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Muslims**

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Robert Baer, the former Middle East CIA operative, recently interviewed a 17 year old would-be suicide bomber from Afghanistan who was caught before he could undertake the attack. An article by Baer based on the interview appears on the TIME website. In it Baer discovers that far from being a rabid frothing-at-the-mouth anti-American zealot, the boy was simply brainwashed into accepting the al-Qaeda ideology. Among the absurdities the boy believed was that the President of Pakistan, Pervaiz Musharaff, was a Jew.

This brand of ideology is the refuge of conmen. Its influence is derived from restricting the availability of information so as to manipulate the way people view the world. It flourishes in environments where reality is oversimplified into a vapid, monochromatic, black-and-white view of the world. "Either you're with us, or you're against us" can go both ways.

One way to mitigate the influence of this type of ideology is by broadening the worldview of those most susceptible to its grip. While this task is admittedly difficult in a country like Afghanistan, where institutions and infrastructure have been crushed under 30 years of foreign-backed proxy wars, it is equally so in the major metropolitan centres of New York City, London, and Paris. This is because the ideologues who organise suicide bombings and videotaped beheadings realise that controlling and manipulating the flow of information is more important than scoring military victories. In fact, more so than being a military threat, the greater danger of al-Qaeda is that it convinces the general public—both Muslim and otherwise—that Islam is an ideology, fixed in time and inexorably charging towards a confrontation with anything "Western." If it is successful, those who accept this false premise will carry out the war that al-Qaeda has no inherent capacity to fight on its own.

It is important we all ensure that this war is never fully realised. To this effect, many within the mainstream media call for the moderate Muslim community to speak out and condemn extremism in the name of Islam. While condemnation is important from a

symbolic standpoint, the act does little to change the underlying problem. In addition to condemnation, what is needed is a broadening of perspectives, a deepening of discourse and a strengthening of independent and reasonable thought.

For all they are worth, simple condemnations of terror or the reiteration of the hackneyed phrase "Islam means peace" are limited in their impact. What will strengthen the hands of the mainstream, and weaken the influence of al-Qaeda-like ideology, is the development of authentic Muslim discourse that explores ideas and promotes broader, more encompassing views of the world. Islam is not an ideology; it has a vast and rich tradition of discussion and debate. This discourse, far from being novel to the Muslim world, in many ways represents a return to the values that contributed to centuries of peaceful coexistence between Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus, and others in places like Spain, Jerusalem, and India.

The values that promote discussion and dialogue are particularly well developed in North America and Europe. Here we instituted them into core principles that have resulted in a number of important institutions, including a free press. The freedom to inform the public of the abuse of power and provide a countervailing force against those who manipulate information for political gain is a fundamental aspect of American and European democracy. Unfortunately, due to decades of overbearing dictatorial rule, many parts of the Muslim world are without these basic freedoms. For this reason ideologues can be influential in controlling public sentiment abroad.

Therefore the need for a Muslim fourth estate — a truly independent Muslim media — is paramount. In North America the signs of its print and online emergence can be found in efforts like *Islamica Magazine* and [altnmuslim.com](http://altnmuslim.com). Rooted within the community, these publications provide a forum where debate on culture, history, politics and society can take place outside larger political narratives or soapbox rhetoric. They can meaningfully engage in the reformulation and development of ideas that influence the Muslim community. It is one thing to dissect a people from the outside, it is entirely different when the community engages itself, drawing from its past with a collective eye on the future.

In every religion there will be groups that reduce faith to ideology to advance their own political agendas. Either through charisma, violence, chicanery, or otherwise, they hijack religion as a means of mobilising the masses. If people were exposed to the realities of this process and the underlying deceit which it embodies, then the ideologue's power over the people would be greatly diminished. Al-Qaeda's long term success is not based in perpetrating violence, but rather in controlling how we think, feel, and act towards others who may be different than us. Our long term success will be in making al-Qaeda's message irrelevant. One way to achieve this is by creating intellectual and artistic spaces within the Muslim community where a broader view of the world is allowed to flourish. To do any less would be playing into the hands of the conmen.

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