



RAMIN TALAIE

THE WAR WITHIN ISLAM

**REZA ASLAN ON HOW THE U.S.
FAILS TO UNDERSTAND
THE MUSLIM WORLD**

ARNIE COOPER



On a recent Saturday morning at the 18th Street Coffee House in Santa Monica, California, I shared a table with author Reza Aslan. A strikingly handsome thirty-four-year-old dressed in a T-shirt emblazoned with Chinese characters, jeans, and sandals and sporting a couple of days' stubble, he did not fit the stereotype of an Islamic scholar. But then, he'd contemplated the Koran at Harvard University, where he'd earned a master's degree in theological studies. We spoke two days shy of the fifth anniversary of the September 11 attacks, which Aslan believes were carried out "to goad the United States into an exaggerated retaliation against the Islamic world so as to mobilize Muslims to, in the words of George W. Bush, 'choose sides.'"

Aslan's first book, *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (Random House), proposes that Islam is nearing the end of a century-long period of reformation. An argument is taking place within the Muslim world, he says, over who has the authority to define the faith: the institution or the individual. In this conflict, he writes, "the West is merely a bystander — an unwary yet complicit casualty."

Aslan grew up in Iran, and he and his family were among the many middle-class Iranians who escaped to the West before Ayatollah Khomeini installed an Islamic government in 1980. Seven years old at the time, Aslan watched as the bullying customs officials at the Tehran airport confiscated his father's watch and his mother's jewelry. After a brief stay in London, the family settled in Enid, Oklahoma. Aslan's father had done a semester abroad at Oklahoma State University. ("I think he thought that Oklahoma was America," Aslan says, "and he was probably right.") They spent the next six months holed up in a motel room, where Aslan and his four-year-old sister watched television and learned about American culture from *Bugs Bunny*, *The Flintstones*, and *CHiPS*, a police drama about the California Highway Patrol. ("For a long while I was scared to death of driving on American highways because I assumed that cars just exploded and flipped over all the time.") Eventually the family drove west to California.

Because of his father's hatred for anything Islamic, Aslan was denied much awareness of his Muslim heritage, but the boy had a thirst for knowledge about religion and God. In high school he attended a Christian camp with some friends, and afterward he converted to Evangelical Christianity. Aslan sought to learn everything he could about his new faith, and ended up learning too much for the liking of his church mentors: when he pointed out that the Bible says nothing about premarital sex



REZA ASLAN

being a sin, they laid their hands on him and prayed for his salvation.

Disillusioned, Aslan pursued his interest in writing fiction at Santa Clara University, a Jesuit school that requires students to take religion classes. The Jesuits' willingness to debate Scripture renewed Aslan's curiosity about Christianity, and he threw himself into Catholicism, getting his undergraduate degree in religion. He was about to embark on a doctoral program in biblical studies at Harvard when his advisor encouraged him to study Islam instead, saying, "No one's going

to give a damn about the 112th person this year who graduates with a PhD in biblical studies." Aslan considers the advice the best he's ever been given. He spent the next two years constructing his own course of study, as there was no Islamic program at Harvard's divinity school at the time. All the fervor he'd had for Christian traditions came out again, only now it wasn't a conversion experience; it was, he says, a "reconversion experience." Aslan applied Christian methods of biblical analysis to Koranic studies, and he now believes this has helped him explain Islam to non-Muslims. "I talk about Islam and the Koran the way most Americans think about Christianity and the Bible."

Aslan never abandoned his interest in fiction, and in 1999 he attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop and also served as visiting professor of Islamic studies at the University of Iowa. After September 11, 2001, enrollment in the class he taught went from 37 to 289. As Iowa's leading expert on Islam, he began touring the state and caught the attention of the national media. He was inspired to work on a book to help Westerners understand Islam. *No god but God* became a bestseller and led to appearances on NPR's *All Things Considered*, NBC's *Meet the Press*, and ABC's *Nightline*.

Aslan has written for the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Nation*. Samples of his writing can be found at www.rezaaslan.com. He is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of California, but has set aside his studies to focus on his next two books: a historical novel that follows a caravan from the Arabian Peninsula to India, and another nonfiction book outlining his theories about the Islamic reformation.

Fueling Aslan's success, no doubt, is his ability to speak extemporaneously about the complexities of Islamic faith — all with charm and a sense of humor. As Islam struggles to define itself in the twenty-first century, who better to chronicle the outcome?

We've made it easier for jihadist propagandists to convince the Muslim world that this is a war against Islamic values. . . . You want to know why we're losing the war on terror? Because they have the better marketing campaign.

Cooper: You say we're witnessing an Islamic reformation. What are the signs of this?

Aslan: When we hear the word *reformation* in this country, we tend to think of the Christian Reformation, which led to the creation of the Protestant denominations in the sixteenth century. But all the great religions have undergone reformations at some point in their history. Ultimately any reformation is about who has the authority to define the faith: the institution or the individual. When this debate reaches a boiling point, the institutions begin to break down into different sects.

This is taking place right now within the Muslim world, and has been for about a century. It began with the geopolitical fragmentation of the Muslim world due to colonialism. In the United States we think of colonialism as ancient history, but we're talking about an era that came to an end a little more than fifty years ago and that at one point engulfed 90 percent of the world's Muslims. It continues to have a profound effect on the Muslim psyche.

One of the results of colonialism was that Muslims were forced to regard themselves less as members of a worldwide community of faith and more as individual citizens of nation-states whose borders had often been drawn up by outside forces. The false sense of nationality this created caused an identity crisis for many Muslims. Individualism began to take over what had once been the quintessential communal faith, with both good and bad results. Toward the end of the twentieth century came the rise of globalization and a corresponding rise in literacy and education in the Muslim world. The Internet brought widespread access to new theories, ideas, and sources of knowledge. (During the Christian Reformation, the printing press had played the same role.)

Now we're at a point where the traditional institutions of Islam have become marginalized — and I say "institutions," plural, because Islam has never had a single, Vatican-like authority. For fourteen centuries these traditional institutions and schools of law maintained a total monopoly over the meaning and message of Islam. No one could interpret Islamic law or make any authoritative judgments on the Koran

except them. Now people are reading the Koran in their own languages; women are reading and interpreting the Koran for the first time. Twenty years ago if you wanted a *fatwa* — a legal opinion on a particular Islamic law — you had no choice but to ask your local imam, whose word was final. Now you can go to fatwaonline.com, islamonline.net, or sistani.org and access an archive of rulings on every imaginable subject, with half a dozen different opinions on each. Because Islam does not have a single, centralized institution that says which *fatwa* is right and which is wrong, it's up to you. This has created a real crisis, because the old way of doing things ensured stability. Now it's all up for grabs, and the extremists want as much authority as they can get.

We have this idea in the U.S. that we're the primary target of the jihadists, but we're not. They call us the "far enemy." The primary target is the older Islamic institutions. If you want proof, all you have to do is read Osama bin Laden's writings, which have been translated into English in a wonderful book by Bruce Lawrence called *Messages to the World*.

Cooper: Why do you think U.S. media reports portray us as the jihadists' main enemy?

Aslan: First off, we have to remember that the primary purpose of the media in this country is to sell products, and what sells is sex and violence and fear. It's not that the media are purposely ignoring the moderate majority of Muslims; it's that, given a choice between reporting on a conference of Islamic scholars who are fashioning a *fatwa* against the use of violence in the name of Islam, and reporting on the public beheading of an innocent American — well, tell me which one you'd cover.

I think there is a more conscious coverup, however, on the part of our political leadership. The new buzzword is *Islamofascism*, which comes from bin Laden's stated goal to create a "worldwide caliphate," an Islamic empire that will sweep away the existing governments of the Muslim world and then come after the West. Now, it's true that this is his goal. But world peace is my goal; that doesn't mean I have a chance of achieving it. By bin Laden's own admission, al-Qaeda will never reestablish the caliphate. A few years ago the majority of Muslims in the world didn't even know what the caliphate was, let alone want it to come back. But when the president of the United States of America, the most powerful man on earth, announced that he was afraid bin Laden could re-create the caliphate, it gave an air of legitimacy to this absurd idea. It emboldened these jihadists and put them in a position of leadership in the Muslim world that they would never have had otherwise. For Bush, talking about the caliphate may have been a good strategy for getting reelected, but it is a terrible strategy for winning this "war on terror" that we're supposed to be fighting.

Cooper: You started writing your book after September 11, and now we're just two days away from the fifth anniversary.

Aslan: Five years later, and we're still asking, "Why did they attack us?" That question has been answered a hundred times over by the jihadists. In their own words they have said that the purpose of the attacks of September 11 was to goad the United States into an exaggerated retaliation against the

Muslim world. Then they could frame the U.S. military response as a “war against Islam.” The irony is that it didn’t work at first. The war in Afghanistan had almost unanimous support in the Arab and Muslim worlds, even from some of the U.S.’s staunchest enemies. In one Muslim country, immediately after September 11, hundreds of thousands of people poured into the streets, lit candles, and prayed in an exuberant display of compassion for the U.S. That country was Iran. So even our enemies were supporting us. Bin Laden’s plan hadn’t worked. Then, as we all know, we turned around and attacked Iraq, and what bin Laden had hoped the war in Afghanistan would become, the war in Iraq became.

So in many ways we walked right into his trap. With our foreign-policy positions and the way we’ve conducted ourselves in Iraq and the rhetoric that has come out of this White House, we’ve made it easier for jihadist propagandists to convince the Muslim world that this is a war against Islamic values, traditions, and ideals, and to rally them to the cause of al-Qaeda and jihadism, because they’re the only ones standing up for Muslims. Their plan is working brilliantly. You want to know why we’re losing the war on terror? Because they have the better marketing campaign.

Two days ago the president lumped Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and al-Qaeda together. These four entities have almost nothing in common. Hezbollah has issued death warrants against bin Laden. Hamas has issued *fatwas* condemning him and the

attacks of September 11. Both these groups want absolutely nothing to do with the global jihadist movement. The only thing they all have in common, besides the use of terror as a tactic, is their Islamic identity, which the president has used to lump them together so that the American people can perceive them as one enemy.

Cooper: In your book you object to the phrase “clash of civilizations,” which is often used to describe the conflicts between the West and Islam. You suggest that “clash of monotheisms” would be more accurate.

Aslan: I coined the phrase “clash of monotheisms” because a clash between Islam and the West would be a conflict between a religion and a geographical location, and that’s ridiculous. Also the fact that we have millions of Muslims in the U.S. who are well integrated into society indicates that this is a mistaken way of thinking.

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Louisiana National Guard unit preparing to provide security at the polls in Iraq on election day 2005.



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