



“The Struggle for the Soul of Islam”

CSIS Congressional Forum on Islam

Today’s struggle for the soul of Islam is not new, Prof. Muqtedar Khan told a group of Congressional staffers on October 16. “Since the death of the Prophet Muhammad there has been a struggle for the soul of Islam.” Khan is Assistant Professor of Islam and Global Affairs at the University of Delaware, and the discussion was part of the CSIS Middle East Program’s Congressional Forum on Islam.

Khan argued that Muslims have struggled among themselves to understand the shape of Islam throughout the course of Islamic history, and this struggle is now a global one. He pointed out that there are more Muslims in the United States than in many majority-Muslim countries. The Muslim population of the United States has been integrated into the fabric of American society, which led Khan to assert that “the future of the West is inseparable from Islam.”

Khan examined the diversity of interpretations of Islamic identity and theology, which he characterized as building “epistemological plurality” within Islam. Without an organized religious hierarchy, Muslims have pursued many paths to understand what it means to be a Muslim and what role Islam should have in daily life. Khan explained that Islam’s “built-in mechanism” for competing theories has created a persistent impulse for Muslim revival and reform. The emergence of five prominent schools of Islamic jurisprudence in the first two centuries of Islam serves as an example of the bustling marketplace of ideas in the Islamic community.

Khan criticized conventional notions of “moderate Islam,” which he saw as shorthand for pro-American Islam. He judged that the moderate voices that are most attractive to the United States have little or no constituency inside the Muslim world. He noted that there are indeed moderate voices among Muslim scholars and clerics, but that many Americans often deem them unacceptable because of their harsh criticism of U.S. foreign policy. While these moderates’ critiques of the United States share much in common with those of the extremists, their prescriptions are different and bear attention from Western audiences.

Meanwhile, the West is seized by fear of political Islam, from Hamas and Hezbollah to al Qaeda. Throughout Muslim-majority countries, these politico-religious movements have seized on the failure of states to deliver on their promises for security and development. Khan pointed out that it was Hezbollah, not the Lebanese army, that was the primary combatant on the Lebanese side during the recent war. Islamist movements’ ability to provide security and human services, and the corresponding failure of secular regimes to do the same, has strengthened support for political Islam as much as any ideology or theology.

Khan argued that a major force behind the surge in Islamism is many Muslims' sense of nostalgia for the glories of Islamic history, which they contrast with the backwardness of today's Muslim world. Even secular liberals, Khan noted, argue that "Muslims were great once, and will be great again." Many Muslims believe that their societies have declined because they have moved away from Islam and tried to imitate the West.

Responding to a question regarding the differences between American and European Muslims, Khan explained American Muslims have, in general, become part of American society. The higher levels of education and wealth enjoyed by American Muslims make them less sympathetic to militant Islamism. This sharply contrasts with their European counterparts, who are often estranged within European society. These populations, particularly in Britain and France, feel disenfranchised and are thus more susceptible to violent jihadi ideologies.

Khan used the image of the centaur to illustrate the unique vantage point of American Muslims. Most Americans only see the "human face" of the United States, greatly benefiting from the personal and political freedoms in this country. By contrast, Muslims abroad often only see the "beast" side of the United States, in their eyes giving support to authoritarians and turning a blind eye to Muslim suffering. Khan said that American Muslims uniquely see both sides of the United States, and understand how they are both part of the same phenomenon. He argued that the vantage point of American Muslims helps them counter the argument that the United States is anti-Muslim and "deconstruct the demonization of the United States overseas."