

10

**American
Muslims
as Allies
in the
War on
Terrorism**

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Any and every injury to America is as much an injury to American Muslims as it is to any other American. Therefore, the loss of life and property, as well as the erosion of security as a result of the attacks of September 11, 2001, hurt American Muslims as much as they hurt other Americans. More than two hundred American Muslims lost their lives on that fateful day, and many American Muslims have since suffered from the political and economic consequences of the attacks. American Muslims also suffered when America responded, militarily and otherwise, to September 11.

Today, other Americans view the entire American Muslim community with varying degrees of suspicion. The community's institutions are under siege, the status of its civil rights is in grave jeopardy, and many Muslims are suffering socially as well as professionally from rising anti-Muslim sentiments in America. American Muslims have also seen thousands of their

118 M. A. Muqtedar Khan

fellow Muslims die in wars, which would not have been waged had America not been attacked.

The point is that when America is attacked, American Muslims suffer, and when America responds, American Muslims suffer again. It follows that American Muslims should be more concerned than anyone about essential American security and that they have a compelling incentive to do all they can to make sure that the international war on terrorism is effective and successful. That is not all. In the process of fighting terrorism, the U.S. government has undertaken actions that have raised the level of anti-Americanism worldwide. Perhaps these actions have been fully justified and wise, perhaps not—but there is no question that one side effect has been an antipathy toward the United States of which Americans, in general, are increasingly aware. Arab countries and Muslim organizations in America have tried to manipulate this awareness by trying to get the United States to focus more on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and less on the war on terrorism, as if doing the former would palpably aid the latter.

The growth of anti-Americanism in non-Muslim societies, especially in western Europe and to a lesser extent in eastern Asia, has become a source of delight to many Muslim commentators overseas. They see it as a vindication of their claims about America's unjust foreign policy and diplomatic heavy-handedness. Unfortunately, some American Muslims also seem to enjoy the rise of anti-Americanism. This is not very smart: Anti-Americanism overseas engenders xenophobia at home, and today nobody is more "foreign" than American Muslims. American Muslims, more than anyone else, will become the victims of xenophobia in America. It is therefore in the interest of American Muslims to work to reverse the growth of anti-Americanism everywhere, particularly in the Muslim world.

American Muslims Need Regime Change

The American Muslim community has not been served well by its national organizations, such as the Council for American Islamic Relations and the American Muslim Council. In the aftermath of September 11, the instinctive response of the leaders of these and other, smaller organizations was to protect the Muslim world from America's revenge. They argued against any military reaction. They also hoped to cash in, quite literally, on the post-September 11 introspection in America, using the rising tempo of concern to raise money. They also sought to bring the Palestinian crisis to the front and center, thinking that enough Americans would blame the Jews for September 11 to force partisan progress on the issue.

All these tactics, and the strategy in general, have backfired. The overall strategy has undermined the credibility of these organizations and has made some of them targets of investigation.

All the major American Muslim organizations failed to condemn either Osama bin Laden or al Qaeda for weeks. They invariably hedged in their public statements by vaguely referring to "whoever was responsible."¹ Many of these organizations encouraged a sense of denial within the community through statements that seemed vague and that even occasionally insinuated that other vested interests may have been responsible for the attacks. This sense of denial, nurtured by ridiculous conspiracy theories that still pervade the Muslim community, has undermined the capacity of many American Muslims to be effective partners in the war on terrorism. It has

1. See Khalid Abou el-Fadl, "US Muslims, Unify and Stand Up," *Los Angeles Times*, July 14, 2002.

120 M. A. Muqtedar Khan

also undermined the efforts of liberal Muslims to heal the widening gulf between Americans and American Muslims.

Today the American Muslim community is deeply divided. For purposes of simplicity, we can define one side of the divide as consisting of those Muslims whose top priority is the future of their children and the American Muslim community and the other side as consisting of those whose top priority is advancing the interests of Arab and other Muslim nations, particularly Palestine. Among the American Muslims for the “Muslim world,” many are still in deep denial about who was responsible for September 11. They also believe that the United States is knowingly and consciously waging a war on Islam.² These Muslims do not recognize the dangers posed by rogue Islamists. These Muslims and some national organizations are more interested in using the American political system to advance back-home causes, even at the expense of the American Muslim community. For them, American Muslims are instruments to be manipulated and used. These groups and individuals do not constitute a significant direct threat to America, but they can and are undermining the efforts of other Muslims who do not share their vision.

In nearly every mosque, every institution, and every forum—and even within families—Muslims “for America” are locked in a struggle with Muslims for the Muslim world to shape the community’s direction. There is a silent and slow, but steady, revolution going on within the American Muslim community. More and more, Muslims for America are realizing that their national organizations are funded by foreign

2. According to a survey conducted by Project MAPS at Georgetown University and Zogby International in November/December 2001, only one out of three American Muslims believed that the war on terror was a war on Islam. This figure most certainly has changed since the use of the Patriot Act and the war and occupation of Iraq. To review the survey, go to <http://www.projectmaps.com>.

American Muslims as Allies 121

sources that have misguided and misrepresented them. Muslims for America are beginning to wake up to the fact that they have been gradually mesmerized by the jihad for Palestine, and they are struggling to break free.³

So far, however, American Muslims for the Muslim world remain dominant. Using foreign resources, they have hijacked the voice, the agenda, and even the future of what is, by every measure, an internally diverse American Muslim community. A quick survey of these organizations will immediately expose their misplaced loyalties and priorities.

A visit to the Web site of the Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR) showed that it was more interested in Daniel Pipes and the issues concerning Iraq and Palestine than with things that affect the future and the security of America.⁴ From the CAIR Web site, one would gather that America was the problem, not rogue Islamists. The recent arrest of Abdurrahman Alamoudi—the founder of the other major national organization, American Muslim Council—has exposed him as an agent of the Libyan government. He has allegedly been using the American Muslim community's goodwill to advance the interests of Mu'ammar Qaddafi's Libya.⁵

Even the more progressive Los Angeles-based Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) has very little to offer in terms of a strategy for fighting terrorism or anti-Americanism in its various forms. In an eighty-page position paper on counterterrorism, MPAC is more critical of the Department of Justice and

3. See Muqtedar Khan, "Putting the American in 'American Muslims,'" *New York Times*, September 7, 2001. Also see Jane Lampman, "Muslim in America," *Christian Science Monitor*, January 10, 2002.

4. See Council on American Islamic Relations, <http://www.cair-net.org>.

5. For details about Alamoudi's arrest and his connections to the Libyan government, see the brief filed against him in a Virginia court by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (<http://news.findlaw.com/hdocs/docs/terrorism/usalamoudi93003cmp.pdf>).

122 M. A. Muqtedar Khan

the U.S. government than it is of al Qaeda, Hamas, or any other rogue Islamist groups.⁶ MPAC even includes an apologia for Wahhabism, but has no advice on how the United States should deal with the fact that fifteen of the nineteen attackers on September 11 were from Saudi Arabia. MPAC's recommendations are designed to make life easier for American Muslims (an understandable and important objective) and to advance Palestinian interests as necessary for American security (once again, revealing greater concern for the Arab world than for America itself). Indeed, the paper does not have anything substantive to say about al Qaeda or about how to deal with it and its sympathizers overseas and at home. But MPAC does deserve credit for at least trying to do the right thing. The limitations of its paper are merely reflective of a lack of policy expertise.

As long as these organizations are seen as being truly representative of American Muslims, American Muslims cannot be a useful ally in America's war on terrorism. Before that can happen, there must be a two-pronged regime change within the American Muslim community. First, those leaders who have used American Muslims to advance Arab interests must be marginalized. Second, American Muslim priorities must change. American Muslims must become a community for themselves and cease to be an instrument of the Muslim world. When American Muslim leaders and the American Muslim community begin to work in their own true self-interest, only then will they be able to assist America in fighting terrorism and other forms of anti-Americanism.

It is, however, important to note that, as early as December

6. See MPAC's position paper on terrorism, "A Review of US Counterterrorism Policy: American Muslim Critique and Recommendations," http://www.mpac.org/bucket_downloads/CTPaper.pdf.

American Muslims as Allies 123

2001, Imad ad-Deen Ahmad, a one-man think tank who is a libertarian and a dedicated Muslim, wrote a powerful article in which he argued that it was the Islamic duty of Muslims to bring the criminals responsible for September 11 to justice.⁷ In that well-argued paper, Ahmad exhorts Muslims in general, and American Muslims in particular, to go beyond words and let their actions against bin Laden speak as their condemnation of his actions and his organization. It is amazing that Mr. Ahmad is not sought out by the National Security Council or the Department of Homeland Security. The global strategies he has proposed for dealing with al Qaeda are far better than any that the Bush administration has so far come up with. It is a pity that Muslim organizations and the Bush administration have not acted on his suggestions.

Ahmad makes several important points, the most important of which is his compelling moral argument that all Muslims, and especially American Muslims, are duty bound to bring the terrorists who perpetrated the attacks of September 11 to justice. He clearly indicates that it is not enough that Muslims unequivocally condemn the acts; they also must act, collectively and decisively, in pursuit of justice. Ahmad is also critical of the conspiracy theories that are circulating in the Muslim world, and he shows how these false claims are contrary to Islamic values. Ahmad identifies various projects that Muslim NGOs and international governmental organizations, such as the Organization of the Islamic Conference, can undertake to arrest the tide of extremism, delegitimize terrorism, and indeed launch, in his words, "a jihad against terror."

7. See Imad ad-Deen Ahmad, "Islam Demands a Muslim Response to the Terror of September 11," *Middle East Affairs Journal* 7, no. 2-3 (Summer-Fall 2002).

George W. Bush Alienates American Muslims

American Muslim organizations have not made all the mistakes, however. Several misconceived policies of the Bush administration have deprived it of valuable assistance that American Muslims could provide in the war on terrorism. The administration, in its characteristically arrogant and short-sighted way, insulted and alienated the United Nations; then, when the United States needed the United Nations, the latter was unwilling to cooperate. Similarly, the Bush administration has mistreated and alienated the American Muslim community, which once voted for him overwhelmingly but which is now determined to see his back.

Most American Muslims feel that by passing the U.S. Patriot Act, which they think undermines their freedoms, and by invading Iraq even though there was no credible intelligence about its unconventional weapons programs and the supposed linkage between Saddam Hussein and al Qaeda, Bush has betrayed their trust. They feel that he is now guided by the prejudice of supposed Islamophobes, such as Daniel Pipes, Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson, who are determined to roll back the growth of Islam in America. President Bush's insistence on getting Daniel Pipes on the board of the U.S. Institute of Peace, by hook or by crook—appointing him when Congress was in recess—has convinced Muslims that Bush will go to inordinate lengths just to insult the American Muslim community.

In addition, President Bush's steadfast support for Israel, no matter what it does, and his misadventure in Iraq strengthen the perception that there is a war on Islam and make many American Muslims less willing to do anything to assist America at this moment. Muslims are not going to help America if America is seen as using September 11 to help

American Muslims as Allies 125

Israel. Perhaps, if there were a new administration in Washington, American Muslims might be more willing to come forward and work with the American government.

What Role Can American Muslims Play in the War on Terrorism?

American Muslims have an enormous potential to become an important ally in America's war against extremism. If consulted and brought into counterterrorism planning, they can help America become more effective, more focused, and more cost effective. Four areas of assistance stand out.

First, with regard to threat assessments and threat identification, American Muslims could have provided the Bush administration with a more accurate picture of the potential for threats from within the United States. Their analysis would have helped make the Department of Homeland Security a smaller, more effective, and less expensive institution. The American government is unnecessarily spending vast amounts of resources in surveillance of groups and individuals who do not constitute a threat, while they may be overlooking those who could be problematic. American Muslim input on this subject could be immensely useful.

Many U.S. policy makers continue to err in understanding and predicting the behavior of Muslim groups; the postwar chaos in Iraq is a case in point. If American Muslims had been more involved in the management of Iraq after the war, it would have been easier for Washington to establish better communications and perhaps gain more cooperation from various groups within Iraq.

Second, American Muslims could have given a Muslim face to America's response to September 11. That option, had it been pursued, could have averted the feeling in much of the

Muslim world that the war on terrorism is a Christian-Zionist crusade against Islam. The Bush administration erred by not appointing a Muslim to a high position at the Department of Homeland Security. Senator Spencer Abraham—an American Christian proud of his Arab heritage, and a trusted Republican—might better serve the country there than at the Department of Energy.

Similarly, the Bush administration should have appointed a number of prominent American Muslim athletes, such as Hakeem Olajuwon, and some imams, such as Imam Hamza Yusuf (an American convert to Islam who is well respected in the Muslim world), as special goodwill envoys to the Muslim world. The State Department is now attempting this in a less prominent way—better late than never. A more prominent Muslim presence in America's diplomatic and counterterrorism endeavors would have gone a long way, not only in preempting the rise of anti-Americanism but also in building trust between America and the Muslim world.

Third, there is the deficit in human intelligence. Some important assets that American Muslims can bring to the war on terrorism include human intelligence, cultural insights, linguistic skills, and experience and awareness of the diversity within Islamic groups and movements. It is possible that the FBI, CIA, and NSA can access these resources through recruitment, but voluntary support in this area from the community can be priceless.

Fourth is public diplomacy. Many American Muslim scholars have argued that Islam and democracy are compatible. The Bush administration could have recruited several of those scholars to make this case in Iraq and to help design Iraqi democracy and write its constitution. Without significant input from respectable Muslim scholars, the Iraqi constitution

American Muslims as Allies 127

may not stand up to possible accusations that it is un-Islamic and written to make Iraq subservient to American interests.

Relatedly, an important arena where the United States badly needs its Muslim citizens is in countering anti-American propaganda. Islamists, as well as several Muslim governmental media, have launched a propaganda war against the United States in response to the war on terrorism. This anti-American media offensive is determined to focus on U.S. foreign policy excesses and failures. It also seeks to explain every aspect of American policy as if it were serving only Israeli interests. With American Muslims as spokespersons surfing the media and the airwaves in the Muslim world, the United States would have a better chance of sending out a more balanced view of its policies.

American Muslims can also counter the abuse of Islam by rogue Islamists and help to undermine their legitimacy. American Muslim scholars have consistently maintained that *hira-bah* ("terrorism") is not jihad and is strictly prohibited by Islamic principles and law. They have also argued how suicide bombings violate the Islamic ethic of self-defense and are not legitimate instruments of jihad.⁸ If the voice of American Muslim scholars were given more attention, say through a White House-sponsored conference on jihad, many of the moderate and liberal elements in the Muslim world would recognize the fallacies in the so-called Islamic edicts of rogue Islamists and the scholars who support and justify their cause.

Restore Balance to America's Foreign Policy

American foreign policy is currently being shaped by a small group of close-minded individuals who are open neither to

8. Sohail H. Hashmi, "Not What the Prophet Would Want: How Can Islamic Scholars Sanction Suicidal Tactics?" *Washington Post*, June 9, 2002.

128 M. A. Muqtedar Khan

criticism nor to suggestion. The White House has become a victim of groupthink. It even refuses to recognize that its foreign policy agenda is in shambles. Bin Laden is still out there, as is al Qaeda; Americans are dying nearly every day in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the American economy is bleeding constantly. Anti-Americanism has reached shocking proportions, even in countries considered to be traditional allies. The administration itself claims that serious threats to American security are still out there and that much of the world is decidedly committed to not cooperating with the United States. To put it bluntly, American foreign policy under Bush is a colossal failure and is even potentially dangerous to America's security and economic health.

This administration would do well to listen to some moderate Muslim voices in shaping its foreign policy objectives and in determining its tactics. Most American Muslims have the same vision for the Muslim world as does the Bush administration. Most American Muslims want wholesale regime changes and the establishment of democracy in the entire Muslim world. They want to see the general human rights environment improving and wish that prosperity and freedom would take root in the Muslim world. The difference is that American Muslims would recommend strategies that are more humane and that involve less bombing and killing. The Bush administration needs American Muslims, and it is time it acted on this need and included them in its policy deliberations.

At the same time, patriotic American Muslims need the administration. Muslims for America are now locked in a struggle with Muslims for the Muslim world to determine the overall purpose and direction of the community. The government must find a way to bypass the dominant Muslim organizations that are determined to advance foreign interests, and

American Muslims as Allies 129

instead recruit American Muslims whose hearts are wedded to America. Doing so could tip the balance. These Muslims must be committed to Islam as well as to America, for Muslims who reject or ridicule Islam will not enjoy support within the community and cannot mobilize the goodwill of the community to help with America's crisis of legitimacy in the Muslim world. Truly, American Muslims and the U.S. government need each other.