

# The Islam/West Debate

One



## Introducing the Debate



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In February of 2002, the international support that the United States had enjoyed immediately after 9/11 was falling victim to global discord. Anti-American sentiment was on the rise in Europe, and, in the wake of the war in Afghanistan, support for bin Ladin had reached disturbing levels in the Middle East. Early whispers of a stepped-up campaign to affect regime change in Iraq only aggravated this global polarization. Collectively, these developments threatened to convert the war against jihadism into a “clash of civilizations.”

It was in this context that sixty prominent American intellectuals released an open letter, entitled “What We’re Fighting For,” that sought to redefine the struggle against terrorism in terms of universal human values. The authors’ basic argument was that jihadist groups like al-Qa’ida pose an implacable threat to the United States and the universal values it embodies; in accordance with the stipulations of “just war” doctrine, the United States has a right defend itself and its values with military force when other methods will not suffice.

Upon its release, “What We’re Fighting For” received little attention from American news outlets, but drew powerful responses from the Middle East and Europe. Impassioned replies to the letter and rejoinders appeared in newspapers and academic journals, and on Islamist websites; Al-Jazeera and other Arab news networks devoted significant airtime to discussion of the letter. Among those to respond to “What We’re Fighting For” were such diverse and important voices as the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia, a leading Saudi dissident Islamist group; the prominent Saudi cleric Sheikh Safar al-Hawali; Germany’s Coalition for Life and Peace; and al-Qa’ida. Throughout the remainder of 2002, these exchanges gave rise to a truly open,

substantive, and international debate on terrorism, values, and U.S. policy—a debate unlike any other, in which Americans, jihadists, clerics, and internationalists all had the opportunity to engage one another’s arguments and views directly. The present volume chronicles that debate. It consists of the “What We’re Fighting For” letter and most of the major media, scholarly, and Islamist responses to it.

In this volume, one finds multiple authors using similar arguments but to very different ends. I will therefore try in this introduction to characterize the ideological frameworks and theses underlying this collection’s major pieces, in order that the reader might better understand what is actually being argued in each text.

### **What We’re Fighting For**

Perhaps the most useful way to begin is with a description of “What We’re Fighting For.” “What We’re Fighting For” opens by arguing that there are universal values (e.g., human equality and religious freedom) and that America’s core values and political system reflect and embody these universal values. After making this case, the authors characterize al-Qa’ida as an implacable enemy that hates America not just for what it *does*, but also for what it *is*—that is, for its values. It has massacred innocent American civilians, and wants nothing more than to do so again. In accordance with just war doctrine, an established set of principles governing warfare, the U.S. has a right to use military force against al-Qa’ida in order to defend its citizens and values when other methods will not suffice. Ultimately, the arguments about values, terrorism, and just war flow together in the letter because America’s right to use force is portrayed, in part, as deriving from its adherence to universal values and al-Qa’ida’s violation of them.

It could be argued that “What We’re Fighting For” was an important document for two reasons. First, it provided a moral-philosophical justification for war against al-Qa’ida. Second, in making this case, the letter expressed the sentiments of a large portion of the American public.

### **The Middle Eastern Response**

This volume includes two pieces which can be categorized as conservative Middle Eastern responses to “What We’re Fighting For.” They are: “How We Can Coexist,” a letter signed by 153 prominent Saudi intellectuals, and “Key Intellectualism,” an article by Heshmatollah Falahatpisheh, which appeared in the Iranian newspaper *Resalat*. For convenience’s sake I will focus on “How We Can Coexist” because it is the more comprehensive of the two. This letter begins by agreeing with a basic presupposition of “What We’re Fighting For”: that Islam and the West share common values that are capable of supporting a just and peaceful coexistence. But the Saudi authors aver that it is

not al-Qa'ida that poses the greatest threat to peace, but rather U.S. foreign policy, which is unjust and conflicts with universal values. Referring to September 11, the authors write that American foreign policy is largely to blame for "what happened." Accordingly, the U.S. should modify its aggressive policies and pursue a just world order through international institutions. These arguments about universal values and U.S. policy constitute the letter's basic thesis.

"How We Can Coexist" disagrees significantly with "What We're Fighting For" over what "freedom of religion" means. The authors of "What We're Fighting For" argue that freedom of religion is achieved through the secular state, which guarantees that all citizens can follow whatever religion they choose. For the authors of "How We Can Coexist," however, "religious freedom" means that Muslims should be allowed to fulfill their religious obligations by establishing Islamic states. They argue that the American letter's advocacy of secular government found in "What We're Fighting For" actually transforms "freedoms and rights into tools for conflict" and presents "a limited cultural vision as if it is a universal law that must be generally applied to all, forcibly if need be." In other words, "What We're Fighting For" uses "values" for narrow political ends. A sinister nexus between the rhetoric of "What We're Fighting For" and American political interests is also seen by Falahatpisheh. He writes in "Key Intellectualism" that "behind-the-scenes of the relations between America and Israel in the Islamic Middle East ... the power elite and the [signatories of 'What We're Fighting For'] have drawn up horrific plans against Islam" and are "seeking a world that would accept America's hegemony."

Despite its largely critical view of the United States, "How We Can Coexist" drew vehement opposition from some jihadis. This collection's "Please Prostrate Yourself Privately" is a refutation of the Saudi letter written by one of these jihadis, 'Abul Bara. Bara argues that, contrary to the opinion of the Saudi intellectuals, Islam and western civilization have nothing meaningful in common. Muslims must avoid infidel ideas and culture and struggle against unbelievers until Islam triumphs: "Antagonism, fighting, and hatred between Muslims and infidels are the basics of our religion." Making frequent reference to Qur'anic passages, Bara maintains that the Saudi intellectuals have obscured the fundamental messages of Islam by taking its values—such as "justice" and "tolerance"—out of their proper context.

The underlying analytical framework of "Please Prostrate Yourself Privately" is the ideology known as Islamism. Islamism maintains that all of society, including the Islamic religious establishment, has deviated from the "pure" Islamic community that is thought to have existed during the religion's early years. The ideology's adherents believe that two intertwined courses of action need to be taken to rectify this problem. First, Muslims must jettison accrued religious traditions and directly interpret Islam's primary texts. Second, because the goal of Islamism is a "pure" Islamic community, Muslims must engage in sociopolitical activism geared towards establishing Islamic states and encouraging individual "piety." These ideas undergird the criticisms of the Saudi letter presented in "Please Prostrate Yourself Privately."

Two documents in this collection respond directly to “What We’re Fighting For” from an Islamist perspective. They are “Options are Limited” by the Movement for Islamic Reform in Arabia (MIRA) and “Letter to the American People,” which was tacitly endorsed, if not penned, by al-Qa’ida. Both letters echo arguments made in “Please Prostrate Yourself Privately.”

MIRA writes that Islam’s revealed truth “really calls on its followers to overcome opponents and reach the whole world with its universal message.” The “Letter to the American People” states that Muslims have the right to and will attack America if it refuses Islam. However, unlike “Please Prostrate Yourself Privately,” these two letters present a host of arguments about U.S. policies. They attack the United States for supporting Israel, stymieing Arab national liberation movements, suppressing democracy in Algeria, and even for refusing to sign the Kyoto Protocol. The two letters even conclude with conditions for a rapprochement between America and the Islamic world. The reader therefore faces some difficulty in understanding what message these letters intend to convey because they seemingly pursue two distinct lines of logic. While I do not want to suggest that there is only one sound way to interpret the letters, I do advocate the following approach: consider the totality of the arguments presented in the texts and avoid, at least initially, trying to “decode” them. This means reading the array of “secular” arguments about policies, culture, and rapprochements in light of the texts’ particularistic Islamist arguments—they should be understood as complementary. Such an approach, it could be argued, brings one to the intended meaning of the texts because the authors could not have intended their arguments to be confusing or contradictory. Thus, “Options Are Limited” and “Letter to the American People” may be understood as objecting not to U.S. policy per se, but U.S. policy insofar as it is an impediment to the goals of Islamism. Indeed, in the letters, complaints about U.S. policy are woven into a larger argument for the global hegemony of Islam; the eventual “rapprochement” between the West and Islam is contingent upon the adoption of the latter by the former.

This volume’s “Letter from Makkah” by Safar al-Hawali may be understood as falling somewhere between “How We Can Coexist” and the Islamist documents in terms of its ideology.

Several liberal Arab and Muslim reactions to “What We’re Fighting For” are also included in this collection. The two most comprehensive are “What We’re Fighting For: A Follow-up,” by Saleh Bashir, Hassan I. Mneimneh, and Hazem Saghie and “The Need for a Paradigm Shift in American Thinking,” which was written by Chibli Mallat and endorsed by a number of scholars in America, Europe, and the Middle East. Both articles affirm the need to defeat jihadism, but object to the vision of a “just war” against al-Qa’ida presented by “What We’re Fighting For.” Part of this objection is on a prima facie basis: war is evil and cannot be associated with “justice.” But beyond this point, the authors contend that, between its notion of a “just war against terrorism” and its praise of American values, “What We’re Fighting For” paves the way for an excessive use of military force by the United States. Woven into these criticisms is a constructive recommendation: the U.S. should pursue terrorists

through international criminal courts, not through extra-legal means. Such an approach would allow the U.S. to defend itself while discouraging militarism.

### **The German Response**

This volume includes two other pieces that advocate an internationalist approach to fighting terrorism, but do so from a somewhat different perspective than that of the liberal Arab and Muslim intellectuals. They are “A World of Peace and Justice Would Be Different” and “In the Twenty-First Century, There Is No Longer any Justification for War.” Both were written by the Coalition for Life and Peace, a group of professors and NGO members based in Germany. The basic thesis of these letters is that, after the end of the Cold War, the United States “concentrated its imagination and its scientific, technical, and economic capacities on strengthening its position as the sole remaining superpower in the world, and establishing a unipolar world order.” As a result, there are major imbalances in the global distribution of power. This inequity, combined with a lack of local development (e.g. political, economic, legal, infrastructural) creates “structural violence” against “have-nots,” which humiliates them and hinders their “full human development.” This situation engenders a “loss of inhibitions” among “have-nots” and makes them resort to terrorism in an attempt to improve their situation. September 11 is therefore construed as protest or rebellion against the powerlessness experienced by Muslims. Reflecting their etiology of terrorism, the Coalition argues that the U.S. should focus its attention on building institutions such as international criminal courts that might moderate power imbalances and therefore eradicate the roots of terrorism. Military responses to terrorism should be prohibited because war only perpetuates the conditions that create terrorism.

### **Other Documents**

Also reprinted in this volume is a reaction to “What We’re Fighting For” from leftist American professors and intellectuals. The basic point of this essay, which is entitled “Letter from U.S. Citizens to Friends in Europe,” is that the United States is an arrogant and militaristic enemy of humanity.

Finally, this collection includes a number of additional pieces written by some or all of the signatories of “What We’re Fighting For.” These include: a response to the Saudi’s “How We Can Coexist” entitled “Can We Coexist?”; a response to the Coalition for Life and Peace’s “A World of Peace and Justice Would Be Different” entitled “Is the Use of Force Ever Morally Justified?”; a statement about the then-impending Iraq War, “Pre-emption, Just War and Iraq”; and, an analysis of the al-Qa’ida “Letter to the American People.”

This collection also includes a number of shorter articles covering and reacting to the international debate over “What We’re Fighting For.” “The

New Intra-Arab Cultural Space in Form and Content” by Hassan I. Mneimneh offers a detailed discussion of the debate and how it fits into recent changes in Arab culture, media, and communications.

### **Conclusion**

The challenges and problems at the core of the Islam-West debate were a long time in the making and they will be with us for a long time to come. Engaging one another in an open and serious dialogue will not completely solve our problems. But it will be an important tool for promoting mutual understanding, and hopefully, for finding common ground. This collection is a valuable resource for those who wish to pursue this endeavor, which must be constructive, yet rooted in critical thought.