

**Muslims in the US**  
“Burning Issues of the Day” SRF Forum, California  
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I would like to thank Mr. Marghoob Quraishi and the Strategic Research Foundation for inviting me to share my ideas with you today.

If my talk doesn't address the issue of whether the US is becoming an empire, it is because I was initially told that the title of our panel was “Burning Issues of the Day,” and by the time I was sent the revised title, I had already written this talk.

At the outset, I should mention that some of what I will say today I've had occasion to say before at a forum at Cornell quite aptly titled “Homeland Insecurity,” and at a conference on “Islam in America” held at Harvard earlier this year.

As a way to situate myself, I want to note that I am a first generation immigrant from Pakistan who now finds herself positioned within, and sometimes between, two overlapping and yet exclusively defined communities: the émigré Muslim on the one hand and the US on the other. It is partly this location that has shaped my perspective on some of the issues that I will be speaking about. In large measure, however, my views, specially the belief that the way in which most Muslims practice Islam actually subverts and undermines its teachings, originate in a specific reading of the Qur'an that I've offered in my recent book, *“Believing Women” in Islam*.

Muslims in America face many challenges these days but I will focus primarily on two: the fall-out of 9/11 and unequal gender relationships in our communities. These may appear to be unrelated, but if we are to confront external challenges, our communities must be internally strong and healthy, and I can't imagine how they can be so long as they are founded on inegalitarian gender hierarchies.

I will speak first about some of the implications of 9/11 for Muslims and then about the need to put our own house in order.

**The fallout of 9/11:**

By now, it should be clear that this administration and its neconservative ideologues are using 9/11 as a pretext for establishing US global hegemony by whatever means necessary.

Abroad, this has entailed wantonly killing thousands of civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq and setting up military bases in Muslim heartlands in the Middle East and Central Asia. At home, it has involved a systematic and ever widening attack on civil liberties that includes racial profiling, surveillance, preemptive arrests and detentions, secret courts,

and the denial of legal rights not only to those accused of terrorism, but also those suspected of harboring hostile intent towards the US.

Such measures are directed almost entirely at Muslims and Arabs who also are under assault by segments of civil society. Thus, hate crime against them—such as “murder, assault, arson and vandalism”—rose by a staggering 1700% in six major cities last year as Human Rights Watch reported (“U.S. officials should have been better prepared for hate crime wave,” November 14).

Moreover, as Human Rights Watch also pointed out, “Backlash violence against Arabs and Muslims...is not unprecedented ....war in the Middle East or terrorism against the [US] associated with Arabs or Muslims has triggered domestic spasms of bias violence many times in the past.” Given this fact, one must wonder why government agencies weren’t better prepared to deal with it .

In addition to the governmental crackdown and vigilante violence, Muslim and Arab academics-and critics of this administration generally-also are being attacked by reactionary watchdog groups some of which now equate “hatred” for the US and “anti-Americanism” with criticisms of the *Israeli* government.

Most people view this as a natural or inevitable fallout of 9/11, but a tragedy, of whatever proportions, doesn’t dictate its own response. My own view is that 9/11 merely brought to the surface the latent Western fear and suspicion of Muslims that dates back to the very advent of Islam.

It is this preexisting hostility that explains the ease with which this administration was able to launch its attack on Muslims after 9/11 and why it has been able to hold us all hostage for the actions of a few without much in the way of a public questioning of its policies.

Of course, other “minorities” have also had to contend with this way of apportioning collective responsibility-like the Japanese during World War II-but such exceptional treatment is reserved only for some of us and not all of us. Certainly, we don’t blame all Jews, much less Judaism itself, for the terrorism unleashed by extremist Jewish groups against Arab civilians in the 1930s and ‘40s.

Nor do we hold all white people responsible for the crimes of the many. Indeed, white people have always been able to claim uniquely individualized identities that free them from having to shoulder collective responsibility; thus Hitler remains Hitler and Timothy McVeigh Timothy McVeigh; neither is taken to exemplify white criminality.

But Muslims and Arabs cannot claim individuality because they are branded with the “mark of the plural,” as Albert Memmi called it, and while Memmi was referring to French colonialist representations of Tunisians (who are Muslims and Arabs), what he says of the French is no less true of US-American attitudes towards Muslims today.

Like the colonizers, most non-Muslim Americans also believe of Muslims that ““They are unpredictable!’ ‘With them, you never know!’” And, like the colonized, Muslims also are “never characterized in an individual manner; [they are] entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity (‘They are this.’ ‘They are all the same.’).” And just like the humanity of the colonized remains opaque and “mysterious after years of living with the colonizer,” so does the humanity of Muslims after centuries of living with non-Muslim Americans (Albert Memmi, *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).

It is against this collective anonymity and unknowability that we are having to struggle today; after all, if non-Muslim Americans had been able to see us in the ordinariness and averageness of our lives, why would we need to explain these lives to them today?

It is also this sense of Muslims as unpredictable, unknowable, and all the same that has dictated the US response to 9/11, including the attack on civil liberties. Indeed, it isn’t accidental that this assault has assumed the form of an attack on the Muslim “Other.” Framed in this way, the attack appears as a trade-off to most people who agree to give up some of their rights-or don’t protest too much when those rights are taken away from them-if it means depriving the dreaded Muslims of most or all of **their** rights.

That such a situation can even appear as a trade-off reveals the extent to which most US-Americans can’t see any commonalities between themselves and Muslims, and as a result, also can’t see that what they’re allowing to happen to Muslims today may happen to them tomorrow. After all, once a law is on the books, it can target everyone equally.

There aren’t any easy solutions to these challenges, but if we are to deal with them at all, we need to do some good house-keeping in our own communities. So, I am going to shift focus now and speak about three pressing internal problems.

### **Putting our house in order**

One is the absence of a powerful Muslim voice in US politics and while there are many reasons for this, a primary one is the insularity and parochialism of most Muslims, specially immigrants.

A combination of cultural hubris and alienation from the larger society in which they live, has led most immigrants to detach themselves from it socially and politically as well, and this detachment and alienation have made us so susceptible to the vagaries of the political system today. Consequently, unless we give up on our self-imposed exile and join the mainstream of national politics (and by this I don’t mean the Republican party!), we won’t be able to narrow the gap between our growing numbers and our marginal presence in US politics.

A second problem is the failure to challenge interpretive extremism in our midst. By this I don’t mean that extremism is uniquely Muslim or Islamic. To the contrary, extremisms of all sorts are pretty universal and not all of them are religious in nature. And even when

it is, extremism needs to be understood in the broader context of a racist, unjust, and oppressive global political economy that is the outgrowth both of centuries of Western imperialism and of many existing US policies.

At the same time, however, Muslims themselves share some culpability for failing to challenge religious extremism. Liberal, progressive, and so-called secular Muslims in particular have disengaged from Islam thereby allowing the extremists a freer hand to dominate the production of religious meaning with disastrous consequences for us all. Thus, it isn't just a case of Islam vs. the West, as the popular mantra has it, then, but also an interpretive struggle of Islam vs. Islam, as Ali Shariati, the Iranian intellectual, used to say, and the best antidote to extremism is to interpret Islam in ever more egalitarian ways so as to discredit its abuse for justifying authoritarianism and repression.

By authoritarianism and repression I have in mind not only the politics of Muslim states but also the sexual politics of Muslim communities not one of which practices gender equality today and most of which are mired in oppressive gender hierarchies. As a Muslim woman and as someone who has done a careful reading of the Qur'an's teachings on gender equality, I find this intensely disturbing and, frankly, insufferable.

This, then, is the third and most acute problem that Muslim communities face today for several reasons. First, while it is only recently that the community as a whole has felt the impact of violent and extremist readings of Islam, Muslim women have **always** borne their brunt. Second, it is around women's issues that our contradictions are most manifest. Many of the same Muslims who were harshly critical of the atrocities that the US committed when it went after the Taliban did nothing to challenge the Taliban's atrocities against women. Even if the "save the Afghan women" campaign became just another tool in the Bush administration's ideological repertoire for bombing Afghan civilians, it doesn't obviate the fact that most Muslims didn't protest the Taliban's abuse of women.

Indeed, for the most part, Muslims tend to remain silent about sexual oppression. Most wouldn't even think of it as a "burning issue of the day" though it's unclear how we can face other challenges so long as we are socialized to view women as inferior to men and to accept their degradation at the hands of men as "Islamic." Dupliciously, this abuse occurs alongside loud proclamations about Islam's egalitarian stance towards women.

I can't offer a detailed commentary on the Qur'an's teachings but I do want to state for the record that the Qur'an does not advocate, condone, or sanction a theory of male rule or privilege notwithstanding misreadings of specific verses. To the contrary, it clearly establishes the principle of ontological gender equality.

The sexism and misogyny that Muslims historically have projected onto the Qur'an is a function of how religious knowledge was produced, by whom, and in what contexts. Historically men have claimed the right to interpret Islam even though the Qur'an says that all humans potentially can acquire knowledge, including religious knowledge, by reflecting on its *ayat* ("signs" of God).

That Islam is not based in the idea of mediation and intercession by men or communities of interpretive or religious experts is also clear from the fact that it does not ordain a clergy or sanction an institution comparable to the church. In fact, there is no scriptural sanction in Islam for male interpretive communities or experts to monopolize religious knowledge and claim inerrant authority. And yet that is precisely how religious knowledge and authority are structured among Muslims today.

At a time when we are confronting serious challenges, it is easy to push awkward and controversial issues to the back burner in the name of communal solidarity. But I am not sure what sort of solidarity can emerge from a situation of inherent injustice and inequality. I believe we would be better served if we were to use the openings provided by the current crises to reflect on our readings of the Qur'an and admit that we've not done an adequate job thus far of reading it for its best meanings, as the Qur'an itself asks us to do. This realization should spur us to do just that in the future.

The Qur'an teaches that God only changes the condition of those who endeavor to change their own condition, just as it teaches that moral individuality and agency lie in using our *aql* and *ilm*, our intellect and knowledge, to understand and practice our religion. Armed with this certainty, we should be unafraid of any challenges; but the burden is upon us to make the right decisions and the right choices today. Unless we do, we won't be able to actualize the full potential of Islam, hence also our own potential as Muslims.