

Scholar mulls the possibilities of U.S. relations with Muslims

July 6, 2007

Posted: 7/06/07

Scholar mulls the possibilities of U.S. relations with Muslims

By Omar Sacirbey

Religion News Service

WASHINGTON (RNS)—What if, [Akbar Ahmed](#) asks, America had limited its military response to 9/11 to liberating Afghanistan from the Taliban and al-Qaida? What if, instead of invading Iraq and waging a global war on terror, the United States had expanded diplomacy and exchange programs with Muslim nations, and tried to win Muslim hearts and minds with hospitals, schools and irrigation?

Those are the questions Ahmed, a former Pakistani diplomat and renown Islamic scholar at American University in Washington, tackles in his new book [Journey Into Islam](#), an analysis of relations between America and the Islamic world.

Akbar Ahmed

Such an approach, Ahmed argues, could have spared America and the Muslim world the violence, turmoil and fear both societies feel today, and that stands to get worse.

Ahmed argues it's not too late—if never more urgent—for America to bring home its soldiers and send students and young professionals to the Muslim world as emissaries of American freedom, prosperity and compassion.

“The only way to battle the intolerance and hatred in our world is with compassion and love as our intention rather than exclusion and hatred,” Ahmed said. “It is possible, but it requires a dramatic shift in our manner of thinking and acting as a world power.”

The main purpose of the trip, Ahmed explained, was to determine how Muslims are “constructing their religious identities,” and therefore a whole range of actions and strategies, as a result of their current situation.

Ahmed divides the competing forces in the Islamic world into three categories:

- Orthodox Muslims, who feel threatened by the West and respond with hostility and rigid interpretation of their faith.
- Modernist Muslims, who also feel threatened by the West but whose corruption and authoritarianism cost them any public confidence they may have enjoyed.
- Sufi Muslims, whose views of a common humanity and inclusiveness hold out the best hope for an East-West détente, in his view.

Hostility to globalization and American military power is rooted less in Islam and more in tribal notions of defending the homeland from invaders, Ahmed argues. America's problems in Iraq and Afghanistan, Ahmed concludes, “are the direct result of their failures to recognize or understand the tribal base of these societies.”

This can only be corrected when Americans take the time to learn about the Islamic world and approach its problems with compassion, Ahmed insists.

Some critics call that appeasement, but studies and the personal experiences of Americans who have traveled to the Islamic world suggest personal contact wins Muslim friends for America, he writes.

Ahmed also takes Muslim societies to task, not only their leaders whose repressive policies have made radical Muslims more popular, but also the corruption, inflammatory media and uneducated clerics.

“There hasn’t been a single Muslim scholar to emerge as a visionary theologian to ring in an Islamic Renaissance,” Ahmed writes.

He notes with open trepidation the spread and appeal of Islamic radicalism in places like Indonesia, where a rising number of Muslims support Shariah law and reject pluralism.