

# The Trump Administration Must Not Initiate Islamic Reformation as Ideological Isolationists

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On June 18th, 2018, The Intercept published an article written by Mehdi Hasan and Ryan Grim claiming a leaked State Department memo advised the Trump administration to push for Islamic reformation. The memo is said to speak specifically to Iran and ISIS by injecting “ideological competition.” Critics of the article and its authors responded with attacks on the publication itself, arguing that The Intercept is “funded by Qatar and is an anti-American enemy propaganda outfit.” The appropriate response isn’t whether The Intercept has a radical agenda, but whether the story is true.

Judging by experience in neoconservative circles, at least the attitude is true. Within those circles, a pieced-together understanding of Islam usually hinges on selected passages of medieval Islamic philosopher Ibn Taymiyyah, a complex scholar with both a challenging and brilliant body of work. The limited understanding of Ibn Taymiyyah, for example, is symptomatic of how many people in these circles view the Islamic faith, and in often cases the bodies that serve as vessels for this faith. Beyond Ibn Taymiyyah, the totality of Islamic thought within the White House’s sphere of influence mostly hinges on hadiths, with a refusal to recognize hadiths for what they are: second hand sources of verified sayings surrounding religious life in Islam, none of which supersede the Quran. Hadiths are often the texts referenced by Islamic hate preachers to advocate genocide against Jews, and a simple way to counter the message of hate imams is to challenge the

authority of hadiths in doctrinal hierarchy. However, when privately discussing the ability to drive reform by challenging the authority of hadiths, Muslim Reformers are often met with opposition by neo-conservatives who believe they understand Islam better than Muslims. The sum of these attitudes that see Islam through a narrow lens reinforces the likelihood that the Washington memo pushing for Islamic reformation is not simply one of many memos, but a significant strategy.

That strategy itself has merit, but if ideological competition is driven by leadership that lacks understanding of Islam, and fails to have basic compassion and respect for its followers, then that strategy is not only doomed to fail but will also risk anchoring and tainting authentic Muslim reform initiatives. It will become highly damaging to ongoing reform work within Muslim communities whose perennial efforts running with minimal funding or support are vulnerable to being overshadowed by the ideological war machine funded by the United States government.

In his book, *God is Not One*, Stephen Prothero, a professor of religion at Boston University, describes the value of this approach as little more than a spectator sport. "Unfortunately, this crucial conversation rarely advances beyond a ping-pong match of cliches in which some claim that Islam is a religion of peace while others claim that Islam is a religion of war," he writes. "One side ignores Quranic passages and Islamic traditions that have been used to justify war on unbelievers, while the other ignores Islam's just-war injunctions against killing women, children, civilians, and fellow Muslims...The reason for all this ignoring is our collective ignorance. We are incapable of reckoning with Islam because we know almost nothing about it."

There remains little meaningful exposure to Muslims, Islamic studies, and understanding of Islam as an organic faith that has always flexed and adapted over time. Given that, it's

likely any attempt to instill an ideological competition will fail and stand alongside many other failed U.S. interventions in the Middle East and North Africa. However, ideological weaponization of faith is not impossible; the strategy is already used by Russia.

At one time, The New York Times ran a series called the Dark Arts on how Russia projects power covertly. Their September 14th, 2016 issue featured a front-page piece by Andrew Higgins on "Dark Arts: Power Through Religion" that detailed Russia's initiative to use faith as a vehicle to exert influence. Titled "Russia Mobilizes Faith to Extend Its Influence," the article describes how the Kremlin invested years of lobbying to secure a \$100 million "spiritual and cultural center" in a Paris neighborhood that may be used as a listening post but also demonstrates Russia's might as a religious power. Higgins goes on to describe "The merging of political, diplomatic and religious interests," adding that "While tanks and artillery have been Russia's weapons of choice to project its power into neighboring Ukraine and Georgia, Mr. Putin has also mobilized faith to expand the country's reach and influence."

Historically, religion is frequently employed as a tool to shape political agendas (as is currently being explored against Iran and ISIS, and is in place with Saudi reforms under Muhammad bin Salman, crown prince of Saudi Arabia). In his in-depth book, *Evolution of God*, Robert Wright charts a stunning narrative of political manipulation of a god identity as it benefited emerging political priorities. A professor of philosophy at Princeton and a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, Wright even details the contentious naming of god between Judaism and Christianity before Islam adopted "Allah" as an identifier for the divine. Seismic theological shifts to understand divinity and integrate it within the structure of civilization through 'religion' has been an ongoing

conversation throughout history, including Islamic history.

Robert R. Reilly, a senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, details key struggles in Islamic political history that shaped the future of Islam and the current crisis of free thought making it very challenging to inject reformation. In his book, *The Closing of the Muslim Mind*, Reilly asserts how Islam's original free thinkers, the Mu'tazilites, who stood in opposition of pre-destination and advocated for free will (and consequent responsibility of actions), were raised to power and influence only through political support. Aligned with the Aristotelian view of rational good, the Mu'tazilites and like-minded Arab philosophers were supported by the ruling power, Caliph al-Ma'mun. Reilly describes Caliph al-Ma'mun as "the greatest supporter of Greek thought in Islamic history," adding that, "in al-Ma'mun's court, Christians such as Theodore Abu Qurrah, bishop of Harran and a disciple of St. John of Damascus, could appear before the caliph to debate Muslim theologians over the truth of their respective religions."

Caliph al-Ma'mun recognized the value Mu'tazilites had in his larger vision for a free-thinking society, and therefore shaped ideological reformation through inclusion and collaboration with like-minded allies. He gave Mu'tazilites political support and power, rather than attempting to influence ideology unilaterally – something we don't see happening yet with the Trump administration as it advances conversations on Islamic reform as ideological isolationists.

In conversation, Sheikh Uthman Khan, academic dean of Critical Loyalty, questions whether the government understands what reform means:

"If the idea is to attack militant islam, you don't need reformation, all you need is to go back to the original faith or religion. Theocracy or Islamism is just an innovation within the religion. The militant approach to Islam came in

only after the death of the prophet when Muslims wanted to spread Islam out into other localities. During this militant approach is when Islam is actually being codified. So all of the codification of religion is going to reflect that militant approach.”

Khan is not alone; the approach of returning back to Islam’s origin is favored by other leading Muslims, globally, who are working within the faith to initiate change. Khan also questions the lack of inclusive invitation to offer consultation and policy initiatives.

“If there are no Muslims on board,” he adds, “then it [reform] doesn’t make any sense because now you’re changing the religion according to whatever religion the government follows. So if the government is more Christian, then you’re Christianizing Islam. If it’s Jewish, then you’re making Islam into a Jewish religion. You’re just forming it according to how you want it. There needs to be some subjectivity in there, some sort of small subjectivity from Muslims. All Muslims have one mindset and belief system, which is believing in Allah, the Quran and the prophet. The details may differ but we can’t change the theology without bringing Muslims into the picture.”

Instead of collaboration, we have the total exclusion of authentic Muslim voices. The recent White House Iftar dinner is demonstrative of this unwritten policy of exclusion. The absence of American Muslim presence from this year’s White House Iftar dinner underscores the cross-spectrum concern that the Trump administration doesn’t know how to engage American Muslims – and perhaps isn’t interested in doing so. Resuming the tradition after cancelling it altogether last year, the June 6th, 2018 dinner was almost exclusively attended by Washington diplomats, with exception of Palestinian dignitaries. Muslim American reaction to the state dinner was mixed, ranging from protests by CAIR and other Islamist organizations outside the White House, to private feelings of

shock and insult among progressive Muslims communities, to relief that a difficult decision didn't need to be made this year. Given the current climate and tensions in an administration that struggles with minority presence and the policies that affect them from the travel ban, to not effectively handling race tensions neo-Nazi demonstrations in Charlottesville, to the current immigration crisis at the border, an invitation from the White House would be heavily weighed.

For Stephen Schwartz, executive director of the Center for Islamic Pluralism, it was simply business as usual. Under George W. Bush, in the era after 9/11, the White House Iftar dinner was a political tool to show that Islam wasn't the enemy. Inclusion of American Muslim leaders and organizations helped reinforce the message that Islam was a religion of peace. "If it was just diplomats, that would be a restoration of the practice in the past," Schwartz shared via email.

Soraya Deen, founder of Muslim Women Speakers, sympathizes with the administration in light of the protests against the Iftar dinner's exclusion of Muslim organizations, including the host of Islamist lobbyists that courted favor during the Obama era: "All what I have seen is the main stream Muslim organizations attack him every time – and then [they] want to be invited?" Soraya shared in talks. "Policies are being made, laws are being written. This is not a private relationship but a public one. We must reach out not lash out."

Her answer begs the question: is the White House Iftar dinner a theological space, and if so, is exclusion from that space a form of alienation of Muslims in theological spaces? The other (and more important) question is, when policies are being enacted that impact Muslim Americans or include Muslims, would it not be prudent for the administration to build inroads with Muslim American leaders and organizations?

One year ago, President Trump spoke in Saudi Arabia asking for

Muslim support in tackling in counter-extremism efforts. In what was billed as the 'Riyadh speech,' he invited a Muslim renaissance. That was not the first time we saw Trump become an outlier and be revolutionary in initiating change. In his 2016 foreign policy speech, Trump suggested radical Islam was a philosophical problem:

"First, we need a long-term plan to halt the spread and reach of radical Islam. Containing the spread of radical Islam must be a major foreign policy goal of the United States and indeed the world. Events may require the use of military force, but it's also a philosophical struggle."

Since his election, the Trump administration has severed government relations with American Islamists – Muslim lobbyist and advocacy groups who work to mainstream orthodox Muslim views through political channels, often at the expense of silencing dissenting Muslims. However, in its place there is now only a concerning lack of curiosity and conversation about who Muslims are and the rich discourse and movement taking place within our communities. When the administration then entertains Islamic reform as a means to challenge theocracy and Islamic militancy, they risk introducing change from a disadvantage because they don't understand the ideology or it's ability to be shaped.

The Trump administration would benefit from inviting Muslims who are looking to work inclusively to address common concerns. The reality is the Trump personality and presidency will likely continue to be aggressively be challenged, making it impossible for President Trump to play peacemaker in a traditional role (as we witnessed with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un). The Trump presidency's most iconic legacy could be masterfully utilizing public hysteria and chaos against his presidency as a channel through which he can guide deeply impactful change.

Speaking at the 2017 Fox News' 100 Days special with host

Martha MacCallum, Muslim Reformer Raheel Raza applauds Trump's ability to abandon appeasement and diplomatic platitudes.

"As a democratically elected leader of this country, he has the right to implement policy about longterm safety and security," Raza explains. "That there is a radical jihadist ideology that is at play is well-known to everyone. It's not something we can hide our heads under the sand like Obama did for 8 years – and appeasement was his problem. President Trump doesn't have to be about appeasement. He has to implement that policies that will be of benefit of both American Muslims and non Muslims in the whole country."

President Trump has more allies than he might realize among Muslims and Americans, and key individuals in the military sector with vast experience of immersion into Muslim societies. In back and forth communication with veteran Jason Howk, I learned of a story of a top Marine Corp general who recently joined a Ramadan dinner. General Robert Neller, who is a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, was invited this month to a Baltimore mosque by veteran Marine and Ahmadi Muslim, Manor Shams.

"The military veterans, that just spent almost two decades living in Muslim countries and befriended and were often kept alive by Muslims in some rough times, are the perfect vehicle for better inclusion of Muslims in American communities," Howk shares.

Howk leads engagement among civilization populations who often have little exposure to Islam or Muslims. With a Masters degree in Middle East and South Asia Security Studies from the Naval Postgraduate School, and studies in Dari and Arabic at the Defense Language Institute, Howk is a perfect example of the broad-based level of inclusion and partnership that could come together, along with trusted Muslim thought leaders, under a Trump administration. There are also other retired non-Muslim American special forces operatives, Ph.D. graduates

with niche areas of study, among others, with deep understanding of building a solution-oriented structure. There are individuals, along with reformers and theologians, who understand how to speak a very rare language that can navigate between the 'Muslim world' and Western bureaucracy.

As for Trump, he's entrusted with the duty of helping politicians and political influencers understand who Muslims are and how to work with us. Privately, there is common admission that conservatives on the hill don't even know Muslim reformers exist. Publicly, liberal organizations like the Silicon Valley Community Foundation and the Southern Poverty Law Center, continue to elevate and support Islamist organizations (in many cases because they simply don't know better and haven't seen a viable counter to mainstream Muslims representation). When Muslims and allies are ignored from critical theological spaces by President Trump, the other mistake there is that he's not teaching anyone else how to work with us.