



American Islamic Congress, Inc.

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American Islamic Congress Capital Hill Distinguished Speaker Series

Topic:

Movements of Extremism in the Muslim World: Struggle between State and Citizens

Panelists:

Ammar Abdulhamid: Executive Director, The Tharwa Foundation

Mansour Al Haj: Senior reporter for Aafaq, Arab reform website

Nasser Weddady : HAMSA Outreach Director, American Islamic Congress

Moderator:

Zainab Al-Suwaij: Executive Director, American Islamic Congress

Extremism in Muslim societies is often associated with non-state militant groups supporting an Islamist agenda. Yet some analysts point to the considerable restraints imposed by autocratic regimes that intensify repression and advance an extremist agenda. This panel will focus on the role of the state in nurturing extremism in the Arab world. We will examine the grassroots movements facing this wave of extremism and how the US should engage actors in this region.

On February 8, 2008, the American Islamic Congress hosted **Ammar Abdulhamid**, the executive director of The Tharwa Foundation, **Mansour Al Haj**, senior reporter for the Arab reform website Aafaq, and **Nasser Weddady**, the HAMSA Outreach director at AIC, to comment on and discuss these statements.

Authoritarianism pushes people over the edge as it dismisses basic human rights of all citizens, inadvertently causing extremism. "Islamist acts are alternatives that the disenfranchised young Arabs take against the dictatorships," **Nasser Weddady** remarks. **Ammar Abdulhamid**, a Syrian national, explains the situation in his home nation. Extremism and violence are caused by repression, though in Syria, "The extremist groups tolerate the Assad regime because of their shared hatred towards the U.S. Ridding one will help to destroy the other."

Mansour Al Haj also comments on his home country of Saudi Arabia. He says, "The Saudi government supports radicals." This has been made evident by the government as it showed support for a court decision to exculpate two people for beating a Saudi black man to death. The government has additionally jailed many individuals, including reformist bloggers, without bring

charged with crimes.

Al Haj also explained: "Saudi Arabia and Sudan are collaborating to bring an Islamic regime to Chad." This support of the rebels and rebel leader Mohammed Al-Nurim, who is striving to make Chad an Islamic state, will cause continued violence in the region, as current President Idriss Deby wants Chad to remain secular. Ultimately, this violence will generate more extremism in the Muslim World.

Since extremism is a revolt against authoritarianism, steps must be taken to put an end to these intolerant regimes, thus reducing extremism and ending the Islamic revolution. Strong international alliances must be built, human rights violations must be confronted, and the youth of these nations must be empowered in order to generate change. The United States needs to help accomplish this goal. It is time, **Abdulhamid** states, "for the U.S. to engage with Arab leaders even in the face of rejection" and it is necessary, **Al Haj** adds, for "the U.S. government to show that human rights comes before economic diplomacy."

The concept of civil rights is essential to peace in the region: "The only way to end the Islamic revolution and intolerant regimes is to inject the idea of civil rights," **Weddady** asserts. Furthermore, these principles of universal human rights must be injected into the youth. Media outlets like the Internet can teach and empower the youth reformers, and allow their voices to be heard. **Weddady** adds, "There must be training seminars and conferences to enable young activists to push for reform."

Another key towards reform and the end of extremism is making the Middle Eastern governments open and sustainable. The U.S. can help in this regard by investing in the economies and expanding trade to help foster growth in the economy. If economies are effective, governments are transparent, civil rights are guaranteed, and the youth is empowered, Islamic extremism will quickly come to an end, a development that will help bring peace to the Middle East and the entire World.