Islam to extremes

Two views -- one measured, one simplistic -- attempt to explain Muslims' hatred

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They Must Be Stopped
Why We Must Defeat Radical Islam and How We Can Do It
by Brigitte Gabriel
St. Martin's Press/ 240 pages/ $24.95

Against Us The New Face of America's Enemies in the Muslim World
by Jim Sciutto
Harmony Books/288 pages/$24.95

On Sept. 20, 2001, in an address to a joint session of Congress, President Bush assured Muslims that Americans respect their religion: "Its teachings are good and peaceful, and those who commit evil in the name of Allah blaspheme in the name of Allah." Traitors to their own faith, terrorists "practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics."

The president has often added that the "war on terror" is a political and ideological struggle, pitting "evil-doers" who despise democracy against "those of us who love freedom and human rights and human dignity."

Many Americans, however, aren't all that sure why "they" hate us. As these two books indicate, fundamental disagreements about the root causes of terrorism help explain the failure to formulate an effective response to the enemies of the United States in the Muslim world.

In They Must Be Stopped, Brigitte Gabriel, a Lebanese Christian who immigrated to the United States in 1989 and founded the antiterrorist lobby ACT! for America after Sept. 11, maintains that core principles of Islam are behind the "jihadist" crusade to subjugate "infidels" throughout the world. Suicide bombers (whose cult has become "virtually universal in the Muslim world"), she insists, are not motivated by Israeli aggression, the occupation of Iraq or the presence of U.S. troops on Arab soil - but by the special status accorded to martyrs in the next world. In the fight against global terror, Muslim
moderates are "irrelevant." Religious fanatics cannot be appeased or deterred. Americans should not give enemy combatants rights of due process or protect the free speech of Isamo-fascists. Even if "direct ties to terrorists" of Muslim organizations cannot be proved, groups seeking to promote the political ideology of Islam should be stripped of their nonprofit status.

They Must Be Stopped is simplistic and shrill. Gabriel makes the bizarre claim that President Jimmy Carter "instituted a campaign" to depose the Shah of Iran. She asserts that third-generation Muslim radicals are "overtaking Western Europe" with "riots, rape, murder, beatings and burnings." She contends that "sensitive positions" at the Pentagon are now filled with "Muslims about whose background and loyalty we know nothing."

And she declares that when corporations provide foot-washing basins, Starbucks sells a frappuccino flavored with dates and the FBI schedules sensitivity training sessions for agents, our politically correct culture aids and abets the enemy and "escalates into crisis."

Nor does Gabriel make a convincing case that Islam - and not a radical reading of it - "has created and unleashed an uncontrollable wave of hatred and rage on the world." She rips quotations from the Quran out of context, with no acknowledgment of less-violent or nonviolent passages, traditions or interpretations. Moderate Muslims, Gabriel proclaims, libelously, "are not religious enough" to prevail in debates with radicals, "who back their statements with 'facts' from the holy book."

In Against Us, Jim Sciutto, the senior foreign correspondent for ABC News, recognizes, as Gabriel does not, that political realities in the Middle East have an enormous impact on the recruitment of anti-American terrorists. After all, the Quran has been around for centuries and hasn't always spawned violence. "Not purely or even principally religious," Sciutto argues, Islamic extremism "is the protest movement of choice for a generation of young Muslims" aching to put their anger to work in a just cause, which promises results and rewards.

Through profiles of al-Qaeda terrorists, college students in Jordan, a Saudi electrician and pro-democracy activists in Iran and Egypt, Sciutto tracks the surge of alienation on the Arab streets. With the American occupation of Iraq and the revelations of abuse at Abu Ghraib, these young men and women, not all of them religious, began to see American foreign policy as "state-sponsored terrorism," designed by Israel and the United States to destroy "resistance" movements such as like Hezbollah and Hamas. Radical Islam provided a language - and a coherent rationale - for the struggle against colonialism, capitalism, modernity and authoritarian regimes in the Middle East.

Sciutto recognizes that "the deep, deep hole" in which America finds itself "is not entirely of our own making." And Against Us may well underestimate the power of Islamic fundamentalism to take on a life of its own for individuals and groups. But Sciutto is surely right that neither a religious war, a militarized foreign policy, nor half-hearted nation-building will not turn "the tide of hate" or stop suicide bombers from strapping explosives to their waists. The United States must continue to fight "the war on terror" and, at the same time, move beyond it to "judge with justice."

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