, the answer is “Yes.” With all due respect, the proof is in the pudding. The reason we are here is because our parents sent us here, and not to Sudan. In the 40s and 50s, massive attempts were made by all parents in the Middle East and the Islamic World, they wanted their children to learn what was happening and why the West was so successful. So son and daughter, go there and learn
from their civilization. Even before that the pioneers of Islamic fundamentalism, such people as Cemaleddin Sadabadi, Sayyid Qutb, they themselves came to America to study the Western civilization and get first-hand knowledge of it. I don’t know how many million Middle Easterners came to America, Europe and studied, primarily because we wanted to know what is happening here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: One of the biggest mistakes we as a community have made is to let the wrong translations of Qur’an prevail in the market. There are, I don’t know, over 2 million copies of the Hilali Khan translation, those worst translations, and are one of the reasons for Islamophobia. Every Islamophobe that you can name, Robert Spencer, Pamela Geller, Brigitte, I have been in touch with them, contact with them; they all cite these mistranslations. And thank God we have worked on it, the translations is corrected, but there are still 60 verses of the Qur’an that are deliberately mistranslated to do the same thing that you have talked about earlier, not make friends with Jews and Christians, to create that hostility, that needs to be fixed. Sean Hannigan is my friend now has changed in the last two-and-a-half years, he has quitted bashing the Qur’an. I have sat down with him and showed him the Muhammad Assad translation, how to read the Qur’an, how it was misinterpreted. So the reason of hope there, you can bring a change if you get positively engaged with people, but to see a different point of view, they are not going to turn down. Just wanted to share that.

AMINRAZAVI: I just wanted to say that Isis and the Taliban read it from the original language and they still misinterpret it.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you, I have a robust question for Dr. Ahmed, but before that I want to furnish a document in response to Dr. Aminrazavi. You say that laws have been taken into the Sharia from Judaism, and you cited stoning to death. Whereas it was narrated Aisha says “Indeed, there was a verse, the Qur’anic verse revealed on stoning. Indeed it was written on paper and kept under a cushion. When Allah’s Apostle, peace be upon him, passed away, we were occupied by that, and a domestic goat entered and ate it up.” This is Sahih Ibn Majah, Hadith number 1944. Even if after we bring it from Jews, we have to had an Islamic stamp on it.

Dr. Ahmed, your speech was very sweet, I don’t know if it was sugar-coated or if it was really sweet. Why didn’t you mention in Surah el-Muminoon in verses 5 and 6, which clearly says Muslims could have sex with captives? Based on these documents, now your opponent is not me but your opponent is Maududi, his Tafhimul Qu’ran chapter four part 24. It explains and clearly says that Muslim winner soldiers and the Caliph have every right to do whatever they want with captives. Dr. Zakir Naik, I don’t like him, but millions of Muslims are engaged with him, he sadly, and openly, and clearly supports captivity. So does Dr. Fawzan, the chief educationer of Saudi Arabia.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you and in the interest of time, I will be very brief. Dr. Saritoprak, you talked about the sources of this problem. I fully agree with you what’s in the happening in the Muslim countries, but in the US context I think this is where we spent most of our day talking about how we can educate our Muslim youth and prevent them from being radicalized. I take an issue with you when you say we need more Muslim colleges in universities and all this. I think that it is the responsibility of the parents to teach their children very early on about true Islam and to get them to practice it. If we were channel more Muslim youths into Islamic schools I am afraid that is going to just do the reverse of what you had in mind.
SARITOPRAK: I think you have a very good point. My idea is that we should focus on education. When these early Americans who settled in the United States, the first thing they thought was education. We first think of mosques. You can pray in any place, you do not have to have a mosque to pray but you have to have a school to educate. And that is our problem, I think, and my goal is to change our mentality of the importance of education. So I would say that they should go to public school, they should go to other schools. However, what we are having in mosque schools is very limited, only religion and not a high level of education. And I think that would be causing some problems. I have some students who were suddenly becoming different and I realized they were taking some Wahhabi ideas. So I spoke with and tried to convince them that this is not what Islam would say. This is the problem we face.

AHMAD: Thank you for that excellent question, and I very strongly believe that one has to take the whole Qur’an at its own context. I left that verse out not because I wanted to simplify my task but simply because I did not have the time to go into it. I did try to rebut what’s in it there is a context provided by other verses. On the other issue of whether you can take a concubine, I stand by what I said. However, bear in mind that the topic I spoke of was rape and even if you take this verse out of context and say this allows for concubinage, it still doesn’t give no authority for rape.
Panel III
Extremism and Challenges of Coexistence Between Muslims and Non-Muslims

Margaret Johnson (Moderator)
Senior Researcher, Institute for Islamic and Turkish Studies

Asma Afsaruddin
Professor in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at Indiana University in Bloomington

Abdul Karim Bangura
Director of The African Institute and Professor of Research Methodology and Political Science at Howard University

Arsalan Iftikhar
International human rights lawyer, global media commentator and author

Asma Uddin
Legal Counsel at The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and Founder and Editor-in-Chief of altmuslimah.com
JOHNSON: Hello, I think we should go ahead and start this panel. I am Margaret Johnson I will be moderating this panel. So we are going to proceed in the same fashion. And our panel today is on extremism as challenges of coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims. And obviously in the West right now, we are at the elections cycle and... it is a very pertinent topic. And we are going to start with Asma Afsaruddin. And she is professor of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at Indiana University in Bloomington. And she has authored several books including one that just came out, and so I got to get a chance to look at it (Contemporary Issues in Islam). And without further ado, Dr. Afsaruddin is going to talk about coexistence in Western societies.

AFSARUDDIN: Assalamu Aleykum. Good afternoon. It is lovely to be here. I wanted to start by thanking Rethink Institute, like everyone else, for the opportunity to get together and exchange ideas, especially about a very important topic of today. I am going to talk on the challenges of coexistence in a broader vein, and not just about in Western societies but as foundational principles. So all morning and early afternoon we have been talking about battling extremism, and I think we would all agree that what is at stake here, at least partially, is ideas. And there is a fundamental question that may be posed: How may we replace bad ideas that lead to extremism? And I think all of us in this room would agree that these are bad Ideas. And how we can replace these bad ideas with good ideas that would undermine extremism?

To do so I would argue that it is necessary to meet extremists to the certain extent on their own ground. And we have to return to our foundational task mentioned in Qur’an as Dr. Imam-ad-Dean Ahmad, who unfortunately left, stressed in his presentation. And critically engage their exegesis of scripture. Now this does not mean simply rehashing past views. Given our own historical context in the rights of modernity, we have vastly changed circumstances. We can in fact read scripture with fresh eyes. And take exegesis in a direction that our premodern predecessors could not have conceived of.

So I want to focus today on two concepts of ethical principles that are drawn from the Qur’an, which can serve us the basis for promoting harmonious relationships among diverse people and especially among diverse faith communities. And these concepts are: first, the knowledge of one another, in Arabic at-ta’arruf, which is based on respect of diversity and difference; and secondly the notion of the commonality of human beings based on righteousness and ethical conduct rather than on religious labels and denomination.

So let me start with the concept of knowledge of one another. The concept of ta’arruf or knowledge of one another derives from Qur’an 49:13, which states “O humankind, We have created you from male and female and made you into nations and tribes that you might get to know one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in God’s sight of Allah is the one who is the most righteous.”

The famous premodern Muslim exegete Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, who I take is known by most of you, and he died in 923 CE, explains this verse emphasizing only on the basis of piety, the word that we have heard mentioned earlier in its Arabic form – taqwa. It is only on the basis of piety that we may distinguish between human beings, not on the basis of lineage and descent. And he said that we should honor our relatives and interact with them. He quotes a hadith, saying of the Prophet Muhammad, in this context which he relates to all humans were descendant from Adam and Eve. Indeed, the Prophet
asserts, “God will not question you regarding your pedigree and tribal affiliation in the Day of Judgment, for only the most righteous is the noblest before God.”

In our contemporary period, the significance of Qur’an (41:13) lies in the fact that it offers us clear scriptural mandate for embracing existing diversity among peoples, and to respect pluralism and beliefs that we encounter. And so we can go beyond al-Tabari in engaging this verse.

Here we can bring a related verse from the Qur’an, 5:48, which further underscores this notion which states, “For every one of you we have appointed a law and way of life, and if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has given you. So, hasten to do good works to God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you incline to differ.”

And these two verses 40:13 and 5:48 are there as crucial proof text that can be involved to indicate divine sanction of religious pluralism. Possibly the most significant part of these verse’s statement “For every one of you we have appointed the law and way of life...” Every religio-cultural community is thus regarded as having his own law and it’s a way of life and capable of attaining spiritual growth in keeping with this law and way of life. And this is further emphasizing the next part of the verse which states, “And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community.” It would not have been difficult for God after all to fashion a single community out of humankind. But the Qur’anic view is that pluralism is a divinely mandated feature, which adds richness and variety to human existence. And each community’s laws and way of life should be such as to ensure growth and enrichment of life without causing harm to others. Beyond this proviso a wide variety of local customs and cultural variations has traditionally been tolerated in many Islamic societies through time.

The last part of the Qur’anic verse states that everyone will return to God and it is He who will make you truly understand all that on which you are accustomed to differ. There is a parallel verse in Qur’an 6:108, which drives on this message more forcefully and it states, “Do not revile those idols [whom] they call upon besides God, in case they revile God out of hostility. “Both verses stress that is not for human beings to pronounce on the correctness of religious doctrines, since that leads you to dissension and strife in the world (7:41). Denigrating someone’s deeply held religious beliefs is very likely to invite a retaliatory response as the verse points out. The initial act of denigration is one of supreme ungraciousness and has no place in the Qur’anic ethics in the increasingly global ethics today. Humans themselves should be concern of the performance of good deeds and refrain from pronouncing on the salvific (8:05) nature of other’s affiliations. This is a
powerful Qur’anic principle that is in perfect accord with the spirit of our own pluralist age. And I would argue that this was not necessarily apparent to our predecessors because they lived in a very different world.

A number of Muslim scholars in the modern period have begun to re-emphasize these Qur’anic principles of human non-judgment and non-interference in matters of faith, hoping to convince the skeptics among the core religious leaders that the genuine regard for religious inclusiveness within Islam on the basis of the scriptural proof text. Extremists among Muslims today, however, resurrected the doctrine of takfir, we heard this mentioned earlier, which means the acquisition of unbelief that was wielded by a minority dissident group in the 7th century known as Khawarij, which means those who seceded. According to this doctrine, these dissidents consider the overwhelming majority of Muslims who disagreed with them particularly on the question of leadership of the community as lapsed Muslims. Such lapsed Muslims as they saw it could ever be legitimately fought against until they capitulated, a chilling harbinger of today’s minority extremists’ views. It is furthermore noteworthy that Qur’an 49:13, which goes beyond simple toleration of our diversity of background. It further advocates that one should proactively get to know one another and therefore learn about one another—again in Arabic li ta’arafu.

My second point: the commonality of human beings. The commonality of human beings based on righteousness is a belief that may be regarded as naturally proceeding out of the Qur’an’s regard for diversity based on religion. As I briefly discussed, the Qur’an asserts (10:08) all righteous believers will receive the reward from God as in verse 2:62, which may be known to many of you, which basically asserts all those who believe, and that include Jews, Christians, Sabians, they will all receive the reward in the next world. According to this Qur’anic vision, believers come to the aid of one another. Again whether they be Christians, Jews or Muslims, and I would argue increasingly in our modern context with any religion at all, and then to work with one another and enjoining what is right and preventing what is wrong, which is a basic moral and ethical principle in Islam. And this joint venture stress clearly in verse 22:40 which declares, “If God had not restrained some people by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques where God’s name is mentioned frequently would have been destroyed.”

And it should be noted that this verse is part of the first revelation allowing Muslims to take up arms to defend themselves. That is to carry a military jihad against pagan Meccans who violently persecuted them. Additionally, it allows Muslims to come to the defense of all believers when they are wrongfully attacked by others. The Qur’an’s ecumenical call to action in defense of all houses of worship—I want to emphasize that—is very important, especially in our modern context. **Inclusivist reading of foundational religious texts which promote a pluralist worldview are thus imperative for people of faith who wish to combat intolerance in their midst.** It is essential, as Fazlur Rahman has observed, that Muslims see beyond the historical formulations of their faith and return to the wellsprings of the Qur’an for moral and spiritual renewal today. In this matter Muslims will be able to, and I am quoting from Fazlur Rahman, “to distinguish clearly between normative Islam and historical Islam.” So what I am arguing is basically is the revival of religious literacy among Muslims, I think it was a point made by Dr. Saritoprak, who I hope is still here. And therefore we still need to emphasize education. Again, I think it is the key to this project and thereby becoming reacquainted with the diversity of religion and intellectual heritage. And this will allow Muslims to deal with contemporary issues in creative and credible ways. And we see some of this is already happening. And
when I say creative I really do mean innovative, fresh readings of all texts, particularly the Qur’an, and we have by no means exhausted the possible meanings that we can derive from those texts. Thank you very much.

JOHNSON: Thank you very much. And now we are going to hear from Abdul Karim Bangura. I want to mention that he is the author of 86 books, 600 scholarly articles. I think he is more than one person because he is fluent in a dozen African languages and six European languages. So he is going to talk to us today about challenging metaphors in our discourse on Islam as a strategy to combat extremism.

BANGURA: Thank you. Before I deliver my humble findings, I want to beg you for just one minute to address three issues that came up, I will talk about them very quickly so you don’t deduct it from my presentation time. A wonderful brother from the State Department asked the most important question after the keynote address this morning. And his question was, “Are Muslim leaders, scholars and others really challenging these extremist messages out there?” If you read Rabbi Michael Schneider’s recent article, he says, “Muslims do speak out thoughtfully and consistently, we Americans are just not listening.” But there are many Muslims that are speaking out. Why is it we cannot see what is influencing anyone’s perspective. But I am convinced in my heart that there are some folks who would have taken the wrong path. At least one of those I said may not be the correct message. And he also asked the question “Why we are teaching about the Muslim world and Islam in the West, are they doing the same thing on the other side of the aisle. How many American universities do we have all about the Middle East or Muslim World? How many universities and extension campuses in the Middle East? Yes, this education is also taking place in those parts of the world. It is just we do not hear about it, because the dominant culture and the dominant media resides in the West.

Unfortunately, our sister Nadia Oweidat has left, she gave a very spirited presentation which I think the things we hear from the other side. And these are the things they complain about Muslim world, those who spent a great amount of time at that part of world to do the kind of work that we do. But those who are mostly engaged in peace education, peace movement of Palestine and other places are never reported in Western media. Those are also on the ground known. A lot of good things happening that we never hear about, because we don’t control that media.

It is unfortunate that our younger sister thinks that Internet is going to make a difference in scholarship beyond the studying these problems. When as a computer scientist when I heard about the Arab Spring, the concept that neither exists in Arabic language, it was something that was concocted here by a professor at the Johns Hopkins University that flourished and took over. This Muslim youth organized, they are coordinated, planned
activities to go through so-called Arab Spring—it was a myth. Computer revelations on Facebook, YouTube and others revealed that most of those activities are taking place here and we are transferring it to the over there. So let’s be very careful how we accept these so-called new technology and these so-called revolutions that are taking place.

Now that wondered if my time is all gone, in the op-ed piece that the great leader of the Hizmet movement Fethullah Gulen warned us just three weeks before Paris. It challenges us to really combat this extremist behavior, not only in the economic, political but also in religious discourses in how we engage these folks. And when my proposal was accepted I wrote a 36-page paper,⁴ which I reduced to ten points that it looks like 60 single-spaced pages. Anybody who is interested please just send me an email or through the folks who organized today’s event you can get a paper.

So I am not going to go through the paper. But what I did was groundwork in a metaphorical, linguistic approach by looking at the confessional metaphors, poetic metaphors, conceptual mixed, nominal and then predicative. That was not enough for me, “How these metaphors are being manipulated?” And then I began with the fact that I was a Muslim, who attended Roman Catholic school and served as an altar boy, who studied Judaism with rabbis in the room. I could not help but go back to all these revolutions to see how many verses in the tongue they are advised of. It is very easy to nitpick and like the Christians say even the Devil quote from the Bible. Very easy sometimes to be blind to say “We cannot say ‘this is Islam, and this is not Islam.’” And that is just a myth. No matter what school you are coming from, either Hanafi, Shafi, Malikî, Hanbali, is very clear—all of them say we all begin with interpretation from the Qur’an and then the Sunnah. So it is not that all of them do agree on these sources. Where some of them go wrong sometimes is in the interpretation of some of those sentences of the sources.

Education has to be more than just an education of the mind, but how do we get to the heart. As Aristotle clearly said “Education of the mind without education of the heart is no education at all.” And of course great imam Ali ibn Abi Talib tell us in Du’a Kumail “The ignorant man does not understand the learned, for he has never been learned himself.” So we have to go back and relearn some of the things that we learned in order to share our knowledge.

So what I did at the end of the paper is to write two letters: one to the Islamic, Muslim extremists and one to anti-Islamists and anti-Muslim.

Dear Muslim Extremist:

Your wrongful use of metaphors is misrepresenting Islam. It also will not help you to achieve any meaningful goal because (a) the overwhelming majority of Muslims all around the world live peaceful lives and believe and teach correctly that Islam is a peaceful din (“way of life”); (b) you are helping to increase the number of anti-Muslims/anti-Islamists who are ready to fight you and innocent Muslims; and (c) you are jeopardizing the lives of Muslims who have seen the number of hate crimes against them increase—in the United States, for example, while the total number of hate crimes has gone down, hate crimes against Muslims have increased by 14 percent.

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⁴ The paper may be accessed at http://media.wix.com/ugd/off67b_d67658cb6acc459ea6ad3b1132db0972.pdf
Your *Allahu Akbar* ("God is The Greatest") metaphor is wrongly used. *Allahu Akbar* (*Takbir*) is not a battle cry for a war that indiscriminately targets everyone, including innocent victims. It represents the 99 Most Beautiful Names of Allah (SWT) that describe His power, kindness, forgiveness, and justice; none denotes indiscriminate killing.

Your use of the *Jihadist* metaphor as a pretext to “defend Islam” is bogus. May you be reminded that there are three types of Jihad: (1) Personal Jihad, or in Arabic *Jihadun-Nafs* is considered the most important and refers to the intimate struggle to purify one’s soul of evil influences and to cleanse one’s spirit of sin; (2) Verbal Jihad refers to striving for justice through words and non-violent means and actions; and (3) Physical Jihad refers to the use of physical means to defend Muslims against oppression and transgression as a last resort, only after all peaceful means fail. Besides, Allah (SWT) never asked you to defend Islam; please allow Allah (SWT) to defend His *dīn*.

Dear Anti-Muslim/Anti-Islamist:

Your wrongful use of metaphors does not only fuel the hate among those who already dislike Muslims and Islam and potential converts to your ideology, it also serves as a potent recruiting tool for the extremist Muslim.

Your Clash of Civilizations metaphor is a misnomer that many of us had hoped would have died with Samuel Huntington. Without Muslims, Western civilization as we know it today would not have made certain significant gains. Similarly, without adherents of other civilizations, Islamic civilization would also not have made certain significant gains. Is it not interesting that after the recent terrorist attack in Paris that the algorithms Mark Zuckerberg used to create the temporary Facebook profile of the French flag overlay, while he failed to do the same for the terrorist attacks in Beirut, Nigeria and Mali, were made possible by the invention of the Persian Muslim mathematician, astronomer and geographer Abu Abdullah Muhammad ibn Musa al-Khwarizmi, from whom the Latinized name Algoritimi and the English variation Algorithm were derived?

Your use of the Crusade metaphor is misguided because it has its religious roots in the first European Christian effort to dislodge the followers of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) from the Holy Land in the 11th Century. This term had the potential to revamp the centuries-old revulsion Muslims felt against Christians for their campaign in the Holy Land. As Steven Runciman notes in the conclusion to his history of the Crusades, the Crusade was a “tragic and destructive episode” and “the Holy War itself was nothing more than a longer act of intolerance in the name of God, which is against the Holy Ghost” (quoted by Kun, 2001:124). In addition, you may want to learn that four centuries after Muslims conquered Jerusalem and the Crusaders invaded and massacred all of the Muslims in 1099, when the Muslim general Saladin recaptured Jerusalem in 1187 he did not allow even one of his soldiers to plunder or touch a civilian and he permitted the invading Christians to take all of their possessions and leave the city in security.

Your use of the Islamic Terrorism metaphor is oxymoronic. If in Arabic, *islām* means “submission,” from *aslama*, “to surrender,” “resign oneself”; from Syriac *ašlem*, “to make peace,” “surrender,” derived stem *šlem*, “to be complete”; from its Semitic roots *šlm* “to be whole,” “sound”; and common Semitic noun *šalām* “well-being,” “welfare,” “peace”; and terrorism is generally defined as the use of violence and intimidation in the pursuit of political aims, how do you reconcile the two? Therefore, just as former Governor of Arkansas, Christian minister, author, commentator and now Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee says that it is “disingenuous” for the Planned Parenthood to blame the terrorist attack against its personnel in Colorado Springs on all
anti-abortion activists and rhetoric and the Western media have refused to label the terrorist act Christian Terrorism, even though the terrorist Robert Lewis’ hate for Planned Parenthood is undergirded by his brand of conservative Christian ideology, it is equally disingenuous for you to label the terrorist acts of a Muslim “Islamic Terrorism.”

JOHNSON: And now we are going to hear from Arsalan Iftikhar. He is an international human rights lawyer and global media communicator and author of his upcoming is Green Scare: How the West Promotes Islamophobia. And he is going to talk about this today.

IFTIKHAR: Assalam Aleykum. Greeting to everyone. First thing that I am going to do is to tell that I am not an academic. And I am not going to pretend to be an academic. I am a Muslim journalist within our global marketplace of ideas. Today we have plenty of academics in the room to talk about academic stuff.

There was a recent poll conducted in Iowa amongst registered Republicans. And out of this public opinion poll conducted in Iowa 33 percent of registered Republicans said that Islam should be illegal in America today. Illegal, against the law. There have been public opinion polls that show that 24 percent of Americans believe that Muslims should be required to carry special IDs. That 49 percent of Americans have believed in the past that Muslims and Arabs should have separate lines in airports for special profiling. There have been studies that have been done that showed that Muslims and the LGBT community are the two most despised demographic groups in the United States today. So when it comes to Islam and Muslims in the West, we are losing quite badly in the global marketplace of ideas, which is a direct correlation to some of the stated goals of extremist groups like ISIS. ISIS has written extensively in the magazines about the “grey zone” of coexistence between Muslims and the Western societies. And their jobs when they commit spectacular attacks like Paris is to chip away at the “grey zone” of coexistence between Muslims and their Western societies, so then Western societies will lash out against their Muslim communities in Islamophobia, which will then increase their recruitment pool for future members.

So the reason that I spend 99 percent of my time in the global media is to push back on this narrative and let our American Western societies know that in light of attacks in Paris or San Bernardino, that not only do we not place collective guilt on Muslims, we need to embrace our Muslim communities more. Because if we do not then we could potentially chip away this grey zone and help create more potential recruits for groups like ISIS. And so when you look at Islamophobia and extremism they are self-fulfilling prophecies of one another. It is a cyclical process, right, nothing operates within the vacuum. Nothing is a linear construct. And so we have to understand that.

You know the vast majority of extremist or terrorist actors, particularly here in the United States have operated outside, with San Bernardino being a possible exception, outside the community. For example, the Boston Marathon bombers were actually kicked out of Boston area mosques when they started to expose some of their anti-American extremist ideology. A year before Paris and Charlie Hebdo, in Ottawa, Canada, there was a gunman who attacked the Canadian Parliament. He was actually turned in by Canadian imam to Canadian special secret police. And so as even a Republican presidential candidate Chris Christie said, we have got more intelligence out of mosques and mainstream Muslim communities than anyone else when it comes to combating extremism here in the West.

But sadly that narrative gets lost in our Western media airways. I literally just came from National Public Radio studios. And I gave an interview to NPR where I said, and you can
hear it tonight on weekend All Things Considered, and I said that this year so far in the United States we had over 350 mass shootings in the United States of America. And 99 percent of them were not committed by Muslims. But with the coverage that we have seen since San Bernardino, you would think that every single one of these 350 mass shootings was committed by Muslims.

A week ago we had a man named Robert Dear going to the Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs, Colorado and commit a mass shooting. His ex-wife in court testified that he had a radical Christian ideology. But he was never called a Christian terrorist in our American media. The New York Times even went so far as to call him “a gentle loner” and then took out the word “gentle” in their article later on when they received pushback from that. Six months ago in June we had a white supremacist named Dylan Roof walk into an African-American church in Charleston, South Carolina with the race war ideology, a white supremacist, who then proceeded to kill 9 innocent Americans and then assassinated the South Carolina state senator, for whom he had asked for by name. But that was never called terrorism either.

So we’ve entered a zeitgeist now where the term terrorism sadly has been co-opted only to apply to brown-skinned people who happened to follow the Islamic religion. And that in itself helps to deteriorate this grey zone when it comes to young Muslims in the West feeling alienated from their societies. So, again, I am not here to speak as an academic because I am not one. And I am here to speak as somebody who understands that the vast majority of our American Muslim community do not attend mosques. Most people don’t know. For those of us who do go to masjid (mosque) on Friday here in the United States tend to think that a good percentage of the American Muslims communities goes to Friday prayers. A lot of studies actually found that only 4 to 7 percent of the entire American Muslim community even goes to the mosque or the masjid once a month.

So we have to understand that not only is Islam not a monolith, Muslims are not monolith either. We are as diverse of a group as anybody else. And we are as screwed up as anybody else. And it is important for us to humanize and own that. And that what I do in the media is that we have to show that we are as indigenous as part of American and Western society as all other demographic groups today. And that is the problem that we are seen as the “other.”

Even though Islam has been here since the slave ships arrived in the 1600s, we are still seen as the “other.” I once did a live nationally televised interview on the news network that will remain nameless, Fox News, and as soon as we cut to the commercial I am at the anchor desk with the anchor. And she looks as me and she goes, “That was a great interview. Your accent didn’t come through at all. Where are you from?” And I said, “Chicago.” And she goes, “No, no. Where are you really from?” Then I said, “Chicago.”
And she asked me the third time, “Where are you really from?” And I said, “Chicago,” and then I walked out of the studio. This woman could not fathom that a brown man would be able to walk in her television studio and be able to articulate himself in a live 7-minute nationally televised debate without having some sort of stereotypical bubble-headed accent. Her notion of what to be American apparently did not include me. Even though I was born and raised in this country.

A number one challenge that we have here today is that Americans feel, generally speaking, we as Muslims in America, we essentially can talk about religion and terrorism. Right, the one-trick pony is the whole dual loyalty thing, right? It is like we will take everything from American society but we are not willing to give back. Now granted that a lot of onus comes upon the media in terms of perpetuating these notions. Like yesterday when we saw CNN and MSNBC walking into apartments of the San Bernardino shooters. As a journalist it was the most horrifying act of journalism that I have seen in my modern life. But again as though Muslims are a sort of zoo exhibit: “Oh, my God look at these prayer beads. Look at this Holy Book that we are finding.” I don’t remember them doing that to the Planned Parenthood guy. I don’t remember them going to his apartment and picking up his copy of the Bible.

And so again, we have to understand all these academic talks about what sort of translation to the Qur’an we need to promote and all these things. But we have to understand that the vast majority of these people that are being lured in by these extremists are so religiously illiterate that they can barely read Qur’an itself. So just because something has religious veneer to it, it does not necessarily mean that we have to addresses it through theological bent. And that the thing is that we are losing so many of our kids, the next generation of Muslims being torn between an America that does not want them really, and a Muslim community that seems alien to them, because we do not provide the resources for social services, community issues. You know, dealing with tough issues that the millennial children and youth of today deal with.

And I am talking about tough stuff, drugs, sex, alcohol, you know, gangs, all these sorts of stuff, we have to address these issues for the future of our kids. Because, I promise you if we don’t reach out to them that they are going to go to the Internet. They are going to Sheikh Google and they are going to find whatever they want to find.

You know the whole misnomer that Muslims don’t condemn terrorism. If you type in the words “Muslims condemn terrorism” in Google you will get 16.9 million results. 16.9 million – remind people of that. Anybody who says that Muslims don’t condemn terrorism does not know how to use a computer. But that is a convenient narrative right now.

So our problems and our approaches need to be multifaceted. We need academics that can deal with academic issues. We need journalists who can push against media narratives. We need people who specialize in countering violent extremism to be able to talk to these people as well. So again we have to understand that it is not going to take one of us, it is going to take all of us. And it is a generational level that we are dealing with right now. Again, I would like to thank everyone for inviting me. I do apologize I have to leave before the end of the panel for another media interview. Thank you for your time and I appreciate listening to me.

JOHNSON: Thank you. I just want to do a one quick follow-up question. And what do you say given that primary source of intelligence coming from the mosques in the US, about the decision in France to close mosques? We are talking about more than 100 mosques.
IFTIKHAR: Yeah, it is a very good question. I actually done work with the French Foreign Ministry in the past. I have been to banlieue after the 2005 social unrest. The French paradigm is entirely different than American paradigm. We have to understand what is good for the goose is not good for the gander. Even within your European sub-communities. So I've done work with the French Muslim communities, I've done work with the British Muslim communities and the German Muslim communities, and they all different. And that's the thing is, the problem we all have, especially for the non-Muslims out there, is that they tend to assume what is good for the goose is good for the gander. Right, if one thing works in American diaspora, that is going to work in the French diaspora and then German diaspora. And that is when we have to bring a nuance, right? And France has entirely different constitutional laws in place. The rise of far right politicians, like Marie Le Pen, they who essentially don't even hide their racism against the Muslim community. At least here in America we have political correctness to the degree that sort of polices what can be said and what cannot be said. But now that is being the eroded. I mean Donald Trump is blatantly saying not only we should have the special IDs for Muslims, we should have databases on Muslims. I mean and special IDs similar to yellow stars of David that Jewish people had to wear during Nazi Germany. We are entering into fascistic talk here. And what we are starting to see in Europe is now trickling over into America. And so again it's a whole other panel on itself. But just to give you an idea that every Muslim diaspora is going to be dealing with a unique set of situations and circumstances that are going to need to be addressed by the Muslim thought leaders of their particular societies.

JOHNSON: Now we are going to hear from Asma Uddin. She is Legal Counsel at The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty. And she is a founder and editor-in-chief of www.altmuslimah.com. And she is going to talk to us today about government restrictions on religious liberty and the relationship to social hostilities.

UDDIN: Great, thank you. And thank you to the Rethink Institute and to my other panelists here. Like Arsalan, I too am not an academic, I am a lawyer. And my focus at the Fund is on religious liberty, both domestic and international.

Looking at the effects of extremism and Muslim – non-Muslim coexistence, religious liberty is key. How do diverse communities live together peacefully and with a free flourishing of all religious expression? More specifically, in the context of Muslim-majority countries, how do Muslims and non-Muslims coexist without one being favored over the other or one being oppressed at the hands of the other? There is a wide range of laws that restrict religious freedom, but some of the worst are blasphemy laws. Numerous countries have them in certain Muslim-majority countries. These laws are the roadblocks to multi-faith coexistence. And when I am talking about multi-faith I am not just talking about those who identify as either Muslim or non-Muslim, I'm also talking about those who consider themselves Muslims but are denied that affiliation by their government or society. Many Muslim-majority countries do not provide adequate protection for dissent of any sort, religious, social or political. In the realm of religious dissent, these countries prosecute not just non-Muslims but in fact the persecution is the harshest and the most frequent against Muslim dissent against the state’s interpretation of Islam.

The results are profound: regular instances of arson, murder and harassment, and on a broader scale, spiritual and intellectual stagnation. And beyond the realm of law and government, the social hostilities are bred by restrictive laws. Research by the Pew Research Center shows a positive correlation between the level of government
restrictions on religion and the level of social hostilities towards religion in a country. While correlation does not imply causation, one particular aspect of this correlation is illuminating. By far the type of government restriction with the greatest predictive power in terms of producing high levels of social hostility is a government policy that clearly favors one religion to the detriment or exclusion of others.

What may explain this relationship? The answer is twofold: (1) by using the power of the law to condemn a religious minority group, states empower a vigilante attitude among adherents of the dominant favored religion; and (2) by denying disfavored religious groups access to the free and open marketplace of ideas that represent mainstream discourse, states contribute to the alienation, depression and radicalization of some members of their society, while recklessly neglecting or actively stifling invaluable opportunities for organic beneficial social reform.

So consider for example the case of Pakistan. **Pakistan has the most extensive blasphemy provisions in the world. These laws are widely abused, encompassing more than religious statements. Pakistan's blasphemy laws are often used to settle vendettas and property disputes.** And people have been sentenced long jail terms on extremely weak evidence. Some of which cannot be even examined in court for fear of repeating alleged blasphemy. Even mere criticism of the blasphemy laws is met with violence. In January 2011, Salmaan Taseer, the former governor of Pakistan’s most populous province and public critic of the blasphemy laws, was gunned down by a member of the security detail. Many of Pakistan’s most influential religious leaders and a majority of its religious population hailed his murder as hero. His crime: speaking out in favor of tolerance and against tyranny of the blasphemy laws.

This continuing violence shows how anti-religious freedom laws help create a climate of impunity. Murderers are not only left unpunished, but in many cases celebrated. The government, afraid of retribution by extremist groups, refrains from punishing criminals, while religious minorities and dissidents continue to be arrested and jailed merely for practicing faith. And the problem extends beyond assassinations. In Pakistan systematic persecution of religious minorities is alarmingly well-documented. And Ahmadiyya Muslim community is arguably its greatest victim. Ahmadis consider themselves Muslims, although Sunni and Shia Muslims disagree, because groups vary in beliefs about the finality of the Prophet Muhammad’s prophethood.

**Consider also the case of Indonesia, which also has blasphemy act.** The Becket Fund tried defeating it back in 2010, working alongside and advising local attorneys in Indonesia. The Indonesian blasphemy act makes it unlawful to intentionally and publicly communicate counsel or solicit public support for interpretation of the religion that is similar to the interpretations or the activities of Indonesian religion but deviates from the tenets about
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religion. So it basically means that the government has decided that only six religions will be considered religions in the country of Indonesia. And those are Islam, Protestant Christianity, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Confucianism, and the state a has state-appointed organization to determine what is the proper interpretation of those religions. And if you deviate from it, even in smallest way, you face fines and in certain cases imprisonment. The act establishes civil and criminal penalties, including up to five years of imprisonment for violators. In the past, it has been used to impose criminal penalties on groups like the Ahmadiyya, as I mentioned earlier, a minority sect of Islam. In 2008, the Indonesian Minister of Religious Affairs, Attorney General and Minister of Interior issued a joint decree ordering Ahmadis, as long as they consider themselves to hold to Islam, to discontinue the promulgation of interpretations and activities that are deviant from the principal teachings of Islam. And similarly in 2009 police arrested the leader of the Sion City of Allah Christian sect and six of his followers for straying from “correct Christian teachings.” Because the Sect is based on only one book of the Bible (the Book of Jeremiah), the government banned it as an unacceptable branch of Christianity and forbade its followers from attending church until 2011.

These cases underscore the problematic nature of the blasphemy laws. Such laws basically let the government decide what a particular group believes and what they should be allowed to teach others. And the government comes with police powers. Believers better accept the government’s version of their religion or else they can find themselves in prison, or in the case of Pakistan, on death row. Blasphemy laws in and of themselves are deeply problematic. Coupled with discriminatory application, widespread abuse, incredibly wide scope of application they make Muslim/non-Muslim coexistence literally impossible.

And while we are talking about the relationship between speech restrictions and extremism, I also want to add that governments that suppress the free exercise of religion do more than just erode law and order and overregulate the free-market of ideas. As we have been hearing from other panels as well, these sorts of restrictions can also contribute to the radicalization of marginalized minority groups. One way is by depriving religious speakers of healthy public discourse, driving the practice of religion underground where the canon is often radicalized.

Ironically, beyond blasphemy laws, this is unintended consequence of the so-called countering violent extremism initiative. Because of the high endangerment and fear associated with acts of terrorism, counterterrorism legislation often allows state authorities to bypass typically required legal procedures, suspend otherwise guaranteed individual rights and in general to act with reduced judicial oversight. In the absence of strict legal safeguards and clear guidelines within the law, such laws can be and have been exploited by state authorities to silence legitimate dissent.

So, in conclusion, the key point here is that speech restrictive laws are not only products of extremism as in the case of Indonesia and Pakistan, but they also create extremist as in the case of counterterrorism laws. Thank you.

JOHNSON: Thank you very much. And as you are the first panelist of the day who finished two minutes early I do have a follow-up question for you. It is known that the blasphemy laws in Pakistan are based on faulty translation. And that has been documented by the Engage, a Pakistani nonprofit. You know the issue here is not a theology, it is political will. And as we talked about throughout the day of Muslim countries and we talked about Islamism cynically using religion for political ends. So given the current state of things,
what can be done about it? Obviously it is not a matter of debating, interpretation or theology, it is a political issue here. So do you have anything to say about it?

UDDIN: I am well aware of the Engage and its efforts. It is working really hard on producing great scholarship in terms of challenging the theological roots of these laws. I can say that is widely held understanding, I think the most part. Many lay Pakistanis assume there is a valid religious basis for these laws. And I think in terms of the solution there are quite a few. Asma Asfaruddin talked about kind of just rethinking and replacing bad ideas with good ideas. And going back just to religious project, that is there. There is also a legal project, of course, because in the end of the day blasphemy laws are laws. And so they're only effective to the extent that they are enforced by law enforcement and by the courts. Unfortunately, the courts have used all kinds of circuitous routes in terms of trying to uphold these laws. Despite the fact that they actually not only contradict religious basis, but they also contradict the Pakistani Constitution and its wide protection, at least in the letter, for religious diversity and religious expression. And the way they do this is they say, “Well not just Pakistani constitution but also international law and international treaty and even the US Supreme Court...” Believe it or not, Pakistani courts refer to US courts for jurisprudence and upholding their blasphemy laws. And what they say is that, “Yes, it is not that we are restricting expression. What we are doing if you look at all these other laws, they make an exception if one public order is at risk”. And so which is really problematic issue that they basically saying, “If you say something that upsets someone else, they are going to get mad and they are going to kill people and burn down buildings. And so in order to prevent that all bad stuff from happening we just going to stop you from speaking.” So instead of using laws that punish arsonists and those who commit battery, assault and murder, and actually punish a violent actor, they are going to just punish non-violent speaker. So I think just enforcing the other laws in the books would be a great way to start changing the legal regime and then, of course, from that out comes the necessary social facts.

JOHNSON: So we can have some final discussion here and I just want to open it up with a couple questions that are short questions and you can choose to answer either or both. And the first one is: What is the role of Muslims living in Western countries to foster coexistence? And the other is: Does Islam need a reformation and what does that mean to you?”

AFSARUDDIN: So let me take the first one first about promoting coexistence. I think we should take advantage of fact that many of us already in it (and I am going to speak as an academic now, I apologize, but that is the world that I’m most familiar with). I mean we do, we are able to operate within a safer environment choice. Let me put it is that way – to float potentially new ideas and engage in innovative reinterpretation of key texts, and we already see that process underway. We are able to publish our thoughts. And what is
interesting is that because of globalization, because of social media, we are actually in touch with our cohorts in the heartlands, shall we say, in Middle East, Middle Asia, and Southeast Asia. There is an international community of scholars who are bouncing ideas off one another. And I think we have actually been able to create a virtual, shall we say, global community of scholars who can engage in this really deep exchange of ideas and information. Think for example of the jurisprudence of minorities that was developed to large extent in the United States, but with a very heavy input from Middle Eastern scholars as well. And this is an idea that has gained quite a bit of traction, mainly I think because of this cooperation. And because people do appeal to texts, to a lively heritage of intellectual and theological debate that still enjoy credibility among Muslims.

And now the second question and this is related to the first. It depends on how we define a reformation. Are we talking about throwing out the baby with the water? Are talking about critically engaging the existing heritage, in other words, communing with a well-established legal and intellectual and theological tradition, mining that for ideas and precedents that are applicable today, and then building on those ideas, so that there is a continuity in Islamic scholarship and engagement with the foundational texts as Islam? If it is along those lines, I think there is a need for that and that process is already under way. And I have to agree with Arsalan, who just left, that part of the reason why these voices and ideas are not getting out there is that there isn’t adequate attention paid to them. And to a large extent because global media is actually based in the West. The Western media is not interested, I think to a large extent, in non-sensational projects that are underway among Muslims that is not going to create headlines. Nevertheless, these activities are proceeding below the radar. And I think cumulatively it will have considerable impact, we are not there yet. There is a lot of pushback and resistance in the number of different Muslim-majority societies. But I can only see that gaining in urgency and frequency and credibility as time goes on, especially because this extremism isn’t dying away on its own. And we have to engage at all levels, and the theological aspect is not an inconsiderate and a trivial aspect. In fact, in many ways it is front and center. So let me leave it at that.

**BANGURA:** What do we do to foster better relations in the US as Muslims? My brothers and sisters and academics, we can write and speak, do more interviews, but I think we should not only write for tenure and promotions, maybe we should write more articles on the Internet. I wrote a book on *Keyboard Jihad: Attempts to Rectify Misperceptions and Misrepresentations of Islam* as one of my little contributions, and many other books followed.

This is a way to be bluntly honest, most of us Muslims when we came to the United States, we did not try to understand politics of the society. We did not learn from the African-American community. They have been able to deal with many things that we are dealing now since 9/11. In that we have to be very honest. When we go to the airport now, all of a sudden, we get treated like African-American, “Now you go to the left.” Because we are not the Americans that many of us thought we were. In essence, we have to learn from those minority groups. We have to learn from these disadvantage groups and work with them to see how we can also help not only ourselves but also those communities. That is one of the best ways to do. Interfaith dialogue has become very critical and I was very happy, whether you like George Bush or not, and we have to be honest about this, after 9/11, George Bush did put a lot of resources and voice to encourage interfaith dialogue. And many of us learned from one another, Christian, Jew,
Muslim, from those exercises. That has gone down. We Muslims can also encourage and revamp those exercises.

**UDDIN:** So I think all the various components... as a lawyer I just have to break it down in terms of bettering the state of coexistence in international context, because a lot of my talking work deals with that. I think one thing is very practical, is that we are a much more secure country, and it is hard to say after what happened last week, but relative to, for instance, Pakistan and Indonesia and all other countries where you can be gunned down simply for publicly speaking about tolerance. I think that we should take advantage of our relative security and do work that many people can’t do. And bring the relevant activists and scholars here to begin to start that change. It is interesting that you brought up Engage, because I will be in the next year working pretty closely with Arafat Mazhar of Engage helping his work and supporting it from US.

The second component is just understanding that so many other communities, and we are talking about coexistence, so many non-Muslim communities, have their own issues that they are dealing with and struggling with. And this is a wide area. Just a couple of examples of this is everything going on about race contacts with the Black Lives Matter movement and just showing up for their causes and actually playing a substantive role in helping them win their battles.

And I think specifically in the context of religious liberty that we as Muslims, not as just Americans and as minorities, are specifically as religious minorities have to understand that the religious freedom struggle is one that is shared by everybody in this country who is a believer in any faith. And that includes the majority religions, including even conservative Christians. And I think that is an interesting aspect of the work I do. I work on behalf of Muslim minorities in US and other parts of the West, and also work on behalf of minorities and dissenters of Muslim-majority countries. And I also work on behalf of majority, Christian majority in this country, because it is so important to say that, “I don’t believe in this right just for myself.” I believe it for across the board and I’m willing to basically do the work to prove that.

**AMINRAZAVI:** Yes, so in addition to what was suggested to advance interreligious dialogue, I really would like to see interreligious dialogue within our own communities. I would have loved to see 10-15 radical fundamentalists who lives right here in D.C. and spend a day talking to them rather than talking to ourselves. Usually people who enter into any kind of dialogue are the ones who don’t really need it. And so I would love to be able to enter into a dialogue with al-Baghdadis of Washington.

**JOHNSON:** Yes, Muslims have a much more difficult time dialoguing with other Muslims than with representatives from other faith traditions.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I really appreciate the opportunity to attend this session, it was very thought-provoking. There have been a lot of things said all day. Thanks to Dr. Bangura’s statement of a few minutes ago, that was a perfect segue for what I have to say. And I have been kind of proverbial emblematic elephant in the room; if you didn’t notice, I am an African-American. I became Muslim in 1972. I was very much affected by Maududi, went to school to Saudi Arabia for a while and had a lot of experience. I am Shia and intra-faith. And I came to that by my own decision. I was raised Christian so I have relatives who are Christians.

There are certain misnomers that have been repeated throughout the day. Someone was referring to Thomas Jefferson’s papers and how egalitarian he was, but you can’t dismiss
the fact that he helped people who were ethnically African to be enslaved. They were not slaves; they were enslaved. And constantly referring to them as slaves is to demean them and dehumanize them.

The fact that there are twin factors to the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and the reading of the autobiography of Malcolm X, I took seeking knowledge from cradle to grave quite sincerely and earnestly. I am by training a psychotherapist I deal with trauma victims, particularly from the fire department. I work for a local fire department and I work with a police agency in tri-metropolitan areas for 13 years as well. So I am used to deal with suicide, homicide, gang violence etc. Repetitively we heard that about having tolerance. It is very interesting brother Iftikhar mentioned the importance of having certain dialogue with people who were dispossessed, into drugs and gangs and etc... I find very interesting which had occurred to me during Jumu'ah (Friday prayer). I am one of those 4-7 percent who do attend Jumu'ah. When Allah created Adam (peace be upon him) He ordered angels to bow down before Adam, and all of them did except Iblis. And Allah engaged Iblis and asked him “What prevents you from prostrating?” Very profound! Allah knows all things, but he had tolerance to ask Shaitan (Satan). Why? He gave him an opportunity to express himself.

We talk about liberalism and conservatism, but we dismiss people who don’t look like us. We dismiss our young people, because “I know what they’re going to say. They are not going to have anything of worth.” But Allah gave us an example. So I think that the idea of tolerance we need to take ourselves and ask, “What do we mean by tolerance?” It is not just saying “OK. Just five minutes.” Tolerance to me means, “If you say one more thing I am gonna smack your mouth!... but I got to be cool.” That is tolerance; it doesn’t conjure up anything to me in terms of value or moral high ground. It is just “I am biting my lips, so I won’t kick you in the face.” That tolerance is not really welcoming. When we engage people and we don’t welcome them they feel that, it is no doubt. And in terms of our young people who’ve been co-opted by Daesh or whatever, from the mental health prospective there are 4 reasons that people get angry: a sense of hurt, fear, injustice and frustration. Hurt can be mental, physical and psychological. Injustice, someone has done me wrong, unfairly. Fear is a very interesting caveat. And frustration. I often say to my clients, when males are particularly fearful, we act angry. Because anger is more consistent with the presentation of masculinity. Because no one wants to be soft, be said to be feminine. And when females are angry they use the act hurt. So we have a lot to learn. Academia is important, I turn to you all I consult to you all, bother you at Jumu'ah, but that is what I supposed to do. These constructs are very good, but it has to be more engaging. And has to touch people on the ground. You said Black Lives Matter, yes, those and spinoff groups who are active in the neighborhood trying to prevent violence and the like. And you all certainly welcome to participate. Thank you for the forum.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I want to make a comment and solicit responses. About your question to Asma, about the role of politics, whether this is a political problem or a religious problem. I think it is both obviously. There is a theological debate that has to be made and, as Asma mentioned, that has been going on for many years about how to reinterpret the text, how to promote a moderate interpretation of Islam around the world. But there is also a political dimension that should not be neglected, because most of the Arab world, most of the Muslim world is ruled by dictatorships. And these dictatorships are not interested at all in these debates. Because they don’t want to challenge the status quo, they want to maintain the status quo. So they shut down these debates completely. And they put anybody who opens his mouth in jail. And probably this
is a majority of the countries. And others, they are also dictatorships, and they lack credibility. They want to impose the certain point of view, whatever it is, even if it is modernist or whatever, but it is by imposition. Institutions of the government itself, such as al-Azhar in Egypt for example, have no credibility anymore because they are supporting a murderer regime. You know Sisi has killed thousands of people on the streets. And now he is coming to talk about Islamic reformation and then we have people in the West who applaud him and said, “This is genuine. He wants to reform Islam.” How can you reform Islam if you just killed four thousand people in the streets gathered for peaceful demonstrations?

And then you get more extremism. This is what is going on in Egypt today. Sisi is creating ISIS, and the likes of Sisi. This problem of dictatorship has been going on for 40 – 50 years. And unfortunately people in the United States are still going back and supporting dictators. I mean, we seem to learn a lesson, for a while, but now we are going back to supporting these dictators, and not realizing that this dictatorship is the main reason why (a) we don’t have a real discussion about reinterpretation of the text in the Islamic world; or (b) why there is no movement for credibility.

I just want to mention the example of Tunisia. Because I have been spending 60 percent of my time of the last 5 years in Tunisia and there we had a revolution and opportunity not only to have these dialogues about interpretation of the religion, but to write a new constitution. And so for example, there was a huge debate for two years about the constitution, including blasphemy. After very long debates, hundreds of meetings, conferences in the government that is ruled by Islamists and secularists together in a coalition government—by moderate Islamists of course, not by extremists. At the end everybody agreed that we don’t need a blasphemy law, including the Islamists, the majority Nahda party. So that is how you solve these problems. You have to have democracy; otherwise these theological discussions will remain just among the small group of expats in the United States or even in the Islamic world but with no real impact on the people. Because there is no freedom to discuss these issues. So again, I want to just emphasize the need to support real democracy in the Arab world and to stop supporting people like Sisi in the Islamic world. And then not to be surprised, if we support people like Sisi and others there will be more extremism in Egypt and elsewhere.

AFSARUDDIN: I just want to say that I agree with you Radwan. I am director of your board after all. But in 10 minutes you can give only a certain aspect of the issue. But theological issues are never debated in a vacuum. There is large sociocultural, historical and political context always to these discussions. And it is a very important part of the equation that has to be reinserted into these discussions. What do we mean by reformation? It is a multi-pronged attempt that has to go on many different levels and there are many actors involved. So you are absolutely right to emphasize that. I agree with you.

BANGURA: And my brother Iftikhar was here, I would have said, and I am going to say it anyway, not to begin the history of Islam with the period of slavery. Muslims were already here, three hundred years before Christopher Columbus sailed his ships. This has been supported by research done by BBC and PBS. And many of us Muslim scholars were saying this based on the evidence, until BBC finally unearthed evidence they finally accepted. King Abu Bakr II of Mali had already sailed to the Americas three hundred years before Christopher Columbus came. So we Muslims also have to understand the history of Islam in this part of the world and should not always begin it with slavery.
UDDIN: I also agree and I am well aware of the played out in Tunisia. And I think that you know it is interesting, because even though most of my remarks were focused internationally, most of our work is actually domestic. And the majority of our cases are always against the government. And because we consider ourselves to be one of the protectors of liberty, so even in a democratic society that liberty constantly needs to be protected. And so exactly that a state will always do what is in its interest and this is exactly how the blasphemy laws and like I mentioned even counter-terrorism laws. You give us an inch and we will take more than that. Thank you.

KURU: A very brief comment about ideas that have been mentioned several times. I think the ideas and this kind of dialogue in a long run will have a practical impact. In Turkey, for example, we don’t have Sisi luckily, but now Erdogan and the AKP is turning into an authoritarian regime. I personally know many senior AKP politicians. They were my friends, we spent 10 years together. We kept criticizing secularism, the generals, the system in Turkey. We never had an internal debate about Islamic history, Islamic philosophy or Islamic theology, because, for us, the main threat was secularist military. I now realize that was a mistake. This is the reason why the AKP turned authoritarian and I blame myself, too. The ideas matter, the discussions matter. The lesson from Turkey is that we really need internal Muslim criticisms.

AMINRAZAVI: I would like to respond, because I tend to disagree. I am Iranian. And I participated heavily in the Iranian revolution. In my previous incarnations, I had a beard and looked revolutionary. And since we Iranians committed suicide on the national scale before the rest of the Muslim world, we have a thing or two to share with you. So there was some sort of a revolution in Egypt, as you know. And everybody was happy that Mubarak is on its way out and people did vote and Muslim Brotherhood did come to power shortly. And that was democracy and the West tended to agree with that reluctantly and so on. But immediately after that, whether it was in Egypt, whether it was in Libya... I still remember leader of the Libyan new government, the first thing he said is to allow polygamy. Polygamy just became a top priority in Libya, as if they were just waiting for somebody to tell them that you can have lots of sex. Same thing with Egypt. The conundrum, the problem is that we are stuck between a secular dictator who at least is a dictator but doesn’t tell you what to drink, how to walk, talk and dress. We did the same thing. We got rid of the Shah, who was a typical dictator, and but we had immense amount of individual freedoms. We got rid of one dictator to bring religious fascists who are telling people how to walk, talk and dress and so on. So Sisis of the world are bad, but our choices in life are rarely between good and bad – most often they are between bad and worse. So let’s keep it in mind and support the bad ones.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I strongly disagree. Actually this way of thinking takes us down to the very dangerous path supporting dictators like Ben Ali, Mubarak. Thinking that Mubarak was going to give stability and development to Egypt, that “It is going to take time, but we are going to support him.” But look at the results – there was no stability even 10 years before revolutions in Egypt. When we had one man burn himself in Tunisia, five other countries had revolutions in two months. That is not stability, there is no stability under these dictatorships. And of course there is no development. I mean, go to Egypt and look at the status of Egypt today and compare what it was 30-50 years ago.

AMINRAZAVI: You think that Muslim Brotherhood could bring stability?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: That is my other point. Muslim Brotherhood was in power for one year. Mursi was in power for one year, the coup was planned two months after he came
to power. This is well-documented now. They were never given a chance. So I am not defending Muslim Brotherhood and I am not saying that they did not make any mistakes. Making mistakes is a part of the process. Democracy was not built in one year or two years or even in ten years. In the United States, it was built over two hundred years, in Europe over a hundred years – it is a process, it takes time. Now, granted, in Iran it did not go very well, I agree with you. In Iran you have another problem, in my opinion, is that you have a religious establishment, which we don’t have in Sunni Islam. Nobody in Sunni Islam says, “I represent God on Earth.”

AMINRAZAVI: Doesn’t ISIS just do that?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: No, nobody takes ISIS seriously. So we have to learn from the mistakes of the past. Supporting Sisi will not take Egypt to stability, to development, to prosperity; it will only make matters worse. And I am not saying that we have to support the Muslim Brotherhood, but we have to let the Egyptians decide for themselves and it takes time. And last sentence, in Libya they didn’t talk about polygamy, they never stopped having polygamy. Tunisia is the only country that stopped polygamy in the Arab world.

JOHNSON: I think we can see that these are very complex issues. There are many layers to them, and each country has its own layers to them.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: As these gentlemen were going most of my questions were being answered. My only comment here is if we admire democracy, perhaps not Jeffersonian democracy, but we say Islam and democracy are intertwined. And if Muslim Brotherhood were elected democratically then, whether I like their politics or not, surely they must be given chance to govern as long as the local people and votes have brought them into power.

KOCA: I don’t think that Dr. Aminrazavi is defending Sisi here, but if I understand you correctly, Sisi is a symptom of the problem. So if you frame the problem essentially as a political problem, you may not be able to see what is grounding that political problem. The problem may be deeper that we think. May be it is in the domain of ideas. Here we are discussing ideas. I believe it is very relevant to discuss these ideas. It reminds me European Enlightenment. You know the process starts with ideas and if those ideas really good ideas then you may go and construct political structures that can reflect those ideas. So it is very difficult to understand religious tolerance of American constitution, let’s say in Thomas Jefferson, without understanding John Locke beyond them. He is actually providing ideas, which can ground religious tolerance. Problem may be deeper that we think. Sisi is a symptom, Erdogan is a symptom of a problem.
Speaker Biographies

ASMA AFSARUDDIN is Professor of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures in the School of Global and International Studies at Indiana University. She is the author and editor of seven books, including Contemporary Issues in Islam (Edinburgh University Press, 2015); the award-winning Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought (2013); and The First Muslims: History and Memory (OneWorld Publications, 2008), which was recently translated into Turkish. Professor Afsaruddin is currently a member of the academic council of the Prince al-Waleed Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University and of the Board of Directors of the American Academy of Religion and serves as Chair of the Board of Directors of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy. She was previously the Kraemer Middle East Distinguished Scholar-in-Residence at the College of William and Mary and has served as a consultant for the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life as well as other governmental and non-governmental agencies. Her research has been funded by prestigious grants awarded by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, which named her a Carnegie Scholar in 2005.

IMAD-AD-DEAN AHMAD, PhD, is President of the Minaret of Freedom Institute, Islamic chaplain at American University, Imam of the Dar-adh-Dhikr Mosque, President of the Islamic-American Zakat Foundation, and arbitrator for the Coordinating Council of Muslim Organizations in the Greater Washington Metropolitan Area. He teaches courses on Islam at Wesley Theological Seminary and has taught honors courses at the University of Maryland College Park in “Religion and Progress” and on “Religion, Science, and Freedom,” college courses on Islam and Development at Georgetown University and graduate courses in Islam and Development and Theory of Social Change at the Johns Hopkins University School for Advanced International Studies. He is the author of Signs in the Heavens, co-editor of Islam and the West: A Dialog, and co-author of Islam and the Discovery of Freedom.

AZIZAH AL-HIBRI, Esq. is the Founder of KARAMAH: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights and professor emerita at the T.C. Williams School of Law at the University of Richmond. She obtained her JD from the University of Pennsylvania in 1985 and worked as a corporate law associate on Wall Street before focusing her efforts on human rights and Islamic jurisprudence. In 1992, Dr. al-Hibri became the first Muslim woman law professor in the United States. Since then, she has written extensively on women’s issues, democracy, and human rights from an Islamic perspective. Dr. al-Hibri founded KARAMAH in 1993 to support the rights of Muslim women worldwide through educational programs, jurisprudential scholarship, and a network of Muslim jurists and leaders. In 2011, she was appointed to the US Commission on International Religious Freedom for a two-year term by President Barack Obama. Dr. al-Hibri’s most recent publication is Islamic Worldview: Islamic Jurisprudence, an American Muslim Perspective, Vol. 1 (ABA Book Publishing, 2014) and she is currently completing the second volume of this groundbreaking series, which revisits traditional
Islamic jurisprudence in order to develop a modern, enlightened understanding of Islam with respect to gender, marriage, family, and democratic governance. Dr. al-Hibri earned a BA from the American University of Beirut and a PhD in philosophy from the University of Pennsylvania before pursuing her JD from the same university.

MEHDI AMINRAZAVI is Professor of Philosophy and Religion and Co-Director of the Leidecker Center for Asian Studies at the University of Mary Washington. He earned a PhD (1989) in philosophy of religion from Temple University, after receiving an MA (1981) in philosophy and a BA (1979) in urban planning from the University of Washington. A native of Iran, Dr. Aminrazavi has been published in both Persian and English and translated from Persian and Arabic into English. He has received a number of awards in the United States and internationally, and is a member of the American Academy of Religion, the American Philosophical Association, and the Middle Eastern Society of America. A member of the editorial board of the Journal of Religious Studies (Cambridge, England), and he is the author and editor of numerous books and articles, among which are The Islamic Intellectual Tradition in Persia (1996), Philosophy, Religion and the Question of Intolerance (1997), Suhrawardi and the School of Illumination (1997), The Wine of Wisdom (2005), and Islamic Philosophy & Theology: An Online Textbook for Colleges (2010).

ABDUL KARIM BANGURA is a researcher-in-residence of Abrahamic Connections and Islamic Peace Studies at the Center for Global Peace in the School of International Service at American University, the director of The African Institute, and a professor of Research Methodology and Political Science at Howard University. He holds five PhDs in Political Science, Development Economics, Linguistics, Computer Science, and Mathematics. He is the author of 86 books and more than 600 scholarly articles. The winner of more than 50 prestigious scholarly and community service awards, among Bangura’s recent awards are the 2012 Cecil B. Curry Book Award for his African Mathematics: From Bones to Computers, the 2014 Diopian Institute for Scholarly Advancement’s Miriam Ma’at Ka Re Award for his article titled “Domesticating Mathematics in the African Mother Tongue” published in the Journal of Pan-African Studies, and the 2015 Special United States Congressional Award for “outstanding and invaluable service to the international community.”

BIROL BASKAN is Assistant Professor at the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service in Qatar. He received his PhD in Political Science from Northwestern University in 2006. He has published in Politics and Religion; HAWWA: the Journal of Women in the Middle East and the Islamic World; Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations; Insight Turkey; Akademik Ortadogu; Arab Studies Quarterly; Turkish Yearbook of International Politics; Comparative Political Studies; and International Sociology. He is the author of From Religious Empires to Secular States (Routledge, 2014) and Turkey, Qatar and the Tangled Geopolitics of the Middle East (Palgrave, Forthcoming). Baskan is also the co-editor of State-Society Relations in the Arab Gulf States (Gerlach, 2014).
FEVZI BILGIN is Founder and President of Rethink Institute. His areas of expertise are constitutional politics; Turkish politics (domestic and foreign policy; relations with US and EU); Eurasian energy and security; Islam and politics. He received a BA from Ankara University and PhD in political science from the University of Pittsburgh. He previously taught political science in Turkey and the United States. His publications have appeared in Critical Review of International Political and Social Philosophy, Rutgers Journal of Law and Religion and Dogu Bati. His recent books are Understanding Turkey’s Kurdish Question (ed.) (Lexington Books, 2014) and Political Liberalism in Muslim Societies (Routledge, 2011).

MUSTAFA GURBUZ is a research fellow at Rethink Institute. His research focuses on political violence and terrorism, Muslims in the West, and Kurdish movements in the Middle East. He received his PhD in sociology from the University of Connecticut. Dr. Gurbuz previously taught courses on political violence and radical movements at the University of Connecticut, Trinity College, and the University of South Florida. His publications have appeared in Sociological Forum, Sociological Inquiry, Research in Social Movements, Conflict, and Change, Middle East Critique, Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs, European Journal of Turkish Studies, and Research in Social Stratification and Mobility. Dr. Gurbuz is Associate Editor of Sociology of Islam and the author of Transforming Ethnic Conflict: Rival Kurdish Movements in Turkey (Amsterdam University Press, 2016).

SHIREEN T. HUNTER is a visiting scholar at Georgetown University’s Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, where she directs a project on Reformist Islam funded by the Carnegie Corporation Of New York. She is also a Distinguished Scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, where she directed the Islam Program from 1998 to 2005. Her latest publications include Reformist Voices of Islam: Mediating Islam and Modernity (M.E. Sharpe, 2008); Islam And Human Rights: Advancing a US–Muslim Dialogue (ed.) (CSIS Press, 2005); Modernization, Democracy and Islam (co ed. & contributor) (Praeger, 2004); Islam In Russia: The Politics of Identity and Security (M.E.Sharpe, 2004); Islam: Europe’s Second Religion (ed.) (Prager, 2002).

ARSALAN IFTIKHAR is an international human rights lawyer, global media commentator and author of the book Islamic Pacifism: Global Muslims in the Post-Osama Era. He also serves as Senior Editor for The Islamic Monthly magazine. Arsalan has also been an adjunct professor of religious studies at DePaul University and he is also a member of the Asian American Journalists Association and Reporters San Frontieres (Reporters Without Borders). Arsalan was also featured in an interview for a December 2012 ABC News documentary called “Back to the Beginning” by Emmy-award winning journalist Christiane Amanpour on the major world religions. He was also quoted extensively in an August 2010 TIME Magazine cover story on “Islamophobia in America.” Arsalan graduated from Washington University in St. Louis in 1999 and received his law doctorate from Washington University School of Law in 2003. A native of Chicago, he specializes in international human rights law and is licensed to practice law in Washington, DC.
MARGARET A JOHNSON, PhD, sociologist, is a Senior Research Associate for the Institute for Islamic and Turkish Studies in Fairfax, VA. In this capacity, she works on program development and conducts research on Islam in the United States and the Gulen Movement worldwide. She is an international speaker and is actively engaged in interfaith dialogue activities. Currently, she is conducting research for a book on Hizmet peace-building activities in areas of conflict and has interviewed Hizmet volunteers about their service in Afghanistan, Albania, Bashkortostan, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Nigeria, the United States, Uzbekistan, and other countries. Dr. Johnson has published numerous journal articles, book chapters, and research monographs, primarily in the area of organizational change, nonprofits, small business development, and woman business owners. Her current primary focus is on peace studies, including a recent co-edited book with Ori Soltes, Preventing Violence and Achieving World Peace. She also owns and manages Transfirex, Inc., a language translation company providing translations in forty languages and research, writing, and editing services.

OZGUR KOCA is an assistant professor of Islamic Studies at Bayan Claremont Islamic Graduate Institute and Claremont School of Theology. His studies focus on Islamic Philosophy-Theology-Spirituality, Science and Religion Discussion, Environmental Ethics, Interreligious Discourse, and Contemporary Islamic Movements and Ideologies. He is on the editorial boards of several scholarly journals, including Science, Religion, and Culture and the Journal of Dialogue Studies. In 2015 he received the Bayan Claremont Excellence in Teaching Award. As an activist, he organizes and guides interfaith-intercultural dialogue trips to European, Middle Eastern, and South Asian countries and writes for local and international newspapers on current issues concerning religion and society.

AHMET T. KURU (PhD, University of Washington) is an associate professor of political science at San Diego State University. He was previously a postdoctoral scholar and assistant director of the Center for the Study of Democracy, Toleration, and Religion at Columbia University. Kuru is the author of Secularism and State Policies toward Religion: The United States, France, and Turkey (Cambridge University Press, 2009), which was given the distinguished book award from the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and translated into Turkish and Arabic. He is also the co-editor (with Alfred Stepan) of Democracy, Islam, and Secularism in Turkey (Columbia University Press, 2012). Kuru’s publications have appeared in numerous edited books and journals, such as World Politics, Comparative Politics, and Political Science Quarterly.

NADIA OWEIDAT, PhD, is a scholar, analyst, and public speaker dedicated to fostering positive change in the Middle East. She has co-authored several studies for the Rand Corporation, including The Kefaya Movement and Barriers to the Broad Dissemination of Creative Works in the Arab World (RAND 2008). Born and raised in Jordan, she holds a BA in English Literature from the University of Jordan, an MA in International Studies from the University of Wyoming, and a PhD in Islamic Thought from Oxford University, where she was awarded the prestigious Weidenfeld Leadership Scholarship. Dr. Oweidat is currently a non-residential Senior Fellow at the New America
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**LEILA PIRAN** holds a PhD in World Politics with a focus on the Middle East from the Catholic University of America. She is a policy fellow at the School of Public and International Policy at George Mason University, where she conducts research on entrepreneurship and social entrepreneurship in Iran. She previously taught courses on International Affairs at George Washington University and served as a research fellow on Turkey at the Rethink Institute. In her current research and writing, Dr. Piran focuses on the political economy and foreign policy of Iran. In 2013, Palgrave Macmillian published her book, *Institutional Change in Turkey: The Impact of EU Reforms on Human Rights and Policing*. She has published articles about Iran’s domestic and foreign policies in *Bourse and Baazar, Lobelog, Muftah*, and *Al Monitor*.

**ZEKI SARITOPRAK** has held the Nursi Chair in Islamic Studies at John Carroll University in Cleveland, Ohio, since 2003. He holds a PhD in Islamic Theology from the University of Marmara in Turkey. Prior to coming to John Carroll, Professor Saritoprak held positions at Harran University in Turkey, Georgetown University, the Catholic University of America, and Berry College in Rome, Georgia. He is also the founder and former president of the Rumi Forum for Interfaith Dialogue in Washington, DC. He is editor and co-translator of *Fundamentals of Rumi’s Thought: A Mevlevi Sufi Perspective* (in English; New Jersey: The Light, 2004) and the editor of a critical edition of *al-Sarakhsi’s Sifat Ashrat al-Sa’a* (in Arabic; Cairo, 1993). His most recent book *Islam’s Jesus*, was published by the University Press of Florida in 2014. He is currently preparing a book on Islamic spirituality tentatively titled *Islamic Spirituality: Theology and Practice for the Modern World*.

**ASMA T. UDDIN** joined The Becket Fund in 2009 after practicing commercial litigation at prestigious national law firms for several years. She is a 2005 graduate of the University of Chicago Law School, where she was a member of *The University of Chicago Law Review*. Ms. Uddin has taken on the role of Legal Counsel, defending religious liberty in the US through several prominent cases at The Becket Fund. She is also the Founder and Editor-in-Chief of almuslimah.com, a web magazine dedicated to issues on gender and Islam. She serves on the Islam and Religious Freedom Advisory Council and the Advisory Council of the Center for Women, Faith & Leadership of the Institute for Global Engagement.
The purpose of the Forum on the Future of Islam is to debate and address the most critical questions, share ideas, and offer solutions to salient issues related to the future of Islam. The first meeting under the theme “Muslim Perspectives on Islamic Extremism” took place in Washington, DC, on December 5, 2015.