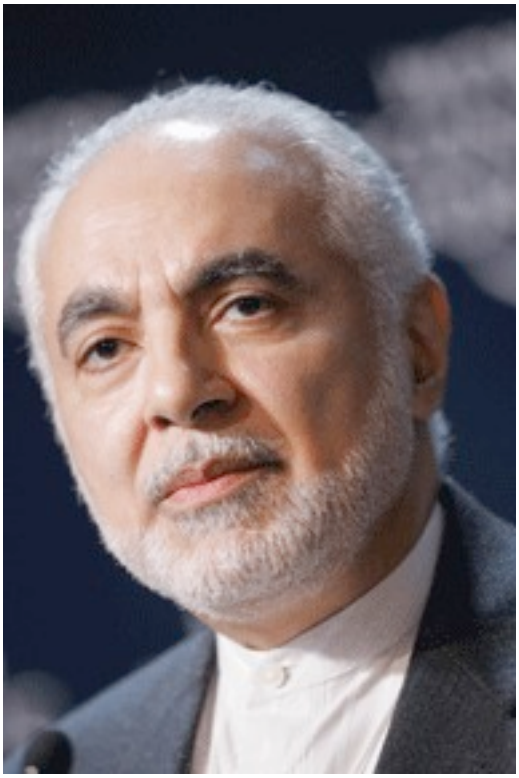
New York The Jewish Week
Connecting the World to Jewish News, Culture, and Opinion

Published on *The Jewish Week* (http://www.thejewishweek.com)

‘Moderate’ Muslim Tag Ever-Murky For Community



Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf, moderate or closet radical?
Renewed focus on nature of Islamic leadership. Getty Images
Reaction to N.Y. imam at center of downtown mosque storm points up unresolved tension, even after years of interfaith dialogue.

Wednesday, August 25, 2010
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Staff Writer

An Islamic leader from the United States gives a lecture about the founding of Israel in the wake of the Holocaust. He recommends a book that denies that mass murder of Jews took place during World War II, calls the Holocaust a hoax and declares that "All this [information about six million Jewish deaths] is false propaganda." Hitler, the leader says, "never intended to mass-destroy the Jews."

An extremist?

A decade later, that same imam, Yasir Qadhi, the leader of an Islamic educational institute based in New Haven, Conn., was part of a delegation of Muslim clerics that visited Auschwitz earlier this month. At the end of the mission the imam signed a joint statement that "condemn[s] any attempt to deny this historical reality and declare[s] such denials or any justification of this tragedy as against the Islamic code of ethics." The statement "condemn[s] anti-Semitism in any form" and pledges "to make real the commitment of 'never again.'"

A partner for dialogue?

Today, as the ninth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks nears and as the nation is riven by a bitter debate about a planned Islamic cultural center two blocks away from the former site of the World Trade Center, two questions remain frustratingly unanswered: who and what is a “moderate Muslim,” and what is the line for the Jewish community separating “moderate” from “extremist?”

These questions have special relevance for the American Jewish community, which has reached out to Islamic leaders with increased urgency over the past decade and often found its dialogue efforts stymied by the intrusion of Middle East politics or rebuffed by intemperate statements by Muslims about Jews or the Jewish state.

In recent weeks, the debate in New York has been centered on Feisal Abdul Rauf, the imam behind the planned cultural center. He is — depending who’s speaking — the face of Islamic moderation or of Islamic duplicity.

He is, say his defenders, a moderate, a man who has denounced anti-Semitism and attended “peace seders,” who accepts Western values and respects other faiths, who

earned enough confidence from the State Department to be sent on a current speaking tour in the Arab Middle East.

A native of Kuwai born to Egyptian parents, Imam Feisal [Muslims often refer to imams by their first names, not their last names], who came to college here as a foreign student, "has become a real American," said Alan Silberstein, treasurer of the Board of Overseers at Yeshiva University's Sy Syms School of Business. Silberstein met Rauf four decades ago as a fellow undergraduate at Columbia University. During the Six-Day War the two would hold daily lunchtime discussions, and Rauf would try to understand "why American Jews … were so concerned about Israel," Silberstein told The Jewish Week in an interview.

Rauf was "very open," Silberstein said, and in subsequent years has taken part in the type of genuine "inter-religious dialogue" that Silberstein has supported between Jews and Catholics.

On the other hand, the imam, say his critics, is a closet extremist who is vague about his vision of the U.S. as a "Sharia-compliant" land; who refuses to condemn Hamas and has called the United States "an accessory to the crime" of 9/11; and who declared in a 2002 interview that "a Western, European-Ashkenazi Jewish population created a state of Israel at the expense of the native non-European Christian, Muslim and even Jewish (Sephardic) populations."

"He is an Islamist — period," because of the totality of his statements, said Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum. Pipes has been a vocal critic of Brooklyn's Khalil

Gibran International Academy, which he in several articles termed a “madrassa,” and its original principal Debbie Almontasar, who resigned under pressure in 2007.

Imam Feisal is, according to the right-wing Zionist Organization of America, an “extremist, anti-U.S., pro-Hamas apologist.”

For many Jews, the definition of moderation in Islam is still fluid. And while it is an issue that centers for the moment on Imam Feisal, it ultimately transcends him and the debate over whether the Islamic cultural center should be built near Ground Zero. What acts or words does the Jewish community demand, and what condemnation of behavior by other Muslims are quid pro quos for a relationship with the Jewish community?

For some, statements against terrorism in general, against Hamas specifically, are necessary. For others, it is the disavowal of anti-Semitism.

Joshua Muravchik and Charlie Szrom listed six questions to determine an organization’s fitness for a “constructive relationship” in a 2008 article, “In Search of Moderate Muslims,” in the conservative journal Commentary: “Does it both espouse democracy and practice democracy within its own structures? Does it eschew violence in pursuit of its goals? Does it condemn terrorism? Does it advocate equal rights for minorities? Does it advocate equal rights for women? Does it accept a pluralism of interpretations within Islam?

Several Jewish spokesmen contacted by The Jewish Week hesitated to give specific, politically based ground rules, but

talked of general behavior that would mark a Muslim as a moderate:

Rejecting violence and terrorism, said Anti-Defamation League National Director Abraham Foxman and Yehudit Barsky, the American Jewish Committee's counterterrorism expert. Defending the rights of Jews as an autonomous religious community, said Rabbi Marc Schneier, president of the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, who has championed Jewish-Muslim dialogue.

"A repudiation of suicide bombings is the minimal position for Jewish dignity," said Yossi Klein Halevi, author of "At the Entrance to the Garden of Eden: A Jew's Search for God with Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land" (Morrow, 2001).

For yet others, there are no invisible lines in the sand.

"I'm leery of defining a litmus test," said Pipes.

"I don't think it helps the Jewish community to have a litmus test" of what makes a moderate Muslim, says Marshall Breger, who organized the recent trip of eight Islamic leaders to death camp sites in Germany and Poland.

Breger, an Orthodox Jew who served as a senior official in the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations, says, "My interest was in reaching out to people who are interested in learning" the Jewish perspective on a crucial issue like the history of the Holocaust. "I'm not giving them a seal of approval."

Imam Yasir Qadhi, who delivered the Holocaust denial sermon a decade ago and joined fellow Islamic clerics in the mission to the European Holocaust sites, was not the only participant with a questionable past; several of the other Islamic participants, all of whom have prominent positions in their community, had a history of making anti-Semitic comments.

Imam Qadhi says he recanted his Holocaust denial statements long before he went to Auschwitz.

While representatives of some Muslim political and religious organizations had praised the 9/11 perpetrators or denied Islam's role in the attacks, others, the so-called moderates, condemned the hijackers and expressed shame that the murders were done in the name of Islam.

The number of Muslim moderates is apparently on the rise. "They are all over the United States," said the ADL's Foxman.

"There are signs today of genuine ferment and self-examination within Islam," said Halevi.

Experts point to the following as evidence of Muslim moderation: the Washington-based Free Muslim Coalition Against Terrorism, which states that "religious violence and terrorism have not been fully rejected by the Muslim community in the post 9/11 era"; and the Indiana-based Fiqh Council of North America, which recently declared "There is no justification in Islam for extremism or terrorism."

"We have seen the emergence of moderate [Islamic] leaders," said Rabbi Schneier. He says he has established a

close working relationship with Indonesian-born Imam Mohammad Shamsi Ali of Manhattan's Islamic Cultural Center; the rabbi and the imam are about to write a book about extremist tendencies within their respective religious traditions.

Robert Kaplan, director of intergroup relations at the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York, cites Mohammad Razvi, founder of the Council of Peoples Organizations, as an active participant in the We Are All Brooklyn coalition, which has brought together more than 75 community and faith-based organizations in the borough since 9/11.

Relationships with Muslim organizations are most successful, Kaplan says, when they stress local, "quality-of-life" issues like fighting hate crimes, rather than taking part in general dialogue discussions.

Some politicians, journalists and academics say there are no Muslim moderates; Islamic leaders who oppose terrorism, they say, are afraid of speaking out. The difference between Muslim moderates and more-extreme members of their community is "all tactical," viewing a "truce" with non-Muslims as a "temporary accommodation" until Islam becomes ascendant, said Bernard Lewis, emeritus professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. The Koran, he told The Jewish Week, does not recognize other faiths — even monotheistic ones like Judaism and Christianity — as legitimate.

"The Christians, for the most part, have long ago abandoned this [supremacist attitude]," Lewis said.

“When I suggest that radical Muslims are the problem and that moderate Muslims are the solution, the nearly inevitable retort from most people is: ‘What moderate Muslims?’” Pipes wrote in the New York Sun in 2007. “There are lots of fake-moderates parading about, and they can be difficult to identify,” he wrote.

To some Muslims, the attempt to label some of them as moderate is an affront.

“Absolutely. Most [American Muslims] find that extremely offensive,” Bethlehem-born Kamal Nawash, founder of the Washington-based Coalition Against Terrorism, formed after 9/11, told The Jewish Week. “It implies that the norm is extreme.”

Do American Muslims understand the effort to identify moderates in their ranks?

“We certainly understand it,” Nawash said.

Breger, professor of law at The Catholic University of America in Washington, told The Jewish Week he had no criteria for picking the Islamic leaders he invited to take part in the recent visit to Germany and Poland, beyond the imams’ positions of influence with the U.S. Islamic community. The mission was sponsored by Germany’s Konrad Adenauer Foundation and New Jersey’s Center for Interreligious Understanding.

“People can transform,” Breger said. The participants, “overwhelmed at the reality of the Holocaust,” were particularly affected by meetings with Holocaust survivors, he said.

In an interview with The Jewish Week, Imam Qadhi, who denied the Holocaust a decade ago, said: “I learned an immense amount of historical and political facts. I said something [then] that I later realized was incorrect.

“One of the greatest lessons I learned at Auschwitz,” the imam continued, “was the need for us — all of us, Muslims, Jews, Christians and atheists — to make sure that we never dehumanize and stereotype another group of people.”

Imam Qadhi is applying this lesson now in Murfreesboro, Tenn., where he is on the staff of a new Islamic center that is meeting public opposition. “Unfortunately, many people remain misinformed about our faith,” he said, “and stereotype all Muslims as potential terrorists.”

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- New York Daniel Pipes Feisal Abdul Rauf interfaith dialog Islamic cultural center Khalil Gibran International Academy mosque Yasir Qadhi