

HUDSON INSTITUTE

April 23, 2009

Tolerance and Intolerance in the Islamic World

Panel featuring

Zeyno Baran
Stephen Suleyman Schwartz
Irfan Al-Alawi
Veli Sirin
Khaled Abu Toameh
Tarek Heggy

Held at the Palais des Nations during the Durban Review Conference

United Nations, Geneva

ZEYNO BARAN

Zeyno Baran is the Director of the Center for Eurasian Policy at the Hudson Institute. Formerly, Baran directed the International Security and Energy Programs at The Nixon Center and the Caucasus Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. She was awarded the Order of Honor by Georgian President Shevardnadze, and has been a Distinguished Visitor at the American Academy in Berlin.

Thank you all for coming. We know that there are many activities taking place right now and I promise to make your time worthwhile here. We'll talk about some of the concerns we have with the Durban Review Conference documents—both what was mentioned in it and what was left out. We'll also discuss some issues critically important for the implementation of universal human rights standards for all, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion or gender.

Who are we? I would say we're some of the voices of the silent majority most of you have never heard of. We are Muslims from different backgrounds, different political views and also different Islamic traditions. What unifies us, however, is our commitment to the freedom to think on our own and our refusal to accept any dogmatic thinking. We do not claim to speak for anyone and we refuse to let others speak in our name, especially when it comes to Islam. We are open to honest debate and we will speak the truth, which is one of the most fundamental aspects of being Muslim. Islam commands one to speak the truth – even if it means going against one's own tribe or family – to avoid the sins of lying, deception and slander and we will follow these principles in our discussions here today.

Before I turn to the panelists, who will each speak for about ten minutes, I'd like to make a few points.

I believe the ongoing disingenuous conversations between Muslims and non-Muslims and among Muslims themselves is at the core of our problem. It also seems to me that everyone is pretending; pretending to be talking to each other, and pretending to care about the lives of others suffering from racism, discrimination and religious intolerance.

I cannot help but constantly think about the saying that many of the holy books and ancient teachings and sacred knowledge have taught us: “people have eyes but cannot see; they have ears but cannot hear.” I see today many people’s minds are totally confused and their hearts have been turned into stones. There is very little love or compassion. Instead, many people are mostly acting out of fear, which quickly turns into anger and hatred.

That is why so many men who call themselves Muslim lose all of their senses over some cartoons, yet they cannot bring themselves to have any kind of compassion or any kind of feeling when they see women and children being raped or tortured or brutally abused, including in the name of a religion. We see this in country after country. These issues are left unaddressed. Some of the most innocent, most helpless victims, children and women, are systematically oppressed in so many parts of the world. Yet when we talk about racism or discrimination, or when we talk about intolerance, most of us somehow cannot seem to bring ourselves to talk about these people and these realities.

If you stop and think about all this craziness, it would be funny –if it was not so tragic because what is happening is so real and horrific. It is also so tragic because a religion that means "peace" is now equated with terrorism, with radicalism, and with intolerance of all kinds.

Let me tell you what kind of Islam I was brought up with. I'm originally from Turkey. I live in Washington now. I was taught that Islam teaches us that we are our own masters. We surrender or submit only to God, not to any kind of religious authority or political authority that wants to control our hearts and minds. The “submission” of Islam is not mindless submission to a dogma or a person as the Taliban or some authoritarian leaders want people to believe. No, “submission” is to the natural rhythm of life. This is very similar to what the yogis believe. It is also what the Native Americans believe. I believe this is the universal truth understood by many people, regardless of their racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds. It means respecting nature, respecting and protecting the environment, animals and all that is around us.

As a child, one of the Islamic teachings that most appealed to me was that one is not even supposed to kill an ant—let alone kill a human being—because God is manifested in everything and everyone. In other words, like millions of others, I was taught that we are all part of the One. This also meant that our intentions mattered more than our outwardly actions, since God knows what is in our hearts.

Sadly, there is little of this understanding, of this spirit left in what has become mainstream Islam today. Today’s mainstream is all about politics. All talk revolves around fear, anger and hatred. In fact, what used to be extremist has become mainstream.

We see many leaders claiming that they have the truth and only they know the answers. They consider others “ignorant”, as President Ahmadinejad of Iran said at the start of his controversial speech at the Durban Review Conference. His speech clearly showed his mental state: while attacking the West and Israel, he also used words like love, compassion and human dignity, and even talked about “the valuable elixir of love and compassion”. If you listen to these words and then stop and think of what is happening inside Iran, again, I would call his performance a comedy, if things weren’t so tragic.

For too long the truly moderate and knowledgeable voices within Islam have been silenced—or simply have not been heard. That is one of the reasons why today so many people, including Muslims themselves, associate Islam with the kind of a radicalism, tribalism, violence and hatred that we see.

I think it is sad but true that Islam has been hijacked by men who care more about their own power than the religion or its true teachings. Their narrative, the narrative we have been hearing for a long time now—and by long I mean centuries—is all about victimization and humiliation. It is part of a deadly mixture of feeling both politically and economically inferior with feeling morally and ethically superior.

This is sadly also reflected in the various statements issued this week at the United Nations by Muslim countries and organizations. They seem to be approaching the issues related to xenophobia, discrimination and racism from the same one side. Their tone suggests that these problems target only--or primarily--Muslims, and that the perpetrators are all non-Muslims.

How about the racism that we see within Muslim countries from one ethnic group to another ethnic group? Or discrimination by one Muslim group towards another Muslim group? What about the rights of the non-Muslim minorities living in Muslim countries? Or the difficulties Muslim minorities experience? Nobody really addresses these concerns.

The statement of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), for example, is full of accusatory remarks towards non-Muslims but there is not a single criticism of practices within

Muslim countries. The goal of Durban should be to eradicate racism and discrimination not only against Muslims but against everybody. The fight against racism, xenophobia, and discrimination is not a one-way street, and it cannot revolve only around the grievances of Muslims.

Now, since I am the only Muslim woman in the panel, I will briefly say a few words about the situation of Muslim women. Many men are in denial—maybe not my co-panelists, but many Muslim men are in deep denial. It is not possible for men to call themselves Muslim and say they follow the Prophet and his ways and then treat the women the way they are currently treated. I would send President Ahmedinejad's statement back to him and say that he is the ignorant one. If he really understood the teaching of Islam and truthfully followed the Prophet's ways, there is no way he would allow the abuse and oppression of women in his country.

Again, it is not possible for a man to call himself a Muslim and then not allow women to get an education. The Koran clearly gives the command, "read!" and is constantly telling Muslims to learn, and be educated in the various sciences—these are commands for both men and women. The equality of man and woman, and the duty of every Muslim to learn as much as they can so they come as close to truth as possible, are among the most important aspects of Islam—yet these are also the most abused aspects of the religion.

Muslims are doing many things wrong today. They say they do these things in the name of Islam or by referencing the Prophet, but they must know that they are worse sinners than the people whom they call apostates or whom they want to silence by preventing free speech.

Even some of the most educated and most respected modern Muslim men seem to be primarily concerned about the image of Islam these days rather than the ethics. Most Muslims simply do not know what is really going on, what the self-appointed "Muslim spokesmen" really are doing. Today this panel will talk about what is really going on.

We will talk about the malaise that has affected pretty much all Muslim communities and countries—and how the continued denial in turn has led to things like Islamophobia and racism.

I recently spoke about some of these things at a U.S. Senate hearing. Before ending my remarks and turning the floor to the first panelist, I'll just mention one thing Senator John Kerry, the chair of the hearing, said and how it relates to our subject today. He had just come back from Syria and he was really surprised that there were so many more women wearing the headscarf now than the last time he visited. When he asked his Syrian interlocutor, the man said, "Well neither my mother nor my grandmother ever wore the headscarf. This is a whole new phenomena." This is the reality, though the Islamists and their propaganda would make you believe women who do not wear the headscarf are not "real" Muslims.

Many of these new understandings of what it means to be a "real Muslim" are a direct result of the oil money starting to influence education, especially Islamic education. The Islamic understanding we increasingly find today in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia, and elsewhere increasingly, all point to the same starting point: Saudi Arabia. It might be wishful thinking on our part, but it is time that the UN deals with what has been coming out of Saudi Arabia—and I am not referring to oil.