

# Can We Coexist?

## *A Response from Americans to Colleagues in Saudi Arabia*

October 23, 2002

Dear Colleagues,

Thank you for your recent letter, *How We Can Coexist*, which 153 of you publicly released in Riyadh in May of this year, in response to our letter, *What We're Fighting For*, which 60 of us publicly released in Washington, D.C. in February of this year.<sup>1</sup> We welcome your communication.

We know that your decision to write to us at all, as well as some of the comments in your letter, have caused some in your country to criticize you publicly.<sup>2</sup> We appreciate the spirit of civility and the desire for mutual understanding which are reflected in your letter. In that same spirit, and with that same desire, we wish to continue the conversation.

### **Where We Agree**

CITING THE WORDS of the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet, you write that the human person is "inherently a sacred creation." Accordingly, you write that killing any human being unjustly is offensive to God and thus a betrayal of religion. You write that it is forbidden to impose a religious faith upon a person. You write that all human relationships must be based on high moral standards and good conduct. You write that justice is a universal value, and that just treatment is an inalienable right of all persons.

We note, and agree with, your strong emphasis on the universality of these fundamental human values. You write that these values "are shared by all people" since they are "in harmony with the innate nature of the human being." You also write that these values and guiding principles as enumerated in your letter "agree to some extent with some of the principles that the American intellectuals put forth in their paper," and that these important areas of underlying philosophical agreement provide "a good platform for discussion." Later in your letter, you write: "A

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<sup>1</sup>The two letters, *What We're Fighting For: A Letter from America* and *How We Can Coexist*, can be read in English in their entirety (along with other related responses and analyses) at [www.americanvalues.org](http://www.americanvalues.org).

<sup>2</sup>Some of these criticisms are reported in an article by Neil MacFarquar, "A Few Saudis Defy Rigid Islam to Debate Their Own Intolerance," *New York Times*, July 12, 2002.

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number of values mentioned by those American thinkers are not exclusively American values. They come from many sources and represent the contributions of many civilizations, among them Islamic civilization.”

We strongly agree. Much of our letter was an attempt to present a moral argument in universal terms. Your response, coming from the land of the two mosques and the cradle of Islam, which we respect, adds weight to that universality and gives us further reason to believe that, notwithstanding our differences, it may indeed be possible for us to reach a broadly shared understanding of the human person and civil society.

Emphasizing the importance of justice, you say that “power is not the only way to guarantee security.” We agree. More specifically, in criticizing our letter you seem to call on us to avoid resorting to “the language of power.” We accept the importance of your advice. But at the same time we remind you that politics, which concerns the ordering of our lives together, is in part *about* the just uses of power and can never evade the issue of power. We hope you agree that it is better to acknowledge this fact openly, rather than to presume a condition unknown to actual political and even religious life.

You insist that Islam as a religion is not “an enemy of civilization” or “an enemy of human rights.” We fully agree. You write that political violence and radicalism is not “intrinsicly tied to religion” or “restricted to one particular religion.” We fully agree.

In this vein, we recall with regret that some Americans have made reckless and even malicious statements about Islam. Some of these statements have been widely reported. At the same time, there is much evidence that these remarks do not reflect the views of the great majority of U.S. citizens.

You call upon us as U.S. intellectuals to “earnestly review” our “position on Islam” and to “open up channels of dialogue with prominent Islamic thinkers representing the broad current of Islamic thought.” That is precisely our intention, as evidenced in part in our desire to respond to your letter.

### **Where We Misunderstand One Another**

Regrettably, our frequent use of the term “American values” in our letter may have caused some confusion, for at one point in your letter you state, with disapproval, that we in the U.S. are calling upon Muslims to “adopt American values.” We intended, and should have made clearer our intention, to ground our argument in universal, not national or particularistic, values. We hereby affirm that the core values upon which we take our stand are not exclusivist at all.

In discussing U.S. values in our letter, we did write that “the *best* of what we [in the U.S.] too casually call ‘American values’ do not belong only to America, but are in

fact the shared inheritance of humankind.” In addition, in part what we termed “American values” reflect the ways in which, throughout our history, we have been enriched by the traditions and understandings brought to these shores by immigrants from diverse societies across the globe. In these respects, our ultimate affirmation of the universality of core human values is quite similar to certain arguments that you make in your letter.

Another area of apparent misunderstanding concerns our use of, and your understanding of, the English terms “secular” and “secularism.” Your letter says that we favor “secularism.” In fact, we state specifically in our letter that we *reject* “secularism,” which we define as “a way of seeing the world based on rejection of religion or hostility to religion.” On the other hand, we do defend the principle of a “secular” government, by which we mean a constitutional order in which government officials do not hold office by virtue of religious standing or as a result of appointment by religious authorities. Being in favor of a “secular” state does not necessarily imply an embrace of “secularism.” Indeed, for us, more the opposite is the case, which is why we wrote: “At its best, the United States seeks to be a society in which faith and freedom can go together, each elevating the other.” And: “Spiritually, our separation of church and state permits religion to be religion, by detaching it from the coercive power of government.”

Some of this misunderstanding may stem from problems of translation. For example, the Arabic word *almani*, suggesting hostility to religion, may be the word that you would often use as a basis for translating both “secular” and “secularism,” whereas the Arabic word *dunyawi*, suggesting merely the temporal, without any connotations of hostility to religion, may be a more accurate translation of what we are endorsing.

More broadly, the prevalence and consequences of ideological secularism in the U.S. and in other western societies, as well as the relationship across societies between religious faith and religious freedom, would be important subjects for further discussions between us.

## **Where We Disagree**

**O**UR MOST IMPORTANT disagreement with you is that nowhere in your letter do you discuss or even acknowledge the role of your society in creating, protecting, and spreading the *jihadist*<sup>3</sup> violence that today threatens the world, including the Muslim world.

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<sup>3</sup> We are aware of the multiple historical meanings of the word *jihad*. But tragically, Muslim groups today who believe that the imperative of changing societies in order to establish an Islamic order is justifiably pursued by violence frequently describe themselves as *jihadists*. Some of you believe — and many of us agree — that these groups are wrongly taking over and twisting the meaning of an important term. But this usage, however unfortunate, is currently a widespread fact.

For example, speaking of those who murdered 3,000 innocent persons on September 11, you do not speak in your letter of perpetrators, but instead of “alleged perpetrators.” These words sadden and disappoint us. Do you expect us to believe that you are not aware that 15 of the 19 murderers of September 11 were Saudis? Or that their leader, Osama bin Laden, was a Saudi? Or that their organization, al-Qa`ida, has for years received substantial financial support from sources in Saudi Arabia? Or that a high proportion of Qa`ida and Taliban fighters captured by U.S. and allied forces in Afghanistan are Saudis? Or that the spread of violence by Islamist groups across the world, from Afghanistan to Indonesia to the United States, is clearly traceable, in part, to the ongoing financial, political, and religious support for such activities in your country?

These facts are well known and are beyond empirical dispute. Yet your letter incorrectly suggests that these facts are not facts at all, but instead mere “allegations,” and that this entire subject — who are these terrorists and who is supporting them? — is somehow irrelevant to the present crisis.

We are aware of some of the possible reasons for your reluctance to discuss this issue. However, if we wrote to you suggesting that slavery was merely “alleged” to have once existed in our country, or that Native Americans only “allegedly” have been the victims of injustice, we suspect that you might reply, correctly, that such fundamental denials of reality render futile any attempt at honest communication. Accordingly, to continue productively our dialogue beyond this present letter, we ask you in good faith to address specifically your perspective on the important roles played by some members of your society in the attacks of September 11 and in the worldwide spread of violence perpetrated by groups citing Islamic sources as justification.

You write that if the U.S. would “withdraw from the world outside its borders,” then Muslims “would not be bothered” about the values and practices of U.S. society. This statement may be true, at least in part. At the same time, we do not think it wise or responsible for our country (or any country, for that matter) to “withdraw from the world outside its borders.” We further note that many leaders and groups in your society energetically promote their own interpretations of Islam not only in the United States, but also in many countries around the world that show little intent or capacity to exercise significant influence “outside their borders.”

You write that “most of the Islamic movements throughout the Muslim world and elsewhere are essentially moderate” and that it is therefore “necessary to maintain this situation.” We do not claim to know with precision the current balance and direction of ideological influences in the Muslim world. We do, however, clearly recognize the current tension in the Muslim world between Islam itself, a great religion for which we have respect, and those radically intolerant religious-political groups that claim (falsely in our view) to speak for Islam. As for the merits of “maintaining” the current “situation,” that situation is one in which growing numbers of innocent

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people around the world, including Muslims, are being murdered by radical Muslim groups, some of which are supported and encouraged by voices from your country, and some of which are currently seeking access to chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons. We have no wish, therefore, to “maintain this situation.”

Opposing those in the U.S. whom you call “conflict mongers,” you write that “stability is the basis for rights and freedoms throughout the world.” We believe that you have largely inverted cause and effect — we believe that rights and freedoms are the basis of stability. For this reason, some of today’s conditions in many Muslim societies — very little freedom of expression, an absence of democratic norms and institutions, and poor recognition by the authorities of academic freedom and other basic human rights — suggest to us that stability in your society, no less than elsewhere, will ultimately hinge in some important measure on the willingness and ability of leaders, intellectuals, and ordinary persons to demand basic rights and freedoms for everyone in society. We also hope that our own government will be more forthcoming and consistent in supporting movements toward democracy in the Muslim world.

Your major theme and ultimate conclusion, stated repeatedly in your letter, is that the attacks of September 11 in particular, and Islamist violence generally, are primarily the fault of the United States and its allies. *You brought this upon yourselves*, seems to be your basic message to us. You write, for example, that much of the instability and unrest in the Muslim world has “come about under the umbrella of Western policy and quite possibly due to the direct actions of the West.”

Similarly, you write that “many of the extremist Islamic groups — as they are called — did not want to be that way when they started, but were forced into that category” by political, military, and media pressures from the U.S. and its allies. You insist that this process of social change due to outside pressure “is the major cause for the extremism of Islamic movements and groups.” The U.S. resort to military force against violent Islamist groups, you tell us at several points in your letter, is only intensifying this trend. Most of all, you repeatedly insist that Israel, and U.S. support for Israel, constitute the root cause of virtually every problem discussed in your letter.

We recognize that U.S. policy, for good or for ill, is an important influence in the world, and in particular, that you strongly disagree with U.S. support for Israel. These are legitimate subjects of debate, and issues on which people of good will can, and often do, disagree. Looking to the future, many of us generally believe — as some of you may believe, and as some other Saudis may believe — that a two-state solution in the Middle East, with a viable Israel and a viable Palestine living side by side in peace and security, would be good for the Middle East and good for the world.

At the same time, we ask you sincerely to reconsider the tendency, evident in your letter, to blame everyone but your own leaders and your own society for the prob-

lems that your society faces. At times, some political leaders apparently find it useful to exploit and foment hatred of the external “other,” or “the enemy,” largely, it seems, in order to divert popular attention away from more immediate problems. But we urge you as intellectuals to consider whether the most urgent challenges facing your society — unemployment, the lack of democratic freedoms, the failure to build a modern, diversified economy, and the nurturing and exporting of Islamist violence — can be adequately solved through a strategy that consists largely of scapegoating other people and other nations.

The U.S. has many of its own problems, some of them quite important. Criticizing the U.S. is perfectly legitimate and, in our view, sometimes necessary. Many of us frequently do it ourselves. But the rise of Islamist violence as a threat to the world, including the Muslim world, is not a phenomenon that you in Saudi Arabia can simply blame on someone else. To do so would be irresponsibly to avoid confronting some important questions.

Here, from our perspective, are three such questions in need of clarification. First, do you believe that Islamic piety as practiced in Saudi Arabia is inconsistent with militant *jihadism*? Second, if you do believe that the two are inconsistent, how do you explain the prominent role of Saudis in the attacks of September 11 and, more generally, in the rise of militant *jihadism* as a world-threatening phenomenon? Finally, do you believe that Saudi intellectuals and religious leaders who hold that the two are inconsistent have an obligation to explain publicly and concretely why the ideas and activities of al-Qa`ida and similar groups are wrong and dangerous from an Islamic point of view? We await your response.

### **Can We Reason Together?**

**I**N A WORLD THREATENED by violence and injustice, made anxious by war and discussions of war, and facing the grim prospect of religious and even civilizational polarization, is any task facing us as intellectuals from East and West more important than finding a time and place to reason together, in the hope of finding common ground on the dignity of the human person and the basic conditions for human flourishing?

We earnestly wish to be a part of such a dialogue, with you and with other intellectuals from the Muslim world. We recognize that the only preconditions for participating in such an initiative are good will, the recognition of our common humanity, and the willingness and freedom to engage in critical introspection as well as careful criticism of others' views.

Your decision to write to us shows that you may have a similar aspiration. We hope to find ways to continue and deepen this conversation.

Thank you again for writing to us.

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