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?

MAMK: The term moderate Muslims/Islam is becoming highly contested. What do we really mean when we brand someone as a moderate Muslim? Indeed, the more interesting question is what does the word mean to outsiders looking into Islam, and to Muslims looking out from within Islam?

As one who identifies himself strongly with the idea of a liberal Islam and also advocates moderation in the manifestation and expression of Islamic politics, I believe it is important that we flesh out this “religio-political identity.” Today, identity is politicized and identity construction
and sustenance has become a major political goal. In this era when who we are determines what we do politically, it is imperative that we clarify the “we” in politics.

The American media often uses moderate Muslim to indicate a Muslim who is either pro-western in his/her politics or is being self-critical in his/her discourse. Therefore, both President Karzai of Afghanistan and Professor Tariq Ramadan wear the cap with felicity, the former for his politics the latter for his ideas. Ramadan, who is critical of intolerance in Muslim communities and a strong advocate of the Europeanness of European Muslims, as well as a major voice in the articulation of the emerging form of European Islam, in many ways embodies both categories: He is pro-western as well as self-critical. In spite of his impeccable credentials as a prominent moderate Muslim, the American government, citing vague reasons of national security, recently revoked his work visa.

This decision sends the dubious message that when these two criteria, pro-westernism/pro-Americanism and self-critical politics clash, the government chooses the former and civil society chooses the latter. His visa was cancelled because, in the government’s perception, he could pose a national security risk. Interestingly, there was uproar of discontent from civil society, and strong voices condemning this decision were raised by the government, particularly within the American academic community.

In general, Muslims do not like using the terms moderate, progressive, or liberal Muslim, for they understand it to indicate an individual who has politically sold out to the “other” side. Others insist that there is no such thing as moderate or radical Islam; there is “only one Islam” – the true Islam, and all other expressions are falsehoods espoused by the munafiqun (the hypocrites) or the murtaddun (the apostates). Of course, the unstated politics behind this dogmatic position is: “My interpretation of Islam is obviously the true Islam, and anybody who diverges from my position is risking their faith.”

In some internal intellectual debates, moderate Muslim is used pejoratively to indicate a Muslim who is more secular and less Islamic than the norm, which varies across communities. In the United States, a moderate Muslim is one who peddles a softer form of Islam – the Islam of John Esposito and Karen Armstrong – is willing to coexist peacefully with peoples of other faiths and is comfortable with democracy and the separation of politics and religion.

Both western media and Muslims do a disservice by branding some Muslims as moderate solely on the basis of their politics. In general, these
people should be understood as opportunists and self-serving. In this conversation, Esposito refers to them as “professional Muslims.” That leaves intellectual positions as the criteria for determining who is a moderate Muslim, and especially in comparison to whom, since moderate is a relative term. I see moderate Muslims as reflective, self-critical, pro-democracy and pro-human rights, and closet secularists. Their secularism is American in nature; that is, they believe in the separation of church and state, but not like the French, who oppose the exile of religion from the public sphere. But who are they different from, and how?

I believe that moderate Muslims are different from militant Muslims, even though both of them advocate the establishment of societies whose organizing principle is Islam. The difference between moderate and militant Muslims is in their methodological orientation and in the primordial normative preferences that shape their interpretation of Islam. For moderate Muslims, *ijtihad* is the preferred method of choice for sociopolitical change and military jihad is the last option. For militant Muslims, military jihad is the first option and *ijtihad* is not an option at all.

*Ijtihad*, narrowly understood, is a juristic tool that allows independent reasoning to articulate Islamic law on issues where textual sources are silent. The unstated assumption is that when the texts have spoken, reason must be silent. But, increasingly, moderate Muslim intellectuals see *ijtihad* as the spirit of Islamic thought that is necessary for the vitality of Islamic ideas and Islamic civilization. Without *ijtihad*, Islamic thought and Islamic civilization fall into decay.

For moderate Muslims, *ijtihad* is a way of life that simultaneously allows Islam to reign supreme in the heart, and the mind to experience the unfettered freedom of thought. A moderate Muslim is, therefore, one who cherishes freedom of thought while recognizing the existential necessity of faith. He/she aspires for change, but through the power of mind and not through planting mines.

Moderate Muslims aspire for a society – a city of virtue – that will treat all people with dignity and respect (Qur’an 17:70). There will be no room for political or normative intimidation (Qur’an 2:256). Individuals will aspire to live an ethical life for they recognize its desirability. Communities will compete in doing good, and polities will seek to encourage good and forbid evil (Qur’an 5:48 and 3:110). They believe that internalizing Islam’s message can bring about the social transformation necessary for establishing the virtuous city. The only arena in which moderate Muslims permit excess is in idealism. The Qur’an advocates moderation (2:143) and extols the
virtues of the straight path (1:1-7). For moderate Muslims, the middle ground, the common humanity of all, is the straightest path.

**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 Islamic democracies. Until now, theorists in the West have visualized 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 such as Prime Minister Erdogan, are the harbingers of moderate Islam and Islamic democracy?

**MAMK:** It has been over half a century since the Muslim world freed itself from European colonialism. In this period, however, the Muslim world has failed to produce a viable and appreciable model of self-governance. The frequent shifts in regime type, such as in Pakistan, which oscillates between democracy and dictatorship, is indicative of the unsettled nature of political structures in the Muslim world. Only nations that had tyrannical dictatorships and monarchies have enjoyed some degree of political stability, but without significant economic or human development.

The level of disenchantment in the Muslim world today remains at such high levels that it is easily the most volatile region on the planet. Today, the Muslim world boasts of a diversity of regime types: dictatorships and sham democracies in Egypt, Sudan, and Tunisia; secular democracy in Turkey; monarchies in the Gulf; pluralist democracies in Bangladesh and Malaysia; and an Islamic state in Iran (a sort of theo-democracy). However, Iran lacks the stability and vitality that one now normally expects from thriving democracies in the First World, as well as former Third World countries, like the United States, the United Kingdom, and India.

There is a growing consensus among experts and the masses alike that democratization will reduce many of the Muslim world’s problems. Recent surveys have indicated that over 80 percent of Muslims would like to see their countries democratize. Except for a rather radical brand of Islamists who reject any and every form of democracy in favor of a nebulous notion of an Islamic state/caliphate, most Islamists are now converging with secularists and moderate Muslims on the desirability of democracy. The only question that really needs to be settled is the role of Islam in the Muslim public sphere. Most Islamists will break from this emerging *ijma*’ (consensus)
if the preferred model of democracy is secular. The secularists and moderates are nervous about accepting the Shari`ah as a prominent basis for Islamic democracy, fearing the implementation of medieval articulations of Islamic criminal codes. The issue of women’s role and the status of religious minorities is also a concern if, as in Iran, the polity is completely theocratic. But Muslims, regardless of their political persuasion, believe that Islam has a lot of good to offer and that it must play a role in the public sphere. An illustrative example of this global debate among Muslims was played out in the discussions of interim laws for Iraq and Afghanistan as they democratize under the jurisdiction of the American occupation forces.

So far, the Muslim world has not reached a consensus on the role of Islam and things Islamic – laws, clerics, scholars – in their polities. While in the Islamic Republic of Iran the masses are clamoring for more freedom and political and cultural liberalization, we are also witnessing extremists demanding greater Islamization in another Islamic state: Saudi Arabia. Islamists continue to demand a broader application of the Shari`ah in places like Turkey and Pakistan, but we also see in those same countries significant opposition to Islamists from secular authoritarian regimes that enjoy sufficient support to prevent popular Islamic revolutions.

The idea of an Islamic democracy that recognizes religious and political freedoms, but also acknowledges that Islam has a central role to play in Muslim public sphere and in Muslim individual and collective identity, is the best middle path between secular authoritarianism and Islamic fundamentalism. I am not convinced that Turkey is the model for Muslim societies. While democratic, Turkey is fundamentalist in its advocacy of secularism. In addition, its human rights record could be much better. On the other hand, Prime Minister Erdogan, who was recently recognized as the European personality of the year (2004), and his cohort of moderate Muslims are great role models for the Muslim world. They are demonstrating how Muslims can navigate this tension between secular authoritarianism and religions fundamentalism. They have shown that they can improve relations with the West and gain respect in the Muslim world without resorting to either violence or extremism. Prime Minister Erdogan has also shown how one can be a democrat without giving up one’s Islamic identity or values.

**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?

MAMK: One of the most popular explanations for the decline of the great Islamic civilization of the classical era is the belief that the door of *ijtihad* was closed, which resulted in the intellectual stultification of an entire civilization. Out of this stultification came the modern Muslim world – a weak and deplorable shadow of its former self. This claim is based on the belief that *ijtihad* is a vital process of intellectual rejuvenation. Unfortunately, this is not entirely true.

The Muslim world has two conceptions of *ijtihad*. One is a very narrow juristic notion that essentially states that *ijtihad* is a process of juristic reasoning employed to determine the permissibility of some action according to the Shari`ah when primary sources (viz., the Qur’an and Sunnah) are silent and earlier scholars had not ruled on the matter. For those who hold this view, who can undertake *ijtihad* is often more important than the need for *ijtihad*. This narrow definition limits who can undertake it and what issues can be addressed. In reality, this view is designed to stifle independent thought among Muslims and to confine the right to understand and explain Islam only to Muslim jurists. It is also opposed to reason, because it essentially says that reason shall be employed only when the texts are silent and no medieval scholar addressed the issue. Reason, according to this viewpoint, is the last resort to understanding the will of God. For those who hold this narrow view, opening the door of *ijtihad* would make no difference, since their very conception of it is impoverished and limited.

The second view, often employed by non-jurists and particularly by those who advocate some form of Islamic modernism and Islamic liberalism, envisions *ijtihad* more broadly. For modernist Muslims – and I believe that Islamic modernism deeply influences all moderate Muslim thinking – *ijtihad* is about freedom of thought, rational thinking, and the quest for truth through multiple epistemologies – science, rationalism, human experience, critical thinking, and so on and so forth. When modernist Muslims claim that the door of *ijtihad* was closed, they are lamenting the loss of the spirit of science and inquiry that was so spectacularly demonstrated by classical Islamic civilization at its peak. We are nostalgic for Ibn Sina’ and Ibn Rushd, for al-Farabi, al-Biruni, and al-Haytham. They were scientists and philosophers; some were also jurists. Call it whatever – some of us call it *ijtihad* [my personal website since 1999 is www.ijtihad.org] – it is this spirit of inquiry and
desire for all forms of knowledge, not just religious and juristic, that needs to be revived to revitalize and restore Islamic civilization.

As long as majority of Muslims equate Islam with the Shari`ah, Islamic scholarship with *fiqh* (jurisprudence), real knowledge as just juristic knowledge of Islam, and *ijtihad* as a limited jurisprudential tool, closed minds will never open. Islamic modernists have been trying, since the time of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (d. 1898), to instill the value of knowledge and appreciation for science and philosophical inquiry. Yet there is no research institution worthy of recognition in the entire Muslim world. Muslims must all go back and read Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) and see how he bridged science and religion in order to understand that Islam has nothing to fear from reason, and also open their hearts and minds to rational thought. This is the goal and the philosophy that Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406) would have called the “engine of civilization.” Modernist Muslims subscribe and advocate this spirit of Islam. Call it *ijtihad*, call it *ruh al-`umran* (the soul of civilization) if you please.

Islamic reformation can be understood in two different ways. It can mean the reform of society (*islah*) to bring it closer to Islamic norms and values. Most Islamic and Islamist reformers are pursuing this form of reform. The other way is that of questioning the extant understanding of Islam and seeking to articulate a reformed understanding of it. This is where Islamic modernists and rationalists have always plied their trade. Here, *ijtihad* is employed as an instrument to critique traditional understanding and rearticulate a more compassionate, more modern, and perhaps even a liberal understanding. The rethinking vis-à-vis democracy and Islam is an area in which Islamic reformist thinking is taking place.

Both of these approaches hold Islam’s divine sources, especially the Qur’an, as sacred and do not question their ultimate authority, although they will dispute human interpretations of these sources. Moderate and modernist Muslim thinkers also ensure that the secondary source – the Prophetic tradition – is treated as a secondary source and not as another form of revelation. There are those who may even seek to reform, reject, or recast revelation; however, they face the danger of trivializing revelation and essentially losing the very essence of faith. These reformers will probably have no impact whatsoever on the Muslim society, regardless of their success with non-Muslim audiences.

In my opinion, Muslims can modernize without fully de-Islamizing or de-traditionalizing. India and Japan have shown that societies can modernize without losing their traditional cultures. Muslim societies today have to distinguish between what is Islam and what is culture, retain their Islamic
essence, and reform dysfunctional cultural habits that hinder development, progress, equality, and prosperity. Without holding fast to revelation, Muslims will lose their connection with the divine, which would cause life to be without meaning and without purpose. Their challenge today is to latch on to the currents of democracy, modernity, and globalization without cutting the umbilical cord to the heavens. I believe that we can do it. American Muslims are demonstrating this in their lives.

**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?

**MAMK:** There is no doubt that the Muslim world is experiencing great turmoil and instability, and that many things will change, including the governing structures of most Muslim countries, before they stabilize. The attacks on September 11th on the United States and Washington’s response, particularly its invasion of Iraq, is triggering changes in society as well as in the balance of power within various groups within Muslim societies.

A significant growth in the jihadi phenomenon is being fuelled by an unprecedented anger and hatred toward the United States. Initially, the jihadis limited their scope of operations to Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Africa, Chechnya, and Kashmir. But since the American invasion of Iraq, they are operating in Europe (Spain and Turkey), Indonesia, North Africa (the Magribi nations), Iraq, and Qatar. In addition, they have stepped up the intensity of their operations in Saudi Arabia. While a majority of Muslims are appalled at their tactics, there is a significant element that supports them and will join them in their endeavors. The jihadis have stolen the thunder from the regular political Islamists, who now look moderate and respectable compared to them, and have even become acceptable to Washington. From Qazi Hussain in Pakistan to Ayatollah Sistani in Iraq, the United States is willing to work with Islamists whenever and wherever it can. There is a distinct possibility that the jihadi phenomenon will grow and keep the Muslim world embroiled in violence and war, within and without, for decades to come.

The jihadis have thus moved from the fringe of the Islamist sector to the center of global politics. Other Islamists now have very few options.
can either adjust to their new position as moderates, which could reduce their appeal to their constituency, who could increasingly abandon them to follow the jihadis, or they can adopt more radical postures in order to remain important. A third option, perhaps the wisest one, would be for the Islamists to join the demand-for-democracy bandwagon across the Muslim world and enjoy the fruits of democracy. The price that they will have to pay for this is the dilution of their Islamist agenda, namely, to reconcile themselves to advocating Islamism in proportion to what the traffic can bear.

While the jihadis are ascendant, so are Muslim democrats. The pressure for democratization being applied by Washington has emboldened the pro-democracy sector in the Muslim world, particularly in the Arab Middle East. The momentum for democracy had been gradually developing across the board, but had remained more or less under the radar. But now, with elections in Iraq, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia, the mood is much more in favor of democracy. Initially, the Islamists stand to gain from the elections, since they are the best-organized political parties in the Arab world. However, it is quite likely that their initial gains will soon decrease if they seek to institutionalize their political rhetoric of opposition to globalization and the West.

Political Islam’s future depends on the prospects for democracy in the Arab world. With democracy comes power, but also accountability in real terms, for the Islamists. So far, all they have done is launch discourses. Once in power, they will have to deliver. And, whether they can do so remains to be seen. If they follow the example of the Islamists in Turkey and focus on effective governance and eschew ideological battles at home and abroad, then they will thrive. Otherwise, they may become marginalized.

Another important element that will influence the Islamists’ future is their relationship with the jihadis. Will they co-opt them, oppose them [indeed, fight them if Islamists come to power], or ignore them? If the Islamists come to power, then they will become the jihadis’ target and, in turn, they will have to go after them. So far, the Islamists have played both sides. While they have asserted to the rest of the world that Islam does not advocate terrorism, within Muslim discussions they have made excuses for jihadis in Iraq, and some of them are even partial toward Bin Laden. We must, however, remember that the jihadis themselves despise the Islamists. Ayman Zawahiri’s *Al-Ḥisād al-Murar* (The Bitter Harvest) was a diatribe against the Ikhwan al-Muslimin.

**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?

**MAMK:** Islam has already had a huge impact on the modern West. Some Muslim philosophers believe that the modern West is the imagination of Ibn Rushd. Islamic ideas have influenced all of the fundamental assumptions of modernity. But the contemporary impact of Islam on the West is coming more in the form of demography than philosophy. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the West and has become the second largest in Europe, North America, and Australia. In England, even the House of Lords has Muslims; in Canada there is an active process of implementing Shari’ah laws [voluntarily]; and in the United States, Islam continues to thrive in spite of severe setbacks in the wake of 9/11.

The presence of a large number of Muslims and their determination to resist assimilation poses several challenges to the West. First, it puts pressure on the West to truly live up to its claims that it is a society that believes in religious tolerance, pluralism, and democracy. The United States has, for a long time, remained a deeply Christian nation while claiming that it is a secular and pluralist society. The arrival of Muslims is testing this. The Patriot Act that profiles Muslims; the rise of Christian evangelism, whose rhetoric demonizes Islam; a new foreign policy that is determined to use force to crush and transform the Muslim world; as well as the scandals of torture and unconscionable conduct at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, are all signs that the United States has difficulty in living up to its own values when interacting with Muslims. Perhaps democracy was always fragile in the West, and the advent of Muslims only exposed it. But with the emergence of both American and European Muslim identities, the West will also discover that it has allies within its Muslim populations in the form of Muslims who are equally determined that western claims to democracy and freedom of religion are substantiated in reality and policy.

The Muslim presence in the West has the potential to improve Muslim-Christian and Muslim-Jewish relations through the various interfaith dialogues that are taking place in the West today. Interfaith meetings and Muslims lecturing in churches and synagogues are now regular events in Europe and North America. There are genuine theological developments
and also mutual recognition and appreciation at these events that could eventually have a global impact.

As the Muslims’ influence increases, they will have an impact on public policy, including the foreign policies of western nations. Many commentators believe, as the question suggests, that one important reason for the growing unease in the transatlantic alliance is a result of European governments becoming more responsive to their Muslim populations. American Muslim influence on American policy is neutralized by the more powerful and well entrenched pro-Israeli lobby, which has strong constituencies in the American Jewish as well as the Christian Evangelical communities. When the Arab-Israeli conflict is finally resolved, there is a great possibility that the Jewish-Christian alliance on Israel may split to give way to a Muslim-Jewish alliance that will seek to counter and contain the growth of Christian evangelicalism in the United States and the threat it poses to secularism in this country. At that time, the American Muslim influence on American foreign policy will increase manifold and have a positive impact on American relations with the Muslim world.

The biggest impediment to the growing influence of Islam and Muslims in the West is the growth of Islamophobia as a result of the aftermath of the attacks of September 11. Some commentators fear that the very future of Islam in the West is at stake, as Islamophobia rises to unprecedented levels. Western nations are compromising their own values – the very values that enable Islam to thrive – in order to marginalize Muslims and reduce their ability to influence domestic and global politics.

Islamophobia in the West depends on two key factors: the rise of an anti-Americanism and jihadism in the Muslim world that demonizes the West as well as the Christian and Jewish faiths, and the rise of an evangelical Christianity in the United States that demonizes Islam and sees it as a barrier to its own global expansion and domination. If the jihadis continue to attack western targets and use terrorism as their main weapon, then Islamophobia will thrive in the West and stifle the growth of Islam in the West. If Christian evangelism continues to strengthen the Christian voting block, it will subvert the very foundations of democracy in this country and put the prosperity and well-being of Muslims and all other religious minorities at grave risk. To use the vocabulary of President Bush, the Christian Right is a grave and gathering danger to Islam and democracy.

In this political environment, moderate American Muslims have a special role to play. They are uniquely positioned, because unlike any other party, they alone take pride in belonging to both civilizations. They are
proud of their Islamic heritage and values and are deeply in tune with their Americanness. For them, the Muslim world and the United States are like two parents between whom they cannot countenance any strife. American Muslims look backward and forward. They are connected here and there, and from this unique position they must advance a balanced discourse of Islam and of the West. They must not only act as Islam’s ambassadors to the West, but also as American ambassadors to the Muslim world. They have to be both critical and self-critical. They have to revisit theology and also partake in politics.

In this current situation, moderate American Muslims are the middle ground through whom the straight path passes.