Islam's future is more Isla

By Geneive Abdo

Muslims living in the West and those in the Islamic world are searching for a middle ground that fuses aspects of globalisation with the Islamic tradition

A small group of self-proclaimed secular Muslims from North America and elsewhere gathered in St Petersburg recently for what they billed as a new global movement to correct the assumed wrongs of Islam and call for an Islamic Reformation.

Across the state in Fort Lauderdale, Muslim leaders from the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), the Washington-based advocacy group whose members the "secular" Muslims claim are radicals, denounced any notion of a Reformation as another attempt by the West to impose its history and philosophy on the Islamic world.

The self-proclaimed secularists represent only a small minority of Muslims. The views among religious Muslims from CAIR more closely reflect the views of the majority, not only in the United States but worldwide. Yet Western media, governments and neoconservative pundits pay more attention to the secular minority.

The St Petersburg convention is but one example: It was carried live on Glenn Beck's conservative CNN show. Some of the organisers and speakers at the convention are well known thanks to the media spotlight: Irshad Manji, author of "The Trouble With Islam," and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the former Dutch parliamentarian and author of "Infidel," were but a few there claiming to have suffered personally at the hands of "radical" Islam. One participant, Wafa Sultan, declared on Glenn Beck's show that she doesn't "see any difference between radical Islam and regular Islam."

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Since the Sept 11 attacks, everyone from high-ranking officials in the Bush administration to the author Salman Rushdie has prescribed a preferred remedy for Islam: Reform the faith so it is imbued with Western values - the privatisation of religion, the flourishing of Western-style democracy - and rulers who are secular, not religious, Muslims. The problem with this prescription is that it is divorced from reality. It is built upon the principle that if Muslims are fed a steady diet of Western influence, they, too, will embrace modernity, secularism and everything else the West has to offer.

Consider the facts: Islamic revivalism has spread across the globe in the past 30 years from the Middle East to parts of Africa. In Egypt, it is hard to find a woman on the street who does not wear a headscarf. Islamic political groups and movements are on the rise - from Hezbollah in Lebanon, to Hamas in the Gaza Strip and West Bank, to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Even in the United States, more and more American Muslims, particularly the

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young, are embracing Islam and religious symbolism in ways their more secular, immigrant parents did not.

I travelled to Florida to serve as the keynote speaker at an annual convention hosted by CAIR. On my way to the event, I spoke with Imam Siraj Wahaj, a charismatic intellectual from the Masjid Al-Taqwa in Brooklyn who has thousands of followers here and abroad. His words summarised the aspirations of mainstream Muslims in the United States and around the globe: "What we need to do is borrow those attributes from the West that we admire and reject those that we don't. That is the wave of the future."

Already, signs support Imam Wahaj's words. Muslims living in the West and those in the Islamic world are searching for this middle ground – one that fuses aspects of globalisation with the Islamic tradition. For example, Muslim women have far greater access to higher education today than ever before. In Iran, there are more women than men in universities, a first in the country's history. But as increasing numbers of Muslim women become more educated, majorities are becoming more religious while also taking part in what are called Islamic feminist movements, which stretch from Egypt to Turkey and Morocco.

These women, who often wear headscarves to express their religiosity, have found this gray area between modernity and traditionalism. They are fighting for more rights to participate in politics and greater equality in "personal status" laws – the right to gain custody of children or to initiate divorce – but also view Islam as their moral compass.

Similarly, the political future of the Arab world is likely to consist of Islamic parties that are far less tolerant of what has historically been the US foreign policy agenda in the region and that domestically are far more committed to implementing shariah law in varying degrees.

In Europe and the United States, where Muslims have maximum exposure to Western culture, they are increasingly embracing Islamic values. In Britain, a growing number of Muslims advocate creating a court system based upon Islamic principles.

What all this means is that Western hopes for full integration by Muslims in the West are unlikely to be realised and that the future of the Islamic world will be much more Islamic than Western.

Instead of championing the loud voices of the secular minority who are capturing media attention with their conferences, manifestos and memoirs, the United States would be wise instead to pay more attention to the far less loquacious majority. COURTESY THE WASHINGTON POST

The writer is the author of Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America After 9/11

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