

The New Face of Islam

A critique of radicalism is building within the heart of the Muslim world.

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Back in the mid-1990s, Osama bin Laden had a problem, and it was Islam. He wanted to say the Qur'an gave his followers license to kill innocents—and themselves—in the cause of "jihad." That was how he could justify his global campaign of terror. But that's not what the Muslim holy book says, and that's not the way it was interpreted by any of the great scholars and preachers of the faith.

So bin Laden set about spinning the revelations contained in the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, known as the Hadith, which provide much of the context for actual religious practice in the Muslim world. The Saudi millionaire wrote a diatribe that he called a declaration of war and then a *fatwa*, or religious edict, cherry-picking quotations from Islamic Scripture and calling on dubious scholars to back him up. The tracts were political propaganda, not theology, but for his purpose they worked very well. The apocalyptic notion of holy war he promoted—and the reality of it that he demonstrated on 9/11—became the dominant vision of Islam for those with little understanding of the faith, whether in the West or, indeed, the Muslim world. Even many religious scholars were intimidated.

Now that's starting to change. Important Muslim thinkers, including some on whom bin Laden depended for support, have rejected his vision of jihad. Once sympathetic publics in the Middle East and South Asia are growing disillusioned. As CIA Director Michael Hayden said last week, "Fundamentally, no one really liked Al Qaeda's vision of the future." At the same time, and potentially much more important over the long run, a new vision of Islam, neither bin Laden's nor that of the traditionalists who preceded him, is taking shape. Momentum is building within the Muslim world to re-examine what had seemed immutable tenets of the faith, to challenge what had been taken as literal truths and to open wide the doors of interpretation (*ijtihad*) that some schools of Islam tried to close centuries ago.

Intellectually and theologically, a lot of the most ambitious work is being done by a group of scholars based in Ankara, Turkey, who expect to publish new editions of the Hadith before the end of the year. They have collected all 170,000 known narrations of the Prophet's sayings. These are supposed to record Muhammad's words and deeds as a guide to daily life and a key to some of the mysteries of the Qur'an. But many of those anecdotes came out of a specific historical context, and those who told the stories or, much later, recorded them, were not always reliable. Sometimes they confused "universal values of Islam with geographical, cultural and religious values of their time and place," says Mehmet Gormez, a theology professor at the

University of Ankara who's working on the project. "Every Hadith narration has ... a context. We want to give every narration a home again."

Mehmet Aydin, who first conceived the Hadith project four years ago, when he was Turkey's minister of state for religious affairs, says it is obvious that in the seventh century, the time of the Prophet, life was very different. One Hadith, for instance, forbids women from traveling alone. In Saudi Arabia, this and other sayings are given as a reason women should not be allowed to drive. "This is clearly not a religious injunction but related to security in a specific time and place," says Gormez. In fact, the Prophet says elsewhere that he misses those days, evidently in his recent memory, when women could travel alone from Yemen to Mecca. In its first three centuries "Islam was interacting with Greek, Iranian and Indian cultures and at every encounter [scholars] reinterpreted Islam according to new conditions," says Gormez. "They were not afraid to rethink Islam then."

Liberal Muslim thinkers have made similar arguments in the past, but they were outliers and often not theologians. The Turkish project, on the other hand, has the quiet backing of the ruling AK Party, the world's most successful, democratically elected party with Islamist roots. The professors involved are quick to deny that their work represents some sort of Islamic Reformation—there is no Martin Luther among them, no theses are being nailed to a door. They call what they're doing a "rethinking" or a "re-understanding" of the sacred texts "according to modern concepts like democracy, human rights, women's rights and universal values," says Gormez. Yet their work has far-reaching potential, given the credibility of the source.

Many states, even those like Pakistan or Saudi Arabia that have tolerated radicalism in the past, have come to see that their own stability depends on encouraging greater moderation. Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah has moved to curb the zealous excesses of some 10,000 imams on the government payroll. The government isn't rethinking basic doctrines, one of the king's advisers, who wasn't authorized to speak on the record, told NEWSWEEK: "Let's say there is a theological debate about how to present their ideas and advice to the public." If a woman dresses a little immodestly by Saudi religious standards, it should be enough simply to say that without calling her a harlot, threatening her with punishment or worse. The idea is to tone down the fire and brimstone, which has inspired young Saudis to sign up for jihad in Iraq and elsewhere.

Across the Muslim world, people appear ready for this new message. Growing middle classes are no longer willing to accept the pieties of peasant life as guides for public and private conduct. "The rules of religion stay the same, but people's attitudes toward religion have changed," says Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose government is working to bring Turkey into the European Union. "The urbanization of the country has brought increased wealth and a different understanding of life." Even in theocratic Iran, police frequently cancel speeches by 49-year-old mullah Mohsen Kadivar because, authorities say, "they may cause traffic and public disturbances outside." Kadivar's message? That the Iranian system of *velayat-e-faqih*, in which a cleric has the final say on all matters of state, is fatally flawed. "It is a centralized interpretation of Islam that is not democratic," says Kadivar. "The government should be answerable to ordinary human beings who live on earth!"

Bin Laden's prescription for change, meanwhile, has led to nothing but death and destruction. Radicals have turned their anger and their bombs against other Muslims whom they deem apostates or simply inconsequential. As a result, they've found themselves isolated. In Iraq, Al Qaeda's forces are on the ropes and largely indistinguishable from gangsters. In Pakistan, polls show public support for suicide bombings has dropped from more than 30 percent five years ago, to less than 9 percent today. In an open letter last year, a Saudi scholar bin Laden had long revered, Sheik Salman al-Oudah, demanded, "Brother Osama, how much blood has been spilt? How many innocents among children, elderly, the weak, and women have been killed and made homeless in the name of Al Qaeda?"

The most ferocious attack on bin Laden's version of holy war has come from one of the few really respected religious thinkers *within* jihadist ranks, Sayyid Imam al-Sharif. Now imprisoned in Egypt, he has known Ayman al-Zawahiri, Al Qaeda's second in command, since they were in university. In a book his Egyptian jailers allowed him to publish last year, al-Sharif writes about the way the Sharia, Islamic law, has been tarnished by Al Qaeda's actions: "There are those who kill hundreds, including women and children, Muslims and non-Muslims in the name of Jihad!" That, said al-Sharif, is unacceptable in the eyes of Allah, of his law and of his people. Once again bin Laden has a problem, and it is Islam.