Moderate Islam: A Product of American Extremism

Abid Ullah Jan

Question 1: Various commentators have frequently invoked the importance of moderate Muslims and the role that they can play in fighting extremism in the Muslim world. But it is not clear who is a moderate Muslim. The recent cancellation of Tariq Ramadan’s visa to the United States, the raids on several American Muslim organizations, and the near marginalization of mainstream American Muslims in North America pose the following question: If moderate Muslims are critical to an American victory in the war on terror, then why does the American government frequently take steps that undermine moderate Muslims? Perhaps there is a lack of clarity about who the moderate Muslims are. In your view, who are these moderate Muslims and what are their beliefs and politics?

AUJ: The promotion of “moderate” Muslims is part of an extremist tendency sweeping the United States, unlike the situation in the Muslim world. It is the result of a war between two Americas: the America of ideals (e.g., of equality and justice) and the America of extremism, which has succumbed to self-interest groups and individuals. For the America of ideals, the Tariq Ramadan episode is a dark spot, one among many such episodes in recent times. Periodic episodes of tragedy are the hallmark of the America that has shifted its priorities under the pressure and manipulation of the extremists. These forces use all expedient means to sacrifice the well-being of the United States for self-interest and promotion of the Zionist state.

Abid Ullah Jan is associated with the Independent Center for Strategic Studies and Analyses, a Canadian think tank. A frequent commentator on Islam and global politics, his columns are published widely by the Muslim media. In addition, he is the author of several books, including A War on Islam? (Pragmatic Publishers: 2001) and The End of Democracy (Pragmatic Publishers: 2004).
This extremism entails a morbid dread of Islam. It never regards any Muslim as moderate unless one publicly rejects the Qur’an as “the final manifesto of God,” considering this belief a “disturbing cornerstone of Islam,” and submitting to the rejection of key parts of the Qur’an. Unquestioning support for Israel, along with all other American-approved dictatorships, is the minimum criterion. All other factors are irrelevant.

The fascistic American track record of accepting “moderates” and rejecting “radicals” is clear. The final distinction is not defined by their adherence to Islam, but by the assumed threat they pose to the interests of these extremists. For example, a devout man, fervent in all of his personal rituals but not participating in political affairs, would be a “moderate,” whereas a marginally practicing Muslim with the zeal to voice his opposition to the injustice perpetrated by the extremists’ America is classified as a “radical.”

In the current political context, a moderate is one who is passive like the devout man, or active like the extremist “moderates” – the Muslim neo-mods – who openly promote the extremist agenda using Islamic interpretations or “Project Ijthihad” as a cover. Hence, the distinction is not academic or religious, but political.

Two opposing factors prove this point. First, there are clear commands for Muslims to be moderate by default. Moderateness is a prerequisite for all Muslims, not a label of identity for some. Accordingly, Muslims cannot be part-time or partial Muslims (Qur’an 2:208) or reject part of the Qur’an (Qur’an 2:85). Hence, such religious labelling is irrelevant. Second, the extremists insist that strong belief in the totality of the Qur’an makes Muslims “Islamists.” That is why they believe themselves to be “absolutely at war with the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran.” It means that the standards of “moderateness,” as set by the American extremists, are directed at neutralizing a preconceived threat. Under these circumstances, mere claims of being a “moderate” do not make any difference at all, as long as a Muslim is presented as a threat, however baseless, to the interests of extremist America.

Similarly, the so-called extremism in the Muslim world is not the result of Muslims’ faith. Rather, it is a function of the perpetually colonized and oppressed people due to the lack of true independence and a central authority to control and productively channel their energies. It is naïve to suggest that a few ill-informed “moderate” individuals or puppet regimes can emulate the abilities of an entire central authority (i.e., the Islamic state) and effect progress and positive meaningful change.
Question 2: The Muslim world is experiencing a period of turmoil. At the heart of this turmoil is the debate over the role of Islam in Muslim society, particularly in its political sphere. At one extreme there is secular despotism, which seeks to dominate Muslim societies, and at the other extreme is the specter of Islamic totalitarianism. The hope in the middle is the possible role that moderate Muslims can play in establishing secular Turkey as a model for the Muslim world. Is it possible to imagine that the Turkish Islamists, now under the leadership of such visionaries as Prime Minister Erdogan, are the harbingers of moderate Islam and Islamic democracy?

AUJ: Although the question frames the central problem in reasonable terms, it thereafter descends into fatal assumptions.

First: Perpetuating the “Islam vs. the West” paradigm is the real agenda expressed. Are Bosnia and Albania part of the “West”? What about Palestine, if some consider Israel to be part of the “West”? Also, consider the relocation of around 400 million Muslims from Muslim-majority regions during the twentieth century. Or, consider Muslims in the United States who will soon constitute the world’s most educated, influential, and wealthy Muslim population. What, then, is “the West”? Instead, a new paradigm is required.

Second: It is ironic and premature to present the intolerant secular regime in Turkey as a beacon of democracy for Muslims. At best, it is a third-rate imitation of the worst of the so-considered West. Without real independence, identity, and vision, Turkey is begging on its knees to enter Europe. The masses still do not identify with the military regime, and the election of yet another Muslim backslider (Erdogan) provides little hope for comprehensive solutions based on Islam.

Third: The use of the pejorative term *Islamic totalitarianism* ignores secularism, which is an ideology every bit as much as any religion. Islamic totalitarianism is a convenient contrivance, unlike the all-too-familiar secular totalitarianism of present. Even a loose model like the one under Khomeini clearly had more popular support than any of the present corporate-run secular totalitarianisms.

The heart of actual totalitarianism lies in a system where humanity is sovereign and decides what is right and wrong according to the interests of a minority that plays a preponderant role in power-mongering. From genocides to unrestrained capitalism, colonial domination is a constant feature of secular democracies. Muslims never built gas chambers, used nuclear weapons, or commanded genocidal sanctions against nations that were
already on their knees. Islam does not sanction concentration camps and the systematic massacre of non-Muslims.

Fourth: The current emphasis on the ongoing turmoil in the Muslim world ignores the fact that problems in Muslim-majority countries are correlated to the problems in Muslim-minority countries, such as India, and to various other regions, such as Africa and South America, that may not even have a Muslim presence of any significance.

The fundamental problem is the continued colonial interference in their internal affairs and their ongoing exploitation by global financial institutions. Regardless of their religious affiliations, no government can thrive under the burden of structural adjustments and the debts owed to these institutions. Even if an Islamic theo-democracy driven by Muslim “moderates” was imposed on Muslim countries, these would still continue to suffer due to the external interference that deprives them of their right to self-determination. Thus, all other experiments in government other than Muslim self-rule will remain mere exercises in futility.

The problem within the Muslim world is a two-pronged crisis of knowledge and faith: a general lack of both among the masses, and an abandonment of both among the educated elite for materialist aims. Simply put, Muslims are proving themselves to be just as capitalistic as the capitalists. The revered generation of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) and his immediate successors was driven by piety and faith. The great Muslim civilizations of history, even if they were faith-driven, still built great flourishing civilizations. Thus, the Muslims’ primary goal is to develop, establish, and nurture a society driven by faith. The structure of government becomes secondary to this goal. Unfortunately, every major Muslim government has drifted away from this foundation.

An Islamic polity would first need to be able to exist without inheriting any of the shackles of its predecessors. Besides, unless it is born from the faith of the masses and the elite, any attempts to implement any sort of Islamic rule would be an unwelcome imposition on a population that is not ready for it. No legitimate government can be implemented through a top-down approach, and an Islamic state is no exception.

**Question 3:** Moderate Muslims are often associated with their advocacy of *ijtihad* and the subsequent reform of Muslim practice and interpretation of Islam through its much wider and systematic revival and application. Do you think that this faith in the promise of *ijtihad* is justified? Where is reform necessary? What do you understand by the term *Islamic reform*?
Can Muslims develop modern, democratic, and prosperous societies without abandoning the wisdom and blessings of revelation?

**AUJ:** *Ijtihad* refers to the complex deliberations involved in providing an understanding of the methods with which to practice the Qur’anic worldview in any given society. In the matters of individual life, everyone is master of oneself and can decide as one wishes. However, in matters concerning collective life, it is a tool used to expand Islamic rules, not to provide a license to promote un-Islamic values and norms by giving them Islamic credentials. For decisions regarding collective life, one should be competent enough and have an established scholarly position in society to offer an opinion.

There should be a genuine demand for forming an expert opinion, as well as an Islamic authority, to finally decide the matter and act accordingly. Presently, this is not the case. None of the governments are Islamic, and hence none are able to support such an exercise and implement the results. In the depressing state of affairs in Muslim-majority countries, Muslims need to start from somewhere by establishing Islam’s system of social justice before engaging in *ijtihad* on the various non-issues that American extremists have prioritized for them.

*Ijtihad* is part of the Muslims’ struggle for self-determination, because the first requirement is to study the problem in an enlightened fashion and thus understand it completely. Then, *ijtihad* is effected to determine the means and method to be adopted. This must precede action and so must occur before the establishment of social justice (e.g., like the Prophet [pbuh] in Makkah struggling against the Quraysh). *Ijtihad* on issues that require the existence of a legitimate authority to be implemented makes no sense under present conditions.

Even if we try to put the cart before the horse, we must understand what we often overlook in our *ijtihadi* adventures: All such deliberations must connect with the Islamic tradition. Historically, the great reformists were always scholars of the tradition who conducted thorough and deep studies of the Qur’an and the hadith. Unfortunately, today we see a double split at two ends of the spectrum. At one end, the Muslim scholars of Islamic tradition have by and large reduced themselves into government scholars who issue state-approved verdicts and those who are either in jail or keeping a low profile so as not to be sent to jail. On the other end, outspoken Muslims are divided into Muslim scholars who are trained in secular institutions, ideas, and methods, and such people as Irshad Manji. Both groups have little connection with the Muslim masses and Islamic tradition or have sought
to acquire a thorough knowledge of the Qur’an and Hadith, the Arabic language, and the details of Islamic jurisprudence.

Of course, we need to see some synthesis. Scholars of Islamic tradition have to update themselves so that they can function in today’s world, and scholars of the secular fields need to become experts in the Islamic tradition. Nevertheless, they are not living in a static environment with everything waiting for this synthesis. What is more likely is that the movement for establishing Islam’s just order will grow and grow. It is only a matter of time before the ummah moves from gaining widespread awareness of self-rule (regardless of the title: Islamic state, khilafah) to calling loudly for it, to finally effecting it.

Until there is a willingness among Muslims to revert to Islam and apply it to their individual and collective lives in its true sense, *ijtihad* will remain little more than a slogan propagated by individuals unqualified to practice it and who will, nevertheless, impose their own visions – apologetic, self-serving, or militant – on the populace.

**Question 4:** What is the future of political Islam? Does the emergence of such radical groups as al-Qaeda and others undermine the legitimacy of Islamic movements in the Muslim world, or does it enhance their appeal? Will we witness a resurgence in the relevance and influence of such groups as the Jamaat-i Islami and the Ikhwan al-Muslimin, or will they slowly lose ground and appeal to more moderate movements? Will political Islamic movements radicalize or democratize?

**AUJ:** The question assumes that “radicalization” or “democratization” are the only two alternatives. This reflects an absolutist mindset. This absolutism has paved the way for the ongoing occupations and for further aggression. The American extremists have failed to present any evidence in support of their justifications for these adventures. The way that the victims of the present American concentration camps have been treated, their public humiliation in so widespread a fashion, and the lack of any convictions indicates that the American extremists wish to send a message to the Muslims: Do not expect mercy if you dare to oppose American designs. The gratuitous employment of unsuppressed torture further demonstrates and emphasizes this point.

No amount of inhumane treatment can ever stand a chance of preventing the so-called “spectre of political Islam” from arising. Actually, there are two sources of “political Islam”: a) material and political and b) ideological.
These will determine its future. So long as Muslims find themselves living under extended colonial and externally imposed or protected regimes in environments that lack opportunity and provide no sense of justice and security, Islam will find itself sought out as a cure in the political realm.

Due to the economic exploitation by global institutions, the gross domestic product (GDP) of the Muslim nations continues to remain stagnant. In addition, while they still struggle to pay off their debts and have to cater to the needs of their rising populations, concerned individuals will continue to question the double standards they face. For example, they see Kuwait receive billions of dollars worth of reparations for its 6-month occupation by Iraq, whereas others could not get a dime for reeling under decades of colonial and other occupations.

For recent generations, the answer came in the forms of nationalism and socialism. While it is expected that some form of socialism will return to combat the unrestrained capitalism that is devouring the globe, Islam itself is right now being sought out to provide answers, if not relief. If the material conditions in these societies improve, so it is posited, it is unfortunate, but yet expected, that their desires for a worldly Islamic salvation will proportionally decrease. For the casual onlooker, the cure appears to be jobs and security. At the ideological level, however, the situation is rather different. Regardless of the material conditions of their particular societies, there are individuals who regard Islam as it is: a complete code of life, a *dīn*, not just a religion or a set of rituals.

Presently, most of these groups are unable to offer a consistent and comprehensive plan of action. In fact, many of them, like the Jamaat-i Islami and the Ikhwan al-Muslimin, are spent forces. Their *raison d’être* has been thoroughly compromised in every arena, given that they have failed in their primary mission. Now they are content to effect charitable actions and mere jockeying for minor positions on the political periphery.

“Moderate” movements will come and go in a similar fashion as tastes change. Democracy (for which instead read “capitalism”) will be tried in the Muslim world to satisfy the interests of the extremists abroad, and it will prove to be just as ruinous as the ideologies of socialism, Ba‘athism, nationalism, and so on that preceded it.

Those who remain steadfast in their belief and stick to the core sources of Islam – the Qur’an and Sunnah – will eventually shine through. Those who have a thorough understanding and a comprehensively sound agenda will manage to effect the change in the ummah required to re-establish the required Islamic polity.
Question 5: The growing presence of Islam in the West has clearly reached strategic proportions. Transatlantic relations are being mediated by the strength of Muslim minorities in Europe. There is a growing and influential Muslim community in North America. Some scholars and experts see Islam in the West as a threat to the West, while others see it as a potential bridge between the West and the Muslim world. What impact will Islam have on the West and Islamic-Western relations? Is the future of Islam and Muslims in the West in danger?

AUJ: The growth in Muslim numbers is absolutely irrelevant. All that matters is their willingness to strive to live by Islam. Muslims without this will have no significance in the West or in the East, as far as relations and dangers are concerned. As we witness today, the Muslims in the United States are on course to becoming the most educated, wealthy, and politically influential population of Muslims on Earth.

The contrary applies elsewhere; the populations of Muslim-majority countries continue to reach unimaginable levels of decay and decline. Their economic drain is only surpassed by their brain drain. Outside the Muslim world, the end of the era of the nation-state is occurring, where the hooks of American political imperialism and cultural hegemony, unrestrained capitalism, and the economic practices of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund are devouring most, if not all, other nations.

The United States is undergoing an unprecedented transition. The Protestant majority has ended. Within a few decades, the white majority will also end. But, these cultural changes are insignificant when compared to the downward turn in the country’s domestic politics. The only area in which the United States could once claim global superiority, being its system of “checks and balances,” is ending. The second area, its free market, is now being reduced to fewer and fewer players possessing an unbridled and unbalanced international reach.

The greatest tragedy is that besides devouring the resources of every corner of the globe, capitalism is simultaneously consuming its culture, morality, and religion. It is a tragedy that humanity has lost its sense of the Creator; now, humanity is losing it sense of its own self. The results are obvious: the collapse of the family and the ever-increasing violence across the planet. It is unfortunate that the American extremists are ceaselessly blaming Muslims for these ills. Even the worst Muslim militant did not cause any of these problems. The world will discover these extremists for what they really are: irresponsible, self-serving charlatans.
Apart from annihilation (which has happened historically at least twice to two major communities in Europe), there is every prospect that Muslims can continue to grow as a community without being assimilated. In some countries (e.g., the United States), they might become more isolated and stigmatized. However, this will serve to make them more aware of their Islamic identity and may also draw in further reverts from the rest of the population who are tired of the extremists’ jaundiced agenda.

With Islam receiving almost continual free advertisement (even in a derogatory manner), there is evidence that this will lead to continued interest in the subject and continued higher exposure of the general population to this “exotic” way of life – resulting in further numbers of reverts and still more who question the extremists’ perceived wisdom.

The United States can easily deal with the Muslims’ physical confrontation with its perpetrated wars and occupations, due to its superior firepower. However, this is true only if the United States is willing to commit the necessary atrocities en route (which it appears able and willing to do at present). However, in the battle of ideas and ideologies, the American extremist ideology has little real answer to the din of Islam. If Muslims actually choose to practice the Islam they profess, then everyone will benefit. An Islamic renaissance will neither make nor break the “West.” Rather, it will uplift it.

Endnotes

2. Ibid.
3. For example, see the preconditions of the self-appointed standard setters for passing the test of moderation (www.danielpipes.org/article/2226), “Moderates” are thus required to totally reject parts of the Qur’an, such as rejection of the clear commands about inheritance (Qur’an 4:11-14, 4:33, and 4:176), court testimony (Qur’an 2:282) and even interest (Qur’an 2:275-76, 278-79; 3:130; 4:161; and 30:39). Another precondition is to agree to “scholarly inquiry into the origins of Islam.”
4. Some people instantly blame Daniel Pipes as a bigot. He is not. He just speaks openly, while others like Thomas Friedman limit themselves to beating around the bush. However, when it comes to supporting and promoting persons like Manji as moderates, there is hardly any difference between them. See Friedman’s recent column: “Brave, Young and Muslim,” New York Times, 3 March 2005.


7. Being a Muslim, one has to be moderate. See http://icssa.org/moderate.html for details. Also, see Šahih al-Bukhari, vol. 3, book 40, hadith no. 550; vol. 4, book 55, hadith no. 629; vol. 7, book 70, hadith no. 577; and vol. 8, book 76, hadith no. 470, 471, and 474; and Šahih Muslim, book 32, hadith no. 6243. Accordingly, a moderate Muslim by default would: a) devote his/her life to the service of the Creator above all other devotions; b) invite others to develop such a relationship with his/her Creator; c) stand up against all prohibitions to this relationship (including criticism of any unjust governmental policy); and d) demand political, social, and economic reforms in the light of revealed wisdom and the removal of any sort of injustice. So, from that simple definition, what is the difference between a moderate Muslim by default and an idealistic American?

8. The Qur’an condemns those who had accepted the revealed books in parts (5:13-14)

9. Ibid. Also, see endnote no. 3.