Opinion Brief: Wars of Our Own Creation

By Sherifa Zuhur

Various Western government spokespersons or policy "professionals" have argued that we are witnessing "an internal struggle within Islam, pitting those who espouse a particular orthodoxy against those who seek a reformation of Islam." [1] Essentially, a battle between moderates and radicals. But who are the moderates, exactly? Why are they increasingly defined as those who support the West, secularists, or those who do not observe mainstream Muslim practices? Is this not a Western perception of moderation, informed by a discrete historical and political self-analysis that is superimposed on the Muslim world? Moreover, do moderates always seek a reformation of Islam? Or do they identify in some ways with bin Ladin's anti-Americanism? Can they be better described, or do they overlap with other categories of Muslims like traditionalists, conservatives, or non-violent Islamists? [2]

"Strengthening the moderates" in the Muslim world has been a consistent policy slogan since 2001. One important study suggests that we build on the "success" of the West in the Cold War by creating a new breed of Muslims – the "moderates" we want, instead of the moderates that we actually find in the region. Indeed, these will not be "moderates", but rather are intended to be Muslim secularists who will promote policies and changes in Muslim societies that synchronize with U.S. goals and strategic communications.

The idea of an Islam struggling without a Luther - an Orientalist and essentialist vision of a backwards culture - is a very useful way to demonize an entire culture. Even Benazir Bhutto may go down in history as a moderate martyr to extremism when in fact, many other factors such as regionalism, foreign interference, and lack of democracy have contributed to the vacuum of power in Pakistan. In Europe, we see how television plays on the idea of a struggle "within" Islam as Christiane Amanpour narrates in "The Moderates Fight Back", a segment of the series "The War Within". [3]

Amanpour's particular focus on Muslims debating in Ireland made it evident to viewers that moderates are not radicals. However, it didn't clarify the spectrum of Muslim moderate positions on a wide variety of issues. For example, Westerners often consider Muslim women who do not wear *hijab* to be moderates, or "secularists" when in fact, they may be neither. At the same time, other Muslims increasingly criticize them, or even allude to their being non-Muslims or false Muslims. Furthermore, for a woman to claim the right to political leadership, as Bhutto did, signifies a challenge to the principle of male *hukm* (arbitration, judgment, ability to serve as an authority)– automatically identified such a woman as a non-conservative. Moderates in Muslim-majority and minority countries do not speak with one voice on these issues, or indeed many others.

Unfortunately, mainstream Muslims - large numbers of whom are Islamists - do not fit the prevailing American definition of "moderate". A person who follows the five pillars of Islam, celebrates Muslim holidays, attends a mosque, eschews alcohol and pork, wears Islamic dress or is bearded, and does not date is simply following basic religious principles. But, in the post 9/11 environment, and probably prior to it, such a person has been treated as being "extreme" when living in Muslim minority countries. Furthermore, there are expectations in the business, professional, governmental, and media environments that Muslims will express the public culture of others; in the United States, the bland geniality and lack of emotion expected of the white, male, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant elite. Therefore, Muslim commentators often appear, argumentative, didactic or at least expressive, and "extreme".

Expectations that Muslims should essentially be secularists, embrace Western cultural values, avoid condemning Israel withhold support of the Palestinian cause, or enthusiastically back American foreign policy in the Muslim world are highly impractical and unrealistic measures of "moderation.". A more literal interpretation of "moderation" or "centrist" might be helpful, rather than equating this category to all that is not Islamist, or secularist-assimilationist, as in numerous US Government and think tank approaches.

The antithesis of a "moderate" could be that new, ugly term, "Islamofascist", which to my dismay seems to include all Islamists. Some experts and sources have for years, defined moderates as "anti-Islamist" Muslims. [4] Campus Watch - a project of the Middle East Forum, and founded by Daniel Pipes - has vilified important Muslim thinkers and academic experts who are considered "moderate" by their peers, regional experts, and Muslim and non-Muslim academics. This approach has gone beyond Campus Watch's McCarthyesque website to a book that castigates 101 prominent American academics, including those who are too defensive of Islam or

Islamists in sheep's clothing. [5]

We should consider the views of "mainstream" pious Muslims, not only those who have rejected Islam as the primary focus of their lives. Among these, we need to acknowledge that a majority in the Muslim world want to retain their identity, and in some cases serve as a positive voice for stricter observance of their faith. They may not fall in the camp who is content to relegate their identity and faith to the private sphere. They might not be able to do so, either, because of the Islamization of the region that has taken place over the last three decades.

Moderate Islamists, like radicals and also many non-Islamist actors, reject Western (American and European) political dominance, and cannot but disapprove of American and European foreign policy in the Middle East today with its transformative dimension. However, they opt for education and *da'wa* to promote their cause as opposed to a violent approach. One symbol of their position (copied on occasion by non-Islamists like President Mubarak) is that they do not wear ties, symbols of the Western business world.

The Ikhwan, or Muslim Brotherhood, is the best organized and largest element of political opposition in Egypt today. Furthermore, it is the parent to organizational branches from Jordan to the Sudan, including Hamas. Three propositions have been made about the Ikhwan [6] by academics who study them, their own spokespersons, and their critics:

> (1) [from academics] If they were permitted to operate as a legal political party in Egypt, this would serve to moderate the Party's positions and weaken the salafists and other extremists
> (2) [from Brethren and Hamas] The Brotherhood (like Hamas) has always been intended to function as a broad socio-religious movement which must, of necessity, go beyond politics; but which can operate even when barred from political legitimacy and
> (3)[from critics] The Muslim Brotherhood is simply not sufficiently "moderate" as evinced in their recently published platform, Barnamig al-Hizb. [7]

While critics point out the proposed role of a Council of 'Ulama in the platform, and the exclusion of Christians or women as potential presidential candidates, one might remember that such ideas are not anathema to many Muslims - they emanate from commonly shared notions of good governance via consultation or *shura*. As for suspicion of women presidential candidates, well, many Americans seem to be right in synch with male-dominated Muslim society, and Egypt's regime-backed National Democratic Party has never and probably will never forward any female presidential candidates and yes, the role of non-Muslims (*dhimma*) continues to be a problematic aspect of a proposed, idealized Islamic state. But is this worse than the current situation for religious minorities in other actual Islamic states? Political observers, take heed! This platform was not formulated with the input of all Brotherhood leaders -- `Isam al-Arian for instance, was imprisoned when it was issued; and it was issued "for discussion." Still, it represents a shift from prior positions of the Ikwhan in Egypt even if it is a little further to the right than those of today's Ikhwan or Hamas moderates. [8]

In addition to these moderates are hundreds of thousands of other Muslims who, however, cannot possibly be termed Muslim liberals. Defining moderates as assimilationists who reject the *shari`ah* and other key aspects of religious identity, wear coats and ties, and embrace Israel is just too much to ask of the Muslim world today. Defining Islamist moderates (and those who write about them) as terrorists, and inhibiting their capacity to pursue other tactics may cost us all dearly.

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NOTES:

[1] Jacquelyn Davis, (principal investigator) and IFPA,   "Radical Islamic Ideologies and Implications for U.S. Strategic Planning and U.S. Central Command's Operations," Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, January 2007, p. 4.
[2] See Sherifa Zuhur, Precision in the Global War on Terror: Inciting Muslims through the War of Ideas,   Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, forthcoming 2008.
[3] CNN aired, 22 January 2007.
[4] Daniel Pipes, "Identifying Moderate Muslims," November 23, 2004, http://www.danielpipes.org/article/2226
[5] David Horowitz, The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America. Washington, D.C. Regnery Publishing, 2006. The author's other targets of this book are Afrocentric black intellectuals, and gays.

[6] Sherifa Zuhur, Egypt: Security, Islamist, and Political Challenges. Carlisle Barracks: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007, http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=787
See pp. 53-55, 57, 64, 68-72, 88, 91-93, 97-101, 103.
[7] The use of the term hizb or "party" implies the crystallization of this shift in the Ikhwan's self-conception, despite the continued assertions of the Ikhwan's multi-dimensional role.
[8] See quotations in Sherifa Zuhur, "The Summit: Milestone or Mirage?" Strategic Studies Institute Newsletter, October 9, 2007, http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/Pubs/Display.Cfm?pubID=824