

## Political Islam

### A Conversation with Gilles Kepel and Jeffrey Goldberg

*In December 2002, twenty-five print and broadcast journalists gathered at the Pier House in Key West, Florida, at the invitation of the Ethics and Public Policy Center for a two-day seminar called "Toward an Understanding of Religion and International Conflict." The session from which this "Conversation" is drawn featured **Gilles Kepel**, author of *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam*, with a response by New Yorker writer **Jeffrey Goldberg**. What follows is an edited version of their remarks and of the ensuing general discussion as moderated by **Michael Cromartie**, vice-president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center. Another seminar session, "Just War and Jihad: Two Views of War," with James Turner Johnson and Christopher Hitchens, appeared as Center Conversation 21. The third of the three will feature historian Philip Jenkins and journalist David Brooks on the rise of global Christianity. These seminars for journalists are sponsored by a generous grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts, with the overall aim of improving journalistic coverage of religion.*

**Michael Cromartie:** When we were deciding whom to ask to speak about the role of Islam in the world today, the name that kept coming up was that of Gilles Kepel, professor of Middle East studies at the Institute for Political Studies in Paris. Professor Kepel is widely known on both sides of the Atlantic as an expert on Islam, particularly since the publication of his book *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Harvard University Press, 2002). His most recent book is *Bad Moon Rising: A Chronicle of the Middle East Today* (London: Saqi, 2003).

#### GILLES KEPEL

Are Islamist movements on the wane? Or are they gaining strength? In my book *Jihad*, I argue that while such movements became extremely powerful in the 1970s and 1980s, from the early 1990s on they began to see a major split in their ranks. Strong contention is roiling within

them, and, for a movement that was supposed to be able to meld together different social forces in Muslim societies, such division spells difficulty. Focusing on this dynamic of disunity within Islamism helps us to understand how and why the Islamist movement's most radical elements have turned to terrorism. At the same time, another process is taking place. We saw signs of it in Turkey's November [2002] parliamentary elections. The winner was a political party that, while it has Islamist roots, has forged new types of alliances that have tended to move it toward a closer embrace of democracy. Some background on what has been going on in the Muslim world—particularly the Middle East—over the last quarter of a century will be helpful in explaining all this.

What does the current Islamist movement mean? What is the difference between *Islamist* and *Islamic*, for Muslims? Islamists are militants; they are actively seeking to implement *shari'a*, the law derived from the Koran, which Muslims believe was revealed to Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel. As important as the Koran is the Haddith, the collected deeds and sayings of Muhammad, which Islamists also take as having binding legal status. So Islamists are people who want an Islamic state. Above all, this means implementing *shari'a*, and not letting any manmade laws stand in the way. Democracy is of course suspect, because it means the sovereignty of the *demos*, the people, and this is contradictory to the sovereignty of God.

The Islamist movement began in the 1920s, a decade that saw the abolition of the Ottoman caliphate by Kemal Ataturk and the rise of politico-religious organizations in various Muslim countries. The best-known of these was the Society of the Muslim Brothers, founded in Egypt in 1928. The Muslim Brothers competed with nationalist movements in a contest to determine what a future, post-colonial Egyptian state would look like. The

nationalists wanted to follow European models; the Muslim Brothers wanted an Islamic state. When nationalists demonstrated to demand a constitution, Muslim Brothers would counterprotest, saying, “We don’t need a constitution—the Koran is our constitution!” The Koran, for them, was the sole source of legitimate political discourse; there was no room for anything else.

A number of socialist movements flirted with groups such as the Brothers because these groups had significant followings, particularly among the middle classes. In the years following the Second World War, however, in Egypt and some other countries nearby, regimes characterized

by a mixture of nationalism and socialism turned on the Islamists. Driven out of Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere, some Islamists wound up in Saudi Arabia. There they melded with Wahhabism, the local brand of Islam that was (and is) highly conserva-

tive but was not, back then, interested in exporting its views. In fact, the British had put the Wahhabis and their allies the House of Saud in power in the mid-1920s because the British thought they represented an accommodating type of Islam. The British policy of support was continued by the United States after 1945, when it became the preeminent outside power in the region.

For decades, until the mid-1970s, Islamist movements were not very powerful. In the context of the Cold War, moreover, they seemed “pro-Western” because of their anti-Communism. Western policymakers thought they might serve as useful bulwarks against Soviet influence in Egypt, Syria, South Yemen, and Iraq. The 1970s became a watershed decade because it saw the coming-of-age of the first generation of Middle Easterners never to know colonialism. They were a massive cohort, these children of powdered milk and penicillin, born to parents who—in time-honored rural fashion—might have as many as ten or twelve children in the obsolete expectation that only a handful would survive. The resulting demographic bulge in the countryside drove large numbers of people to leave the land and move to the outskirts of the big cities, turning what for centuries had been majority-rural societies into overwhelmingly urban societies in just a few years.

Since the 1970s, the main demographic actor in the region has been the poor young man from the urban slums. He is not pleased with things as they are. The government that rules him grounds its claim to power in an anti-colonial struggle that took place before he was born.

Of much more urgent concern to him is the virtual non-existence of his prospects for upward social mobility. He is probably also one of the first people in his family to possess at least basic literacy, thanks to the spread of mass education after 1945. Previously, access to the written word had been limited to tiny secular or religious elites.

The discontented young urban poor might support the call for an Islamic state because they favor any kind of social upheaval that offers them a chance for recognition, respect, education, jobs, decent housing, and other basic human goods. Alongside this large and angry young cohort—which has become the recruiting ground for the more radical sectors of Islamism—is another constituency that I dub the “pious middle classes.” These are small entrepreneurs or modestly successful professionals who also feel alienated from an existing power structure that they think has shut down their prospects for political and economic advancement. To be a successful entrepreneur in Saudi Arabia or Morocco or Egypt requires connections to royals, top bureaucrats, military officers, or other elites. Without those ties, it is hard to get ahead. So there is a lot of frustration in this other class, many of whose members have links to the religious establishment and think an Islamic state will favor them by reforming or crushing the corrupt establishment that is holding them down.

A point that needs underlining here is this: While both the angry young urban poor and the pious middle classes have reasons for supporting an Islamic state, they understand the Islamist agenda in distinctly different ways. The middle classes do *not* wish for a major social upheaval. Yet some of their members do seem to view the young urban poor as material for a classic type of mobilization strategy that seeks to send “the riff-raff” into the streets to face the regime’s guns and perhaps touch off a series of violent events that will lead to the incumbents’ ouster from power.

Were these two groups ever to take power, they would need a third group to balance them out, hold them together, and give their revolution staying power: the Islamist intelligentsia. This third group provides the slogans for mobilization and knows how to use the language of Islam to bring together the other two groups, which have no other practical basis on which to join forces. The intelligentsia also knows how to name the enemy, which is not only those currently in power but also secularism and the secularist way of thinking. If these groups manage to remain in alliance, they may be able to seize power. Once they become divided they cannot seize power, and a turn to extreme violence by some in the Islamist movement cannot change that fact.

The only country where a revolutionary takeover has occurred is Iran. Everywhere else, Islamic revolution has

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failed. In Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini was able to control the whole field of political mobilization, appealing both to the young urban poor—to south Tehran, if you will—and to the middle classes. The middle classes wanted to oust the Shah and his courtiers and take the oil money, while the young urban poor were interested in something much more significant: upending social hierarchies. Khomeini constantly spoke of the “disinherited” (*mustadafeen*) in order to play on the sensibilities of both groups, thereby widening his support and isolating his enemies, the keys to success in any revolution.

Khomeini succeeded so well at this that by the end of 1979, even the secular middle classes were jumping on his bandwagon. They thought that Khomeini was needed to take over the Shah’s regime, and that the ayatollah could then be eased out while they, the worldly classes of Iran, took over. Khomeini, of course, had other ideas. Once the revolution took hold, he began turning on and eliminating his allies, starting with the secularists.

And then, thanks to Saddam Hussein, who at this time was a great pal of the West and of the Gulf States and who attacked Iran in September 1980, the young men of the poorer urban classes could be sent to their deaths by the hundreds of thousands as “martyrs” deployed to fight the Iraqis in mass infantry assaults. And so the young urban poor effectively disappeared as an organized political force, and the Islamic revolution became routinized and spawned the current—and much-despised—Iranian ruling class of merchants, clerics, and their allies.

The Iranian revolution was not meant to be a purely domestic phenomenon. Like the French and Russian revolutions, its aim was to set the world on fire. Early on, Iran appeared to be succeeding at this. The first targets were the rotten monarchies of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. America, the Great Satan, was an enemy, as was France, dubbed the Little Satan even though the French had sheltered Khomeini in exile. In response, the West and the conservative Arab regimes took several actions to contain the Islamic revolution. One was Saddam Hussein’s attack and the eight-year war that followed. Far more significant, in terms of long-range consequences, was the opening of a second front on Iran’s eastern flank, in Afghanistan. The Afghan jihad was the axial event of the last quarter-century in that part of the world, and we are still paying for it.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 created an opportunity to redirect the radical young men of the Muslim world away from Khomeini’s idea of fighting the West and toward the struggle against the Soviets. To U.S. authorities, this looked like an opportunity to inflict “another Vietnam” on the Soviets, and at a bargain rate:

the Afghan jihad cost only about \$1.2 billion a year, half of which was paid by the Saudis and the Gulf emirates. And no U.S. troops were involved.

On the regional scene, the idea was to strip revolutionary Iran of the initiative and return a leading role in the politics of the Muslim world to U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia by making them sponsors of a holy war against the Soviet invaders of a Muslim land. Thus the jihad had a regional dimension. Alongside the native Afghan *mujahedeen* were international brigades of jihadists from Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, even France and Los Angeles. Whether they actually got into the fight against the Soviets or not, most of these people received military training in camps along the Pakistani-Afghan border.

In addition to instruction in the use of arms, the Afghan experience gave many of these members of the region’s first post-colonial, first broadly literate generation a new understanding of Islamism. Traditional Islamic religious literature can be hard to follow. It uses many archaic words and difficult grammatical constructions. Key Islamist ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb of Egypt, Abul Ala Maududi of Pakistan, and even Khomeini himself spoke powerfully to this first educated generation by using simple, accessible language to press the claim that “Islam is the answer” to all the ills of society.

The jihad camps were places of intense indoctrination, even brainwashing. Recruits had to memorize medieval texts. Questions were not encouraged. Most recruits probably had no actual

understanding of what these texts mean. The camps were run by people who claimed absolute interpretive authority and who desired an atmosphere of intellectual dependence. With U.S. blessing, weapons-

training in the camps came from officers of the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Agency (ISI)—an experience that left many in Pakistan’s security apparatus with a fascination for jihad. And while the Afghan jihad has been conceived at least partly as a countermove against the Iranian Islamic revolution, Islamists with Afghan experience would not give up on Islamic revolution as a goal so much as begin to think that it might best be pursued simply by reproducing the Afghan struggle elsewhere. No complex alliances with the pious upper classes would be needed then.

In Arabic, jihad means “effort.” Jihad of the soul means making a personal effort to be a better Muslim, to overcome vices and make progress in virtue. But there

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are public or communal types as well. One (*al-jihad al-mubadahah*) aims at the armed conquest of new lands for Islam. It is mainly the business of the Islamic ruler and his troops. Another—and this covers the Afghan case—is a defensive struggle (*al-jihad al-dafa'ah*) that is proclaimed when infidels attack Islamic territory. Such a proclamation is supposed to result in a general mobilization of all good Muslims. Those who can fight should fight. Those who can't fight should pay. And those who can't pay should pray. Significantly, all other legal obligations—such as fasting during Ramadan—are suspended as guarding the community becomes the overriding concern.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was met with a worldwide proclamation of jihad, issued under the auspices of scholars in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. There was U.S. support: spokesmen for the campaign came here to tour college campuses, raise funds, and so on. And the jihad succeeded. The Russians left in February 1989 in what looked at the time like a simple victory for the Saudis and others in the “pro-Western” camp within the Islamic world. Iran had reached cease-fire terms with Iraq in 1988 as that war ended in a draw. In June 1989, Khomeini died. Iran's attempt to assert hegemony and export its revolution had failed.

Then came Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 and the first Gulf War in early 1991. This caused a split in the movement as the Saudi rulers and other higher-ups lined up with the West against Saddam. The radicals, many of whom had Afghan experience, turned

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against the West and its local allies such as the Saudis and the pious middle classes. Radical Islamists spent the first half of the 1990s trying to duplicate the Afghan jihad through bloody guerrilla warfare in Algeria, Egypt, and Bosnia, and later in Chechnya and some other places. By the mid- to late 1990s these campaigns had failed, and the radicals turned to terrorism as a fallback. This brings us more or less to where we are now.

What makes terrorism a fallback from guerrilla warfare? A terrorist group, unlike a guerrilla movement, does not need to have any social roots in the country where it is based. Terrorists work in cells—covert, closed-in groups of operatives who might, for instance, plant bombs in the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania without there being any significant Islamist insurgency in either country. And what are the terrorist tactics meant to accomplish? Their aim is to mobilize constituencies through the media, to demonstrate that the enemy is

weak, and to show that people should not be afraid to mobilize against the powers-that-be, such as U.S. domination. So Bin Laden and Al Qaeda really represent a third option, after transnational Islamic revolution and national-level guerrilla insurgencies have failed.

Thus on the one hand you have the radicals, who have grown increasingly alienated from the bulk of the population, and who are trying to overcome this through spectacular acts of terrorism by which they hope to remobilize the masses with the rallying cry of building an Islamic state. On the other hand you have the pious middle classes, who find this radicalism ever more frightening, knowing as they do that in places such as Algeria, the radicals would often target middle-class people first—as when the security forces pulled out of certain suburbs around

Algiers—looking to extort money, steal cars, exact tribute from shopkeepers, and so on. This fear has led the pious middle classes to start looking for new allies among

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former competitors, such as the upwardly mobile secular middle classes or certain types of former Islamists or moderate Islamists. Ties with radicals are out.

Something like this dynamic can be seen in Turkey, where the newly victorious Justice and Development Party has a hard-core Islamist base but also a significant constituency among disenchanted secularists who consider the secularist Turkish parties of no avail. This new party goes very light on the Islamist appeals. Its leaders have explicitly disavowed any attempt to write *shari'a* into the laws.

While it is very difficult to know where this will lead, one could think of the fate of the Communist parties of Western Europe. They entered parliaments thinking they would work the system from the inside as another way to achieve their ultimate goal of Soviet-style revolution. But they became entangled in the workings of democracy, became social democrats, and then disappeared. That's just one possible scenario—I don't have a clue as to what is going to happen to all these Islamist parties in the Muslim world.

But what I am sure of is that, when we compare the early 2000s with the late 1980s, we see quite a different landscape. We see an Islamist movement that is badly split. There are jihadists desperately trying to gain or regain a mass following through spectacular acts of violence, acts that they hope the masses will see as blows struck for emancipation, against foreign domination, and the like. And new types of alliances are forming between

the pious middle classes and their more secular counterparts. I am not saying that this is a rosy picture or a bleak picture; I am just trying to grasp the nature of the changes and of the situation that we are dealing with in the Middle East today.

**Michael Cromartie:** Thank you, Professor Kepel. Our respondent is Jeffrey Goldberg, a *New Yorker* writer who has been covering the Middle East for some years and never fails to be worth reading.

### JEFFREY GOLDBERG

I agree with most of what Professor Kepel said, though I would quarrel with a few things, such as his definition of terrorism. His book is very good; I recommend it. One thing that really interested me was his claim that many Arab states encouraged their young men to join the jihad in Afghanistan as a way of focusing their attention on an external problem rather than problems closer to home. I see that as an interesting analogue to much of what is happening in the Muslim world today. In Egypt, for instance, the only permitted political topic is Israel's flaws. Arab sentiment is being misdirected toward an exclusive focus on the Israeli-Palestinian topic in order to distract people from thinking about changing their own governments.

From Professor Kepel's book and to some extent from his remarks here, one gets the impression that the jihadists are in steep decline, and that the spasms of terrible violence we see these days are the last gasps of a movement that is a perversion of Islam. But is the jihadist strain a perversion, or could it be a legitimate interpretation of early Islamic thought and Islamic history? I am not convinced either way, but I'd like to hear what Professor Kepel thinks.

I appreciate his definition of jihad. One finds in the mainstream press in this country and certainly in academia the idea that jihad is primarily an inward concept, a striving to make yourself a better person—that the Sufis, in other words, have it right and the militants have it wrong. This is obviously frustrating to people who have read the Koran and the Haddith, the collected sayings of Muhammad. The Imam al-Bukhari collection of Haddith—which is sort of the standard—contains about two hundred references to jihad, all of which have to do with the term in its military sense and none of which have to do with making yourself a better person. So are we witnessing the slow or fitful flaming-out of an artificial, inorganic idea in the Muslim world? Will this problem be gone in ten or twenty years? Or do certain streams of thought within Islam allow the Muslim world (or certain Muslims, at any rate) to defend against perceived threats by turning to jihad? In other words, are we near

the end of a unique thirty-year period in history, or are we going to see this process repeat itself because there is something organic—perhaps in the religion itself, or perhaps in certain influential interpretations of it—that allows this sort of spectacular terrorism to recur?

I would like now to paraphrase some remarks I've heard while interviewing Muslim clerics who are *not* considered to be of a militant or jihadist stripe. I bring these remarks up because they highlight certain aspects of Islam that seem to me to encourage intolerance, up to and including the kind of intolerance that can lead to violence. The first aspect is **purity**. Right after September 11, I was sitting with Sheikh Mohamed Sayyed Tantawi, who is the dean of Al-Azhar University, the so-called Harvard of Sunni Islam—though its reputation has dimmed in recent years as the Wahhabis have come in and dulled the intellectual freedom of the place. I asked the Sheikh an intentionally simple question: "Why can't I visit Mecca?" He laughed and said, "You can visit Mecca when I can visit the Wailing Wall." I said, "You can go visit the Wailing Wall tomorrow." He didn't believe me, because in his conception of the world, no religion would allow unbelievers near its holiest spot.

I find that striking in light of my next point, which has to do with the feelings of religious **superiority** that I think are hard-wired into Islam, and in ways not restricted to militant fundamentalists. While talking with moderate clerics and reading the original Islamic sources, you find intolerance for other religions in the sense that Islam calls itself—and many Muslim clerics call themselves—the perfection of monotheism. God sent prophets to the Jews, but the Jews wouldn't listen. Christianity's message is flawed. So Islam came along and is the final and perfect expression of monotheism. This idea is not limited to Osama Bin Laden and his ilk; one finds it across much of Islam. If you are taught from birth that your religion represents the final and true word of God, and that God has specially blessed you, and that you have all the answers, then when that belief collides with the reality of decline, what seems to result from that collision is catastrophic violence.

Again, all I am trying to do here is set in a kind of broader context the question of whether the jihadists of today are perverting Islam, or are part of a particular strain of Islam that can be traced back to Ibn Taymiyya, the fourteenth-century Hanbali theologian who inter-

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preted jihad as holy war against all non-Muslim infidels and whose thinking inspired the Wahhabi school.

Next after purity and feelings of superiority is **intolerance**. Take the riots that Muslims in northern Nigeria started in November [2002] over a perceived slight against Muhammad in a column carried by a Lagos newspaper. The subject was Muslim protests against the “Miss World” competition, then being held in that country. The rioting—which cost the lives of more than two hundred people, including some Muslims—was not the work of Al Qaeda. It expressed a much more broad-based feeling of intolerance. I find it fascinating that we in the West are so tolerant of the intolerance of the mainstream Muslim world. With notable exceptions, such as the case of Salman Rushdie, we accept the notion—and if you read some of the commentary about the violence in Nigeria you will see this—that Islamic doctrines should never be questioned because to do so is an affront to the dignity of Muslims. This is a notion that we won’t accept for any other religion. In the case of Islam, we are clearly frightened into submission.

Let me bring up one other subject that Professor

Kepel didn’t mention: the explosive growth of anti-Semitism in the Muslim world. This again is a phenomenon that extends far beyond the realm of Al Qaeda, Islamic Jihad, or Hamas. Sheikh Yusuf Abdulla al-Qaradawi of Qatar, whom many of you know as the Al-Jazeera preacher, has a weekly call-in show on that network. I consider him a militant, but many people see him as a moderate, sort of a mainstream Muslim Brother as opposed to an Al Qaeda type. In my opinion, he is an endorser of terrorism. While Sheikh Qaradawi did condemn the 9/11 attacks, I would note the following: In the Muslim world today, far beyond the precincts of Al Qaeda, an extremist Muslim is defined as one who would endorse the killing of Americans on American soil, while a moderate Muslim is defined as one who would not endorse the killing of Americans but *would* endorse the killing of Israeli civilians both within Israel and outside it.

Again, I raise these points only to broaden our discussion and to try to ascertain whether what we are experiencing today (and what we’ve experienced gradations of over the last thirty years) is a perversion or an obvious interpretation of Islamic doctrine.

## DISCUSSION

**Michael Cromartie:** Thank you, Jeffrey. Professor Kepel, I see that you want to make a few comments.

**Gilles Kepel:** Is radical Islam a natural outgrowth or a perversion? As a scholar, I would not pose the question that way. I think that for the Islamists, what they think is Islam *is* Islam, in the sense that matters most. Of course, large numbers of Muslims think Al Qaeda has nothing to do with Islam and is even anti-Islamic, while others believe that Al Qaeda and similar groups represent the true essence of Islam. In my view, there is no such thing as a “true essence” of Islam or Christianity or what have you. What matters for the sociologist of religion is what people—believers, half-believers, even nonbelievers—make of this or that creed in the political sense, the social sense, and so on.

Are existing governments in the Muslim world encouraging jihad in order to divert attention from local problems? I discussed this in a book I wrote on Egypt more than a decade ago. Islamic scholars have always discussed jihad with a lot of caution because they know what a double-edged sword it is. You know when you *start* jihad; but when and where it will end you cannot say. And it can lead to divisions that make the Islamic community easy prey for its enemies.

Historically, proclaiming a jihad has been the province of qualified authorities, who do so for a limited time and with limited aims. Since the Afghan episode in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, jihad has become a sort of ever-expanding thing that no one center of authority can really control. At first it was about throwing the Soviets out of Afghani-

stan, and then the cry began to go up that the Palestinians should wage jihad against Israel, and that holy wars against existing regimes were needed in Algeria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and so on. And then who’s in charge? Who sets the limits? Who knows?

**Michael Cromartie:** Jeff has a quick response, and then we are going to get all of you in.

**Jeffrey Goldberg:** Let me set the question in an even broader context, which is President Bush’s repeated assertion that Islam is “a religion of peace.” This is probably politically necessary, but it’s not true. I am not making a value judgment here. When we say that Islam is a religion of peace, we are talking in terms framed by a Christian-centered notion of what a worthy religion should

be like. Islam is what it is. As any Islamic scholar will tell you, it means submission to the rule of God. It is a religion of peace in the sense that this submission, once made, is supposed to bring about what is—by Islamic lights—a just and therefore peaceful order of things. Looking at the Christian (or at any rate, post-Vatican II Christian) idea as compared to the Muslim idea, we should ask: Is the Muslim idea more conducive to military expansion and world hegemony? That's what I think I'm getting at.

**Michael Cromartie:** Thank you, Gilles and Jeffrey. Now everyone else is invited to join the discussion. [All participants will be identified at the end.]

**Carl Cannon:** I would like to ask you, Professor Kepel, about what seems to be an organizing principle of all the classes you discussed: their shared hatred of Jews. Even supposedly moderate people, including secular, middle-class types, now embrace anti-Semitic conspiracy theories that would make a neo-Nazi blush. It never seems to end. What is the right way to deal with it?

**Michael Cromartie:** Let's get a few more questions or comments out on the table before our speakers respond.

**Jay Tolson:** I would like to hear either or both of you talk about what you think is happening inside the epicenter of Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia: among clerics, within organizations such as the Muslim World League, and within the ruling al-Saud family and its support base. Moreover, what can you say about the conflicts among these groups? Through a fluke of history, Wahhabism has come to be the best-funded version of Islam, and it is also the seedbed of radicalization. All the criticism that Saudi Arabia has ab-

sorbed, particularly since 9/11, has made the Saudi establishment and its supporters uneasy. But I would like to know specifically how you see the fissures working.

**David Frum:** I'd like the panelists to consider the implications of two Islamic doctrines for their own ideas. Jeffrey Goldberg mentioned Muslim intolerance of other religions, but the problem is not that Muslims have a hard time with tolerance; every religion has that difficulty. The problem is a doctrine widely taught in the Islamic world: that the Jews and Christians falsified their own Holy Scriptures. This means that Jews and Christians aren't merely ignorant or obstinate but are willful liars and deceivers.

While reading the Koran and other Islamic sources recently, I was struck by how often all these texts promise worldly success to believers. And I wondered what the implications of catastrophic, repeated, and prolonged non-success would be for such a faith. Christians can lose every battle and Christianity could still be true. But if Muslims lose every battle, this would seem, by the Koran's own teaching, to raise the possibility that Islam is not true. Is that going to have any kind of theological, sociological, or political effect?

**John Fund:** You mentioned, Professor Kepel, that the pious middle classes are very resentful of the hierarchical social and economic arrangements in their various countries. Basically, I think most Muslim economies operate on the principle that the rich get richer and the poor keep them that way. There is no upward mobility. In the few countries where there has been some economic liberalization—I'm thinking of Turkey, Bahrain, and Qatar, plus Kuwait to some extent—there have been at least glimmers of more tolerance, and certainly the treatment

of women has tended to improve. How much potential do you think economic liberalization has to exert an ameliorative effect on Muslim societies?

**John Judis:** I wonder how much the Israel-Palestine question has to do with the origins of radical Islam and the continuation of terror in both the Middle East and the West. Given that Israel appears to so many in the Middle East not as an answer to the Holocaust but rather as an outpost of Western imperialism, do you think an end to radical Islam is possible in the absence of peace between the Palestinians and the Jews.

**Christopher Hitchens:** Could you comment on the defeat of the Islamist movement within Algeria, and tell us what wider significance, if any, you think this has?

**Gilles Kepel:** You've raised a lot of interesting points. Let me respond first to Christopher's. In Algeria, as you know, the Islamists were doing well in the first of two rounds of national voting in 1991, when the military stopped the process and staged a coup. Then came an Islamist jihad against the military-backed regime—a struggle that raged at least until 1996. After a while the Islamist movement, spearheaded by the Groupe Islamique Armée (GIA), became more and more violent. There were outbreaks of savage strife and purges within the movement.

At last the general populace, which at first had been favorable to the GIA, became alienated. At the same time, the Algerian army, like the security forces in Egypt, became more proficient. So it is hard to say whether the jihadists lost because they aroused popular resentment or because government forces defeated them militarily. In both Algeria and Egypt, the jihadists initially surprised the authorities with the

quality of their fighting—they had been trained out of U.S. counter-insurgency manuals either in Afghan camps or else by people who had been to Afghan camps. It took the Algerian and Egyptian armies two years each to get the upper hand.

But get the upper hand they did, until by the mid-1990s there was a reversal of expectations, and Algeria no longer seemed like a place where the jihadists could win. To go back to David Frum’s question, this non-success of the GIA insurgency or guerrilla campaign helped to lead to an acceleration of terrorism, since that became the only avenue open to the jihadists. But it cost them whatever chance they had of retaining support among the pious middle classes, who were often the first ones targeted.

As I said earlier, in distinguishing terrorism from guerrilla warfare I hold that the former does not need social roots, whereas the latter does. In Algeria, the guerrillas certainly committed terrorism, but as long as they had substantial support within society they would, in my purely technical sense, be better described as guerrillas or insurgents rather than as terrorists.

My intention in saying this is not to make a judgment that one is better than the other, still less to excuse either, but simply to point out the difference between those who wage a guerrilla war with acts of terror as one among the array of tactics available to them, and those who lack the social backing to stage an insurgency and turn to terrorism as their best remaining option. There is a historical connection between the failure of the 1990s-era Islamist guerrilla movements in Algeria and Egypt and the kinds of unrooted terrorist operations we saw in East Africa in 1998, in the United States on 9/11, and on the island of Bali just recently. That was the only point I was trying to make.

**Franklin Foer:** It seems as if there has been a theological homogenization throughout the Islamic world. Qaradawi, the Al-Jazeera preacher we spoke of earlier, actually comes from a tradition that used to debate Islamic law almost Talmudically, with skepticism about sources, an emphasis on the importance of interpretation, and an acknowledgment that not everything was fixed at or just after the time of Muhammad. But slowly the center shifted, and Qaradawi, while not technically a Wahhabi, became a theological apologist for the Saudi position. This Saudi seizure of the theological high ground is problematic for the political future of Islamism, which is now locked into unyielding advocacy of the total imposition of *shari’a*, with no room for maneuver or moderation.

Every time I go into mosques or talk to American Muslims, I am shocked by the extent of Saudi money and Saudi influence on Islam in the West—and clearly the West has yielded a fair number of recruits for Islamist terrorism. Is this Saudi influence a function of immigrant alienation that will disappear as these people assimilate into Western societies? Or will the problems with Islam in the West plague Western societies for decades to come?

**Jeffrey Goldberg:** Professor Kepel, the account that you gave of jihad focuses on it as a phenomenon that developed over the last twenty years from sociological forces and from U.S. proxy forces in the battle with the Soviet Union. This emphasis tends to direct attention away from the religious roots of jihad and its connection to Islam, and also from the ways in which this version of jihad might also express influences from Western radical political quarters as well, making it a very strange sort of ideological hybrid indeed. Among its ugliest aspects is its continuity with the history of twentieth-

century Arab anti-Zionism. To view the Arab-Israeli conflict, as many do, purely as a matter of “colonialism” obscures this continuity and could make us forget that anti-Zionism is found in all versions of jihadist ideology. What do you think about that?

**Jane Eisner:** My question is also about whether or not Islam is inherently intolerant. Is there an expression of the Muslim religion that is moderate, condemns suicide bombing, and can coexist with the West? If so, is there anything the West can do to encourage this version of Islam? And finally, if such a version of Islam does exist, why has it been so silent?

**Gilles Kepel:** What Franklin Foer said about theological homogenization is a good point. Nowadays one of the issues is access to the media. Qaradawi, who has this interactive Sunday program on Al-Jazeera in which viewers call and send in mail, is preeminent because Al-Jazeera is preeminent. His is therefore the voice that is the most heard. But Al-Jazeera is very responsive to its audience. The Saudis, by the way, tend not to think much of Al-Jazeera, and criticize Qaradawi for being unreliable. He is not interested in what his critics have to say—he told me that he finds them unscholarly. He is an Egyptian, after all, and Egyptians have nothing but contempt for the Wahhabis, who are Bedouins.

When I asked him what he thinks of Bin Laden and whether he considers Bin Laden’s declarations religiously important, Qaradawi said that Bin Laden has never published anything that would allow one to judge his learning, cannot call himself a doctor of the law, and thus cannot possibly have the authority to issue a *fatwa*. Qaradawi added that Bin Laden’s ignorance had caused him to make the fundamental mistake of launching a jihad against the West.

For Qaradawi, the propagation and expansion of Islam can take place through media such as the Internet, without violence. A jihad against the West could undermine years of patient work and spread suspicion. That is why he resents Bin Laden's operation.

As for my tendency to emphasize the sociological over the directly religious, I did that on purpose. I think studies of Islamism have steered too close to essentialism, assuming that you must study texts that are almost a millennium and a half old in order to understand why Muslims today act the way they do. I think that knowing those texts is important, but you also have to be able to put them into context and know which group is likely to select which passages, for what purpose, and under what conditions.

Let me mention some other influences on the ideology of jihad. Khomeini's term "the disinherited" actually came not only from the Koran but from Marxism, by way of an Iranian translator of Frantz Fanon's famous anti-colonialist work *The Wretched of the Earth*. The translator was trying to render Fanon's distinction between "the oppressors" and "the oppressed" in Persian, and hit on a Koranic term that literally means "those who have been weakened."

The lesson here is that different factions in Iran thought they could control a revolutionary mobilization. The Marxists—and Iran under the Shah had a large Communist party, the Tudeh—thought they could interpret religion to mobilize people to support a leftist agenda. Khomeini, meanwhile, managed to expand the understanding of "the oppressed" to include groups that a Marxist would not call oppressed, such as the merchants.

As for that question about Arab anti-Zionism, I'm not sure I understood what you asked.

**John Judis:** I was saying that to understand the development of anti-

Zionism in the Arab world before the existence of Israel, you would have to take into account not just the rise of secular nationalism, and not just notions of the great powers and their actions in the area, but the religious element as well.

**Gilles Kepel:** Yes, there is this claim that Palestine is a "Muslim" land and cannot be alienated to non-Muslims because it was part of the Dar al-Islam, the "house of Islam." But this argument, while it never exactly disappeared, was for the most part marginalized until the beginning of the first intifada in 1987 because the Muslim Brothers in Palestine, who were a branch of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, considered that they were in what the Koran calls a "phase of weakness." In such a phase, one cannot confront the enemy directly and so must retreat in order to preserve the existence of the community. So the Muslim Brothers were quietists of a sort. Moreover, they didn't want to fight alongside the PLO because those people drank alcohol and even ate ham. At the time, the Israeli authorities backed the Muslim Brothers as a way of undermining the PLO. So while anti-Zionism always used religious followers to some extent, it was only after 1987 that the Islamic movement became a very significant factor in the Palestinian upheaval.

Now for the question whether there is an expression of the Muslim religion that is moderate and ought to be encouraged by the West. Well, that depends on what you mean by "moderate." Many Muslims who live in the West came here to make a living and are perfectly peaceful. There are mosques in the West and elsewhere where the imams do not preach jihad. Probably the majority of mosques are in this category, but their voices are not often heard because they do not really want to take sides. They remain very careful.

**Jane Mayer:** Is there anything we can do to encourage them to be more vocal?

**Gilles Kepel:** This is difficult. They do not want to be taken as apologists for the West. If an Islamic figure becomes too closely associated with the West, he will lose credibility in the Muslim world. There will be charges of manipulation by Christians, "Crusaders," Zionists, Jews, or what have you. Take Nasser Youssef, for instance. He was persecuted in Egypt because he was a former Marxist who wrote a book about Islam that the Muslim Brothers and other Islamists did not like. He was fired from his university post in Egypt because of an Islamist campaign against him. It was decreed that he could not remain married to his wife because he was branded an apostate. So the two of them fled together to Holland. Nasser Youssef is very careful to display signs of his piety, such as fasting during Ramadan. I think he is fighting a fight that is worth taking an interest in. And there are number of others like that.

**Jane Mayer:** If it's counterproductive to do anything very obvious to encourage moderate Islamic leaders to speak out, is there anything else that the West can do, perhaps involving the leaders of other religions?

**Gilles Kepel:** One thing that could help is education. It would be a good idea to give people from Muslim lands access to curricula in the social sciences and other fields that offer a more modern view of the world. Students are the leaders of the future.

**Michael Cromartie:** There are other people who have courage and who don't care whether they are branded as kowtowing to the West.

**Gilles Kepel:** It is not an issue of courage. People can be extremely

courageous. The thing is that you don't want them to be courageous and then be isolated.

**Franklin Foer:** But there is a point where you get so isolated that you don't need to care about being even more isolated.

**Gilles Kepel:** True, and that kind of courage is clearly commendable in the case of an individual. But in the larger scheme of things, the priority is to have people who provide a non-fundamentalist view of Islam and are influential figures rather than isolated and despised ones.

We have exactly the same problem in France. I have been involved in trying to develop university curricula for the young Muslims in France that would help them form an understanding of their religion that would be compatible with life in the West. That is what they need. But any French Muslim who shows an interest in such things is immediately branded a traitor by the radicals. The non-radical Muslim intellectuals must cope with the challenge of building a constituency while they are developing those ideas. To date, they have not managed to attract much of a following. In France we have a sheikh whom the press call the "moderate mufti," but he has been accused of being in the pay of the Algerian government and is facing isolation in the Muslim community.

**Jeffrey Goldberg:** To come back to Qaradawi for a moment, his prominence underlines the rather pinched intellectual spectrum that we see in the Muslim world. He's called a "moderate" because he restricts himself to endorsing the murder of Israeli civilians and does not endorse the murder of American civilians. As some of you may have noticed, a couple of weeks ago he spoke on Al-Jazeera and predicted that by 2021 there would be no more conflict be-

tween Islam and the West because of voluntary conversion and the peaceful propagation of Islam. That is what makes him a moderate on the spectrum.

One quick point on the pernicious influence of Wahhabism. A couple of years ago I lived for a month in a *madrassah* near Peshawar that was training four or five thousand boys, mostly Pashtuns from both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border. All the funding and the curriculum came from the Saudis. The curriculum was insane. Students who had no knowledge of Arabic were made to memorize the Koran in that language; it was pure indoctrination. The Saudi government directly propagates this kind of retrograde education all over the Muslim world. That is an important point to make.

As for anti-Zionism in Islam, I think it plays a much bigger role than a lot of people think. It is a fairly central idea in traditional Islam that once a land has come under Islamic sway, it must never be allowed to fall out of it, which is why Islamists in many parts of the world talk with complete seriousness about the necessity of reconquering Spain. And that *is* part of their program; it is not above Kashmir and Chechnya, but Spain is on the list. I think there is also a very important point to be made about the Muslim shock at Jewish self-determination. There was a particularly horrified response in pre-Zionist Palestine, where the Jews were known among the Muslims as the "children of death" because they wandered the streets of Jerusalem bothering no one, content to live docilely in a kind of semi-benign subjugation under Islamic rule. So it was a terrible shock to see Jews asserting their equality, and not only their equality but their *dominance*. That shocked Muslims politically, theologically, and socially.

And finally, I want to touch on Jane Mayer's point very briefly. I know that we should read their origi-

nal texts and look at their history in order to understand that Islam is different from Christianity, that it began as a military political movement—Muhammad fought, I believe, seventy-nine battles and won something like seventy-seven of them. But I don't think any of this is immutable, and I, along with everyone else, am waiting for the enlightenment to come, something like the enlightenment that swept through Judaism and Christianity in which a . . .

**Michael Cromartie:** Reformation?

**Jeffrey Goldberg:** . . . in which a reformation of beliefs takes place such that the "army of Muhammad" comes to be seen in metaphorical rather than literal terms, and such that jihad is truly transformed and becomes a call to inward spiritual betterment rather than outward armed conquest. There is nothing immutable about any of this. But I bring up the history and the Wahhabis and what the Koran says because I think that all this is going to be very hard to achieve, at least in part because Islam really did begin as a military movement.

**Kenneth Woodward:** Jeffrey, you said that Islam sees itself as the last and the fullest of the revelations, with God on its side, and you raised the question of what happens when people who subscribe to such a set of beliefs fall on bad times. I think your answer was "an explosion." Is there any instance in Islamic texts, traditions, or historical experience in which Muslims were thwarted in doing what they thought was God's will and were forced to look within themselves and ask, "What did we do to offend God?" Given Islam's rapid and tremendous initial expansion and comparing that to where Muslims are now in the world, I think we can say that they have already experienced contraction and humiliation. So

somewhere, somehow, this question *has* to have been asked.

Looking at the Hebrew Bible and the history of Christianity, we can see the constant motifs of the unfaithful people, of backsliding Israel, of needing to be humble so that God can put you back on the right path, and episodes like the Catholic papacy's losing its temporal power and lands and then becoming an even stronger and more spiritually influential institution. Is there anything in Islam that might divert the reaction from "explosion" to something more introspective?

**Jeffrey Goldberg:** You mean the equivalent of the transformation from temple Judaism to rabbinic Judaism?

**Kenneth Woodward:** Well, however it comes about.

**Gilles Kepel:** This was a rationalization, if you will, of a radical conception.

**Kenneth Woodward:** Are we really even going that far? I have read a lot of the Haddith, but I don't recall any instances where instead of blaming the outside you are to blame yourself, as you are exhorted to do in any number of places in the Hebrew Bible. Is that type of counsel available in any canonical Islamic sources?

**Gilles Kepel:** Well, when Israel won the Six-Day War in 1967, some in Muslim religious circles interpreted the Arabs' defeat as God's way of punishing impious Muslim rulers, such as Nasser. So in recent history, there is some evidence for the possible reassessment of Islamic identity. Now the big issue, I guess, is the expected war in Iraq. [This seminar took place in December 2002.] What if Baghdad is taken? What if Saddam Hussein is destroyed? What if you have a pro-American regime ruling

over Iraq? What might the consequences be? Will this crush the militants' morale and pave the way for more reform within Islam? Or will there be something like the post-1967 reaction, in which more people in the Arab world come to think that terrorism is a proper response to perceived humiliation and unfair defeat? I don't know.

**Patricia Cohen:** We speak of militants, moderates, radicals, people in the street versus the elites in Muslim countries, and so on, but do we have any real sense of how large these various groups are? What percentage of Muslims alive today, for instance, might be willing to actually wage jihad and commit terrorist acts? What percentage might support this sort of thing but never actually do anything violent themselves? What percentage might be anti-Western to some degree but not interested in committing or supporting violence at all? It's very hard to get a clear sense of what we're dealing with.

**Gilles Kepel:** That is very difficult to answer. In Palestine, you do probably find a huge number of people who back suicide attacks. Daniel Pipes has come up with a figure of 10 percent to represent the proportion of the world's Muslims who are in the thrall of militant Islam. I don't know he arrives at that number, which would work out to be more than 100 million people. I would say that, nowadays, the vast majority of people in the Muslim world are just trying to have a better life, and feel tremendous frustration about the lack of social mobility and opportunity in their societies. Some public-opinion surveys have been done in Muslim countries, but it is very difficult to interpret them or know if they are really reliable. The coming strike on Iraq, as I suggested, may tell us something. Will the "Arab street" make itself felt? Will masses of people turn out to burn the U.S.

embassy in Cairo or elsewhere? Some say this is a grave danger; others say it won't happen because Arabs know that there is more to lose than to gain by such violent outbursts.

**Patricia Cohen:** One of the more troubling things that I heard you say was that anybody who aligns with the West is immediately seen as somehow a traitor, or at least loses credibility in the Muslim world.

**Gilles Kepel:** Not anybody; I was speaking about religious figures.

**Wendy Kaminer:** We haven't talked much about assimilation, but if we think about Muslims living in the West again, is there the possibility of moderation without assimilation? Is there significant resistance to assimilation on the part of Muslims in the West? If so, why? Does it have to do directly with theological views? Or is it less about this or that religious doctrine and more about nervousness over or dislike for Western cultural and social mores, particularly those having to do with sexual equality, family life, and the greater freedom available to women in the West?

**Christopher Hitchens:** For many of us, it's more frightening to hear people in the Middle East say "The Jews blew up the World Trade Center!" than it would be for us to hear them say, "Osama bin Laden blew it up, and we're on his side." Clearly the Arab Middle East, as the recent UNDP report and a host of other evidence reveal, is in a state of deep crisis, but I wonder: Is it fair to identify Islam—which does seem to fuel irrationality, though that doesn't surprise me since I think all revealed religions do this—as the source of this crisis, or are there non-religious sources that are more important?

**Caryle Murphy:** I have a comment about moderates versus radicals. The

way I see it is that Islam is in a crisis of theology, a crisis that began about a hundred years ago. A very influential thinker in Egypt named Muhammad Abdou perceived that Islam would have to reform if Muslim peoples were to be as successful as Europeans. He tried to start that reformation but didn't succeed, for a variety of reasons. That reformation, or impulse toward a reform of Muslim theology, is still going on.

But the problem right now is that the most radical voices are dominant in the Middle East. I see that as the opposite of what we have in the United States, where the moderate Muslim voices are the loudest. We have a really big problem, and this is why I think the war on terrorism is going to last a long time. Terrorism won't come to an end until two things happen. First, either U.S. policy on a variety of issues will have to change, or Muslims will have to accept current U.S. policy on these matters. Second, this crisis of theology will have to play itself out, and that's not going to happen in one or two years.

I think the only thing we can do, which hardly anyone is talking about in our government or in our society right now, is to find a way to help the moderates, both here and in the Middle East, find their voices. I agree with Gilles Kepel that the way we do this is crucial; we can't be seen to be somehow paying people to preach what we believe. Perhaps this is where Gilles's point about the importance of educational reform comes into play, as does Christopher Hitchens's point about the need to overcome the Arab world's stagnation and deprivation, which the U.N. Human Development Report recently documented.

**E. J. Dionne:** Before I state my questions, I want to salute you, Mike, for your intellectual quickness. When Jeffrey used the world "enlighten-

ment" you quickly replaced it with "reformation," and that's full of theological meaning; we could argue about it all day.

**Michael Cromartie:** We could but we won't, since we're nearly out of time. Let's have your questions and a few others, and then give our speakers the last word.

**E. J. Dionne:** I have two questions. First, Gilles, you stressed that U.S. and other Western interventions in the Islamic world have repeatedly seemed to push it in the wrong direction, as in the cases of our alliance with Saudi Arabia and our role in launching the jihad in Afghanistan. It's hard to invent an alternative history, but can you speculate about what might have developed in the Islamic world absent those kinds of Western interventions?

Second, and this question is for both Gilles and Jeffrey: I've always been mystified as to why the Palestinian movement, which began as secular and predominantly leftist, has now become thoroughly Islamicized. Obviously the simple explanation is the failure of the old leadership, but it's at least conceivable in principle that the Palestinians might have gone in the direction of bourgeois nationalism rather than Islamism. Can you shed any light on what has happened within the Palestinian movement over the last fifteen or twenty years? It really is, as far as I can tell, a very large shift.

**David Frum:** Descriptions of the Arab and Muslim world today—featuring authoritarian regimes, economic hopelessness, entrenched elites cut off from their societies, a proclivity for sudden outbursts of mass inexplicable violence—make it sound a lot like Latin America in the 1950s and 1960s. When people discussed the Latin America of that time, they often blamed—fairly or not—the "ob-

scurantist" Roman Catholic religion of the region for a lot of these problems. Yet in the past twenty years, Latin America has been swept by Pentecostal religion—a much more personal religion, one that directs your personal life and then offers you very attractive heavenly rewards. In parts of the Muslim world that are not Arab—such as Java, Xinjiang, Central Asia, Africa—is it completely inconceivable that, in response to the repeated failures of this religion for which success is the criterion of truth, something like a Pentecostal movement might break out?

**Michael Cromartie:** As it happens, Professor Philip Jenkins will be discussing that subject in a later session of this seminar. ["The Rise of Global Christianity," forthcoming as *Center Conversation 23*.]

**John Judis:** I don't buy this stuff about Islam as a "warrior faith," or the notion that there is a causality linking the origins of Islam to the radicalism we see today, which makes us fearful of Islam itself. I see too many examples in the history of Christianity—Cromwell's "army of God," the Crusades, intolerance generally—so I don't view religion as a kind of independent variable. The problem is not Islam itself, but how to make Islamic radicalism less relevant to the Arab world, Indonesia, and other areas.

The answer, I think, lies not in theology but in questions of production. The reason that Turkey is different from Saudi Arabia has to do with oil. We also have to consider the need to put to rest the lingering effects of imperialism in the Middle East. Those, I think, are the crucial matters, not religion itself.

**Michael Cromartie:** Let's get a few closing responses from our speakers: Jeffrey Goldberg first, and then Gilles Kepel.

**Jeffrey Goldberg:** On the question of Islamism in the Palestinian movement: If you've ever interviewed Arafat, you know that he will go off into deeply mystical veins of rhetoric that I think are at the very center of his personality. He started in the Muslim Brotherhood and in a sense has never left it psychologically. Of course, the failure of the secular Palestinian leadership is significant, but you also have to consider how the Camp David negotiations opened a Pandora's box by putting the subject of Jerusalem on the table. As Shimon Peres feared, this helped to turn what was an Arab-Israeli or Israeli-Palestinian dispute into a Jewish-Muslim dispute, or in other words, a fight over religion. Sovereignty over the Temple Mount is the big sticking point in all the arguments over Jerusalem. Each side says, "This is our holy spot!" But I think there has always been more of a religious component to this dispute than many people realize.

On Caryle Murphy's comment on Muslim moderation: Of course I agree that it's naïve to think we can just go in somehow—whether through B'nai B'rith, the CIA, the Brookings Institution, or the Ethics and Public Policy Center—and teach "those people" about moderation. These people are grownups with an ancient and very complex system of beliefs, and that system of beliefs may conflict in certain important ways with Western beliefs. We need to be prepared to acknowledge that there may be truly fundamental differences in outlook here.

As to John Judis's remark that this is not a struggle of faiths: Every time I'm in the West Bank or Gaza, I hear this Arabic chant go up at rallies, funerals, and other gatherings, and among Fatah supporters as well as people affiliated with Hamas or Islamic Jihad. It's a cry about how the "army of Muhammad" will return to defeat "the Jews of Haibar," who were an Arabian Jewish tribe that fought

Muhammad's forces. A modern Muslim can follow a very obvious pathway back into his history to find a military precedent for his actions today. I don't think anything is immutable, and I think things that are taken literally can later come to be taken metaphorically. But we have to deal with the fact that Muhammad spent his life fighting, and that almost all of his nearly eighty battles were offensive rather than defensive in nature. He is the model of what a good Muslim is, and it's perfectly reasonable for a Muslim to say, "I want to model my life on the life of Muhammad."

I'm not making a value judgment here; that's just what the religion is. As I've said, there are Sufi and other moderate interpretations that move the idea of jihad away from its outward, military connotations and make it more spiritual and inward; but they are not the only interpretations, and I think we have to deal with that.

**Gilles Kepel:** I think you have a point: the sanctified early period of Islam, which is conceived as a defining moment that sets standards for later conduct, is a period of military action. The difficulty is in the interpretation. Sufis and a number of modernists have tried to take this metaphorically. But as Caryle Murphy pointed out, when you have a crisis of theology and there are no theologians left, only Wahhabis and self-proclaimed theologians, then many more people will take this material literally and use it to provide a justification for suicide bombings and other violence.

So where do we find interpreters who, rather than insisting on a literal and militant understanding of the sources, will say, "That interpretation just is not viable, and will never allow the Muslim world to get in step with the rest of human civilization"? The Muslim world is just sinking; there is no development, and Muslims are lagging behind everywhere.

India has more than a billion people most of whom live in poverty, but there is an elite—perhaps a fifth of the population—that is modern, creative, and in step with the rest of the globe. There is, sadly, no comparable elite in the Muslim world. Addressing such global issues is also a legitimate task of theology. One of the problems of the Muslim world is that, apart from a relative handful of exiles who live in the West, nobody in Muslim ranks is really addressing these issues with any guts.

What would have happened had there been no Western interference? I don't think we can possibly know.

Will democracy in the Muslim world be worse for the West than the current dictatorships there? One student of Saudi Arabia has suggested that Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman Zawahiri would win a free election in that country. Turkey is interesting in this regard, but it is not a democracy per se. Democracy functions when you have a middle class; no democratic experiment can really be viable without one.

As for assimilation: This word is music to the ears of a Frenchman such as me who advocates assimilation against all odds. We used to think that the best thing that could happen to anyone on earth was to become French, and we could not understand why anyone would think differently!

Now we have this new Council for Islamic Affairs in France, sponsored by the Ministry of the Interior. It is all right as long as it deals with such things as the building of mosques or cemeteries, but I fear the day when a French citizen who happens to be named Ahmed or Fatima thinks that he or she must be represented within the French political and social world through some kind of self-consciously Islamic party or movement led by a self-proclaimed Islamic leader. This is now an active subject of debate in Europe and North America, and comes

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up in relation to questions about such practices as the wearing of headscarves.

We in France tend not to speak of "Muslims"; instead we say "populations of Muslim origin," because a vast majority of the North African immigrants in France today are totally secular, and, unlike Pakistanis in Britain or Turks in Germany, they often marry or have children with members of the non-immigrant French population. Those children, most of whom are French-Algerian, may be called Karim or Jean-Pierre; they go to school with other children in public schools, and they are part

of the new hybrid face of France and of Europe.

This is a process in the making, where social forces, as opposed to the ideologues, have their say. I think we should pay attention to these social forces and should not, for instance, compel people of Muslim origin to identify themselves primarily in terms of religion.

### DISCUSSION PARTICIPANTS

**Gilles Kepel**, Institute for Political Studies, Paris; **Jeffrey Goldberg**, *The New Yorker*; **Michael Cromartie**, Ethics and Public Policy Center; **Carl**

**Cannon**, *National Journal*; **Patricia Cohen**, *New York Times*; **E. J. Dionne**, *Washington Post*; **Jane Eisner**, *Philadelphia Inquirer*; **Franklin Foer**, *The New Republic*; **David Frum**, *National Post (Canada)*; **John Fund**, *Wall Street Journal*; **Christopher Hitchens**, *Vanity Fair*; **John Judis**, *The New Republic*; **Wendy Kaminer**, freelance writer; **Jane Mayer**, *The New Yorker*; **Caryle Murphy**, *Washington Post*; **Jay Tolson**, *U.S. News & World Report*; and **Kenneth Woodward**, *Newsweek*.

[Note: This "Conversation" was edited from the transcript by free-lance editor Philip Costopoulos.]

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## Ethics and Public Policy Center

1015 Fifteenth Street NW, #900 ■ Washington, DC 20005

202-682-1200 ■ fax 202-408-0632 ■ [ethics@eppc.org](mailto:ethics@eppc.org) ■ [www.eppc.org](http://www.eppc.org)