

SAM HARRIS

THE BLOG

Lifting the Veil of “Islamophobia”

A Conversation with Ayaan Hirsi Ali

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(Photo via Getty Images)

Ayaan Hirsi Ali was born in Mogadishu in 1969. The daughter of a political opponent of the Somali dictatorship, she lived in exile, moving from Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia and then to Kenya. Like 98 percent of Somali girls, Ayaan was subjected to female genital mutilation. She embraced Islam while she was growing up, but eventually began to question aspects of the faith. One day, while listening to a sermon about the many ways in which women must be obedient to their husbands, she

couldn't resist asking, "Must our husbands obey us too?"

In 1992, Ayaan was married off by her father to a distant cousin living in Canada. In order to escape this forced marriage, she fled to the Netherlands where she was granted asylum and then citizenship. In her first years in Holland she worked in factories and as a maid—but she quickly learned Dutch and was then able to study at the University of Leiden. She soon began working as a translator for Somali immigrants, where she witnessed firsthand the clash between liberal Western values and those of Islamic culture.

After earning her M.A. in political science, Ayaan began working as a researcher for the Wiardi Beckman Foundation in Amsterdam. She eventually served as an elected member of the Dutch parliament from 2003 to 2006. While in parliament, she focused on furthering the integration of non-Western immigrants into Dutch society and on defending the rights of Muslim women. She campaigned to raise awareness about violence against women, including honor killings and female genital mutilation—practices that had followed Muslim immigrants to Holland. In her three years in government, she found her voice as an advocate for an “enlightened Islam.”

In 2004, Ayaan gained international attention following the murder of Theo van Gogh, who had directed her short film, *Submission*, depicting the oppression of women under Islam. The assassin, a radical Muslim, left a death threat for Ayaan pinned to Van Gogh's chest.

In 2006, Ayaan was forced to resign from parliament when the Dutch minister for immigration revoked her citizenship, arguing that she had misled the authorities at the time of her asylum application. However, the Dutch courts later reversed this decision, leading to the fall of the administration. Disillusioned with the Netherlands, Ayaan then moved to the United States.

Ayaan is a fellow with the Future of Diplomacy Project at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard Kennedy School. She is also a visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, currently researching the relationship between the West and Islam. Her willingness to speak out for the rights of women, along with her abandonment of the Muslim faith, continue to make her a target for violence by Islamic extremists. She lives with round-the-clock security.

In 2005, Ayaan was named one of *TIME* magazine's “100 Most Influential People,” one of the *Glamour* Heroes, and *Reader's Digest's* European of the Year. She is the author of *The Caged Virgin*, *Infidel*, and *Nomad*. She is now working on *Short-cut to Enlightenment*, a dialogue between Mohammed, the founder of Islam, and three of her favorite Western thinkers: John Stuart Mill, Karl Popper, and Friedrich Hayek.

A few weeks ago, Ayaan and I had a long conversation about her critics and about the increasingly pernicious meme of “Islamophobia”—which our inimitable friend Christopher Hitchens once dubbed “a word created by fascists, and used by cowards, to manipulate morons.” [NOTE 5/11/14: This wonderful sentence seems to have been wrongly attributed to Hitch (who was imitable after all). I'm told these words first appeared in [a tweet](#) from Andrew Cummins. Well done, Andrew!]

The following text is an edited transcript of our conversation.

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Harris: Ayaan, it's great to speak with you. This conversation is obviously timely, given recent events. Unfortunately, a conversation about Islam is now always timely—and, I fear, will remain so for the rest of our lives.

We happen to be speaking just after the first anniversary of the Boston Marathon bombing. The Islamic militant group Boko Haram has also been targeting innocent civilians in Nigeria—even going so far as to [massacre schoolboys](#) and [kidnap schoolgirls](#). Needless to say, their justification for this barbarity is explicitly religious. There have also been atrocities carried out by jihadists in several other countries in recent weeks, notably in Iraq and Pakistan. So that is the context in which we are having this conversation.

Hirsi Ali: One just needs to open the newspaper on any given morning. It's that crazy.

Harris: I know, and it has been this way for years. Of course, most of this suffering is visited on Muslims themselves, and on their neighbors in the developing world. In the West, we tend to focus on the threat that Islamic terrorism poses to our own societies. But as galling as that is, radical Islam currently causes much more suffering elsewhere, in the form of sectarian violence, the repression of women, and the suppression of free thought in dozens of countries that can ill afford to stifle so much of their populations—mired as they are in economic and political conditions akin to what Europe and America left behind 150 years ago. For reasons that are not especially mysterious, the House of Islam remains the most ramshackle house on the street.

There are two main issues I want us to tackle in this conversation. First, I'd like to talk about the way you've been treated by your critics. Second, I'd like us to address the issue of "Islamophobia"—which has become the catchall criticism applied to anyone who is more worried about Islam than, say, Mormonism.

Increasingly, questioning Islam results in a person's being vilified as an "Islamophobe" and a "bigot"—or, in a ridiculous but omnipresent misuse of the term, as a "racist." These charges come from Muslims themselves and from their apologists on the Left. Even major news sites, such as *The Guardian* and *Salon*, frequently publish these attacks.

Let's begin with your experience as a public figure. There are certain aspects of your journey about which you are repeatedly and unfairly attacked. I'd like to address three of them in particular. The first relates to a comment you once made in a talk about Anders Behring Breivik, the lunatic who massacred nearly a hundred young people in Norway. The second relates to your immigration interview in the Netherlands. The third is your affiliation with the American Enterprise Institute.

The reason why I think it's important to deal with these personal attacks—apart from your being a dear friend—is that you are also an incredibly valuable symbol. Unlike almost any other person on earth, you have fully recapitulated the Enlightenment in your own life. You went from being a devout Muslim standing barefoot in a village in Somalia to being a secular Member of Parliament in the Netherlands in a few short years. It's astonishing to me what you managed to accomplish and the speed with which you accomplished it. If I had been obliged to follow in your footsteps, I'd still be struggling to learn Dutch.

I also find it very depressing, and rather ominous, that liberal women are not celebrating you as the best example in a generation of what could and should happen for nearly a billion of their sisters currently living under Islam. Your lack of feminist allies is alarming. And the fact that so many liberals ditch their commitment to gender equality and *attack* you in

the name of “religious sensitivity,” despite all that you’ve been through—making your life both less pleasant and more dangerous in the process—is just infuriating.

Hirsi Ali: Thank you, Sam. I’m very happy to talk to you. Well, on the topic of Breivik, it goes without saying that I was horrified by his actions. He is one of the worst mass murderers in history, and there’s no question about that. Like most people, I had never heard of him before he went on his killing spree. However, he did write a thousand-page manifesto in which he quoted John Stuart Mill and other thinkers, and even me. Trying to use other people to justify your own actions is not unusual in mass murderers. Osama bin Laden quoted Noam Chomsky with approval. Does that make Chomsky in any way culpable for the behavior of bin Laden? Of course not. Just as no one quoted by Breivik is responsible for him.

In any case, I gave a speech at an award ceremony in Berlin, in the spring of 2012, on the shortcomings of policies based on the theory of “multiculturalism,” and I said that Breivik was one deeply unfortunate product of these policies, as are the rising number of European jihadis. They are unintended products, to be sure, because multiculturalism is all about good intentions. But an analysis of Breivik’s writing and testimony shows that he complains bitterly of seeing no way to engage in politics other than to use violence. I also said that I have come across many other people who complained in this way. Instead of violence, for now, these people preach apathy, distrust of the system, and “white flight.” But it is all too easy to see the progression from this type of thinking to violence, and that is a very dangerous place for society to be. Sadly, in extreme cases, until something changes, I think we should expect more violence.

My remarks in Berlin were a plea to lift the iron curtain of political correctness so that citizens can engage in politics through peaceful means and debate, and thus channel their frustrations with immigration and Islam through the system. This is elementary political science—but, of course, Islamists and their friends on the Left have twisted my words to make me sound like I was applauding an atrocity. Multiculturalist policies and political correctness make it easier for radical Muslims to preach, inspire, mobilize, and target immigrant communities on the grounds of religious freedom. And those who criticize them in Europe are silenced or branded as racist Islamophobes. In the long run, you get more jihadist ghettos and intolerant right-wing enclaves. That is the tragic outcome of decades of policies that had good intentions in theory, but in reality have instead cemented divisions between groups and bred too much insularity and mistrust. We cannot be so afraid of causing verbal offense that we lose the ability to have open debate—because that debate will still be had, but by less peaceful means.

Harris: The unfair treatment you’ve received on this point illustrates the terrible irony of Breivik’s existence: He was obsessed with the problem of Islam in Europe, but his psychopathic behavior has made that problem much more difficult to speak about. The man has been a gift to jihadists and Islamists everywhere.

Let’s talk about the misconceptions surrounding your asylum in the Netherlands.

Hirsi Ali: When I arrived in the Netherlands, in 1992, I misrepresented the year of my birth at my intake interview. I said I was born in 1967, but I was born in 1969. I also changed my grandfather’s name. In many tribal societies, instead of a surname you have a string of names—I am Ayaan; my father is Hirsi; and my father’s father, when he was born, was named Ali. But later on, when he grew up and became a warrior, he was called Magan (Somali for “protection” or “refuge”), because he protected some of the peoples whom he conquered. Magan is, basically, a nickname that he acquired later in life. Technically, I did not lie about Ali, because that was also his name. I used it deliberately, because I figured that if I could get this intake interview, then my father or the man he married me off to could come and say that they were looking for Ayaan Hirsi Magan, born November 13, 1969, and they would find me very easily. I wanted to prevent that, so I called

myself Ayaan Hirsi Ali and changed my birth year to 1967. I was trying to cover my trail just enough that I wouldn't have the fear of being immediately found. I had never before lived in a system where there were any protections put in place for me.

Harris: So you did this because you were afraid that someone would come to the Netherlands for the purpose of harming you?

Hirsi Ali: Oh, yes. Absolutely. I was terrified that either my father or some of our clansmen—or the man whom I had been married off to—would come looking for me and find me. And they did come! My ex-husband was accompanied by three other men when he showed up at the asylum center where I was. But by then I had been in the country for something like four to six months, and even in that very, very short period, I came to understand that I had rights.

On the day that they showed up, I went to the reception center and confessed everything to one of the people working there. Her name was Sylvia, and she said, “You don't have to go with him if you don't want to. You're over the age of 18. In fact, here in the Netherlands, your marriage isn't even recognized, because he is Canadian and the marriage took place somewhere else. So we will just protect you. I'll simply call the police.” It was in this period that I found my independence. I had been able to live on my own for months, so I thought I could live on my own for longer.

I don't know whether things have since changed, but back then, if you asked for asylum, a member of the legal-aid community was referred to your case to prepare you for your interview. I told my legal-aid lawyer about my forced marriage, and she said that it was not sufficient grounds for asylum and that I would have to come up with something else. So, based on the information she gave me, I adapted my story.

In 1992, the civil war in Somalia was at one of its worst points, and most European governments were giving asylum to Somalis. In fact, it was almost enough to just say that you were Somali. So, during my interview, instead of talking about my forced marriage, or about living in Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and Kenya, I just pretended I came straight from Somalia, and that I was fleeing the civil war.

Then, in 2002, the VVD, the liberal party, asked me to enter Parliament to help work on human rights issues related to Muslim immigrants—and I said yes. As a party, they give an in-depth interview to all potential MPs to determine whether there is anything in a person's background that could produce a scandal. I was very honest with them and told them everything. The party leaders consulted lawyers to find out how problematic the details of my immigration might be, and the lawyers said, “Oh, no, voters will be far more interested in the fact that she has adapted so well to our society. No one will care about this white lie.”

So, when it became possible to tell the truth, I told the truth. Back in 2002, I was no longer afraid. I had found my way. I felt strong. I had a network of friends. So there was no need to keep up the lie. And since that time, I have given hundreds of interviews in which I have openly told the truth—that I had lived in other countries after Somalia and that I came to Holland fleeing a forced marriage.

The scandal arose only when the Minister of Immigration and Integration used what I had said in my original asylum interview as a political tool to take away my citizenship. The government forced her to give it back to me, and that's what led to a political crisis. When she gave me back my citizenship, a member of a smaller coalition demanded that the minister resign, and threatened to pull out of the government. This coalition did pull out, and the government fell. That's how that

part of my life became a news story.

Harris: Clearly, you told the immigration officials what they needed to hear to ensure your own safety. You were fleeing people who scared you for reasons that are completely understandable. I don't see how any serious person can hold this against you.

Hirsi Ali: They're not holding it against me. It's just an instrument. For a vilification campaign to be effective, you need material, and that's one of the things they use. If she wasn't always completely honest, then her statements about Islam must be a lie, too.

Harris: As though the claims you make about Islam are difficult to confirm. I sometimes think that it would be great, as an act of performance art, for you to come forward and say, "You caught me! I've been lying about Islam. Women have full equality with men under its doctrines—and there's no problem for apostates or blasphemers either!"

Hirsi Ali: Yes—and honor killings, denying girls an education, denying women the right to leave their homes without permission from a male relative, performing marriages on girls as young as age 9, the continued practice of female genital mutilation for "purity," the stoning of homosexuals, those are all just coincidences.

Harris: The last personal issue I want to address is your affiliation with the American Enterprise Institute. Tell me how you came to work at the AEI and why that made sense for you.

Hirsi Ali: Back in 2005, I already knew that I did not want a second term in the Dutch parliament. In my first term, I promised to address the issues of women's rights and the integration of Muslims into Dutch society, and I felt that going back for a second term wouldn't add much to what I had done already. In the Dutch system, you address a certain issue in one term and then you move to another issue in the next. But I didn't want to move on to other issues. And I didn't want a career in politics.

So I reached out to Cynthia Schneider, who had served under President Bill Clinton as ambassador to the Netherlands. I told her that I was going to be in New York, working on a book, and asked if she could introduce me to various think tanks, because I wanted to get back into academia. I also wanted to have a life, because in 2004 and 2005, the level of security that the Dutch government had me under was like living in a prison. It was also accompanied by considerable notoriety. I had paparazzi following me, and I couldn't walk outside without being recognized. Holland is a very small country. I wanted a quiet life in academia, and I wanted to be safe.

So I approached Cynthia, and she took me to the Brookings Institute, and to Rand, and to Johns Hopkins, and to Georgetown—she took me to all these institutions, and there was no interest. They didn't say it to my face, but I got the feeling that they were uncomfortable with what I had been saying about Islam.

Then, on the last day, just before I left the country, Cynthia suggested that we try the AEI. And I said something like "I can't believe you'd take me there. It's supposed to be a right-wing organization." And she said, "Oh, come on. You Dutch people are too prejudiced against the U.S. Things here are really very different than you think. I was a Clinton appointee, and one of my best friends—one of Clinton's best friends—Norm Ornstein, is there. So it's not what you think it is. And it's definitely not religious."

So we went to the AEI, and I met with Norm Ornstein and a woman named Colleen Baughman, and they were so enthusiastic. They immediately introduced me to their president, who suggested that we talk again in a month. And we just kept talking. I spoke about my work; they told me about what they do. And I didn't hear back from any of the other institutions that I had solicited.

Harris: So the truly mortifying answer to the question of why you are at the AEI is that no liberal institution would offer you shelter when you most needed it—and when your value to the global conversation about free speech, the rights of women, and other norms of civilization was crystal clear. And ever since, your affiliation with the one institution that *did* take you in has been used to defame you in liberal circles. Perfect.

Hirsi Ali: Well, it certainly seemed at the time that none of the other institutions were willing to talk about Islam in the way that I do—and specifically about its treatment of women.

Harris: And they still won't. I consider this one of the great moral scandals of our time. How you've been treated reminds me of what many liberals did during the Salman Rushdie affair, blaming him for his recklessness in the face of the hair-trigger sensitivities of the Muslim community.

I'm a liberal by nearly every measure. Give me a list of liberal values and prejudices, and I will check almost every box.

Hirsi Ali: So will I.

Harris: But because of your association with the AEI, many people don't know this about you. I remember what it was like when the Dutch government withdrew your security detail, and your friends—among whom I was very proud to count myself—were faced with the task of raising money to pay for your security. Without the AEI's help at that moment, it would have been an even scarier time than it was. So the fact that liberals hold this affiliation against you is just shameful.

Hirsi Ali: I find it sad. And you should know that during all my interviews with the AEI and my subsequent years there, they've always understood that I'm a liberal. No one within the organization has tried to change my mind about anything—not about Islam, or euthanasia, or abortion, or religion, or gay rights, or any of the other things that many of my colleagues have problems with. They've never opposed my atheism or confronted me with anything I have said in public. It's a wonderful institution.

Harris: As a relevant counterpoint, I should say that when I was raising money for your security, I got in touch with some of my contacts in the “moderate” Muslim community. In particular, I reached out to Reza Aslan, with whom I was on entirely cordial terms. I said, essentially, “Reza, wouldn't it be great if the vast majority of Muslims who are moderate helped protect Ayaan from the minority who aren't?” It seems to me undeniable that if people like Reza are going to argue that Islam is just like any other religion, they have a real interest in ensuring that people can safely criticize their faith—or even leave it.

But all Reza did was attack you as a bigot and deny, against all evidence, that you had any security concerns worth taking seriously. His response came as quite a shock to me, frankly. I was unprepared to encounter this level of moral blindness and ill will, especially at a moment when I was reaching out for help.

Hirsi Ali: Here's the thing, Sam. Some moderate Muslims hate me—and yes, that's a strong word, but I think what they've

said supports it—because I make them feel uncomfortable. The things I talk about put them in a state of dissonance that they can't live with. Many of them seem to hate me more than they hate al-Qaida.

Harris: Let's explore why that might be the case, and turn to the subject of Islam in general. I doubt there is any daylight between us on this topic, but let's go into it in some detail.

Hirsi Ali: When I read the work of my critics, whether it's a blog or an article or a full book, they introduce me as a "controversial figure." I've been trying to wrap my head around what I say, exactly, that makes me controversial.

Consider my views about the treatment of women under Islam. Where is the controversy? Can anyone argue that women are treated well in traditional Muslim societies? Under Islam, every woman is a second-class citizen. She can inherit only half as much as her brother. Her testimony in court—say, in the case of her own rape—is worth half that of her rapist. A Muslim woman has to ask a male guardian for permission to get married or have a child—in some places to even leave the house. And all these various oppressions are justified using the core texts of Islam: the Koran and the *hadith*. I'm amazed by the accusation that something I've said on this topic is controversial. It's simply horrible to treat women like this. Is that a controversial thing to say? Is it controversial to say that men and women should be equal? I would have thought this was the most boring statement a person could make.

Harris: It certainly should be. That's what is so crazy about this Islamophobia charge. The people who commit the worse offenses—the honor killers, the suicide bombers, the Taliban gunman who attempted to murder Malala Yousafzai—are absolutely clear about their motives and articulate them at every opportunity. They are motivated by Islam. Yes, other religions have problematic doctrines. We can even concede that the Old Testament is the most barbaric scripture of them all. But Christians and Jews don't tend to take the worst of its passages seriously, for reasons that can be explained both by the centuries during which these Western faiths have been weathered by science and secularism and by crucial elements of their own theology. Most important, in my view, is the fact that Christianity and Judaism do not have clear doctrines of jihad, nor do they promise, *ad nauseam*, that martyrs go straight to Paradise. Islam is truly unique in this respect, which helps explain the fanaticism and violence we see throughout the Muslim world. Of course, your focus has been on the plight of women and girls under Islam, many millions of whom live in conditions that are antithetical to the most basic human happiness, as you know all too well. And the rationale for their oppression is drawn directly from scripture.

Hirsi Ali: Absolutely. And when I expose these oppressions, along with their cultural and religious underpinnings in Islam, I'm not doing it just to annoy people. I'm working in the hope that debating and discussing these issues is going to lead to some form of positive change. Even for the people who disagree with me—even for those who call me naïve or stupid—I remain hopeful that their thinking around these issues will change. Clearly, I'm not doing this work for the fun of it. I take absolutely no pleasure in talking about Islam at all.

In the Netherlands, where the debate was a little more intense because I was in Parliament, at some point my critics shifted from discussing the substance of these issues to "It's not what you say, but how you say it. We agree, Ayaan, there's this problem with treatment of women under Islam, but we just don't like how you say it." So we would get into these absurd conversations where I would say, "Okay. How exactly do you want me to say it?"

How can you say these things in a way that is inoffensive to the very people who think that women are second-class citizens? There is just no way. I am surprised sometimes that we cannot find more common ground. Liberals notice these

same oppressions, but they attribute them solely to economics or politics.

Harris: That's a point I really wanted us to cover. Most liberals think that religion is never the true source of a person's bad behavior. Even when jihadists explicitly state their religious motivations—they believe that they have an obligation to kill apostates and blasphemers, and they want to get into Paradise—liberal academics, journalists, and politicians insist on looking for *deeper* reasons for their actions. However, when people give economic, political, or psychological reasons for doing whatever it is they do, everyone accepts those reasons at face value.

If a man murders his neighbor because he wants to steal his property and doesn't want to leave a witness, everyone accepts the killer's account of his actions. But when he says, as every jihadist does, that he was driven by a sense of religious obligation and a yearning for Paradise, liberals insist that the search for an underlying motive must continue. So the game is rigged. If you're always going to look beneath a person's religious convictions for something else, *of course* you'll never see that religion is an important driver of human behavior.

Hirsi Ali: And that's where it becomes truly painful. All these Western apologists, no matter where they are on the political spectrum—left, center, or right—are robbing Muslims of the opportunity to reflect. It is very, very difficult in Muslim households, communities, and countries to reflect on Islam. Such a process of introspection and self-criticism has led to the reformations we have seen in other religions—and it's being denied to Muslims by this focus on economics, politics, and all these other variables that are, in many cases, the *result* of Islamic doctrine. For instance, there is a very strong case to be made that the desperate economic situation in the Middle East is largely a product of religion.

Harris: You've pointed out similar ironies before. The very people who call us bigots are practicing a bigotry of low expectations with respect to the Muslim community. For instance, when those cartoons came out in Denmark, the message from liberal politicians was that Islam is a peaceful and noble religion that should be respected and that the West has callously overindulged its freedom of speech. Meanwhile, these same leaders were busily ramping up security or simply closing their embassies in anticipation of violence in dozens of countries. As you've pointed out, secular liberals are not holding the Muslim community to the same standards of civility and reasonableness that they demand of everyone else.

Hirsi Ali: Absolutely. And if we want the Muslim community in America to feel truly American, we have to apply the same standards to them that we apply to everyone else.

We criticize the Catholic Church for its treatment of women, for its sheltering of pedophiles, and for other harms it has caused. And we do this for the purpose of improving people's lives. But we're not doing this for the Muslim community. Meanwhile, there's this assumption that if you engage in satire, or even serious debate, Muslims will fly into a rage and commit acts of violence. It then becomes this perverse process whereby the people who imagine that they are protecting the feelings of Muslims are actually hurting the most vulnerable Muslims, who now don't have a voice; they are making it more dangerous for women especially to come forward and say, look, *sharia* law is being applied in parts of the U.S. These women have a much harder time than Mormons, Jews, and Christians do. In any of these other communities, if a woman summons the courage to leave her husband, or her faith, she will find the rest of America on her side. But Muslim women have no one to talk to. Even to address an incident of domestic violence as a policeman, for instance, is to risk being branded a racist. This is one of the problems that we address at the [AHA Foundation](#). We talk to pediatricians, policemen, and other service providers who worry about being perceived as bigots when responding to the obvious suffering of women and girls in the Muslim community. Naturally, these people would rather not be accused of what you and I are accused of all

the time. So they generally take a hands-off approach.

Harris: You've just exposed another painful irony here. When our critics insist on cultural or religious "sensitivity," imagining that they are protecting a vulnerable population, they are really protecting thuggish men who are oppressing women, spreading hate, and stifling freedom of thought within their own communities and freedom of expression everywhere else. Anyone who likens the criticism of Islam as a *doctrine* to a hatred of Muslims as *people*—or to anti-Semitism, racism, and other forms of bigotry—has made it more difficult for Muslims who are truly suffering to speak about their problems. It never ceases to amaze me that when one complains about Muslim theocrats abusing *Muslim* women and freethinkers, one inevitably gets accused of anti-Muslim bigotry.

It will probably seem tendentious to many readers for me to put it this way, but our critics are just dishonest. Which reminds me of something you said at the end of one of your public lectures: Someone was challenging you and insisting that Islam is no different from every other religion, and I think you said something like "If it's the same as every other religion, why do I have to walk around with armed bodyguards?"

Hirsi Ali: Yes, yes. I think that was at the Intelligence Squared debate with Douglas Murray, three years ago.

Harris: Those kinds of reversals are often hilarious, and they ought to flat out end the argument. When the journalist Glenn Greenwald attacked me as an Islamophobe, insisting that my concerns about Islam were both irrational and a symptom of my own bigotry and white privilege, I responded by challenging him on Twitter to a duel of cartoon contests. He could hold one for Islam, and I would hold one for any other religion on earth. That shut him up immediately.

This disparity between Islam and every other religion is *so* obvious, in fact, that it is somehow considered a low blow to point it out. However, it remains the case that only the Muslim community reliably threatens its critics with violence—not just in the Middle East, but everywhere. Having observed the risks and hassles you've had to endure because of this, I find liberal obscurantism on this point just maddening.

Hirsi Ali: There's also a sophisticated and well-financed radical Muslim lobby that is engaged on this front. These groups, including even so-called mainstream ones like CAIR, have found that people in the West are highly sensitive to accusations of racism. I'll give you a concrete example: A couple of years ago, in El Cajon, California, an Iraqi woman named Shaima Alawadi was beaten to death. Her own daughter found her dying in a pool of blood. Beside her body was a note that read, "You terrorists, go home." The interesting part of this case is that CAIR and other Muslim organizations pounced on it and started campaigning against Islamophobia and racism—explicitly linking it to the Trayvon Martin case. On the flimsy basis of this note, there were campaigns called "Hijabs and Hoodies." And they succeeded in marketing it as a hate crime. Weeks later, of course, the husband was arrested. And just yesterday he was convicted of murdering his wife. She had asked for a divorce, so he beat her to death with a tire iron. It was a plain honor killing.

This sort of thing happens in the U.S., and CAIR and these other organizations don't say a word about it. When they attack me, they sometimes concede that honor killings, female genital mutilation, and other acts of oppression are legitimate concerns—but somehow the most pressing issue is to silence people like me. And this is where they direct their energy and resources.

Harris: I have long considered CAIR to be an Islamist pressure group masquerading as a human rights organization. Is that too paranoid a description? The moment one says that a person or group is pretending to be one thing while trying to

advance an Islamist agenda by stealth, one begins to sound like a right-wing crackpot. What do you think is true in the case of CAIR?

Hirsi Ali: Again, reasonable people need only look at the evidence. CAIR and these other organizations have mission statements, and these statements make it very clear that their agenda is to spread Islam. Initially, CAIR was collecting money for Hamas, and they were exposed for this during the Holy Land Foundation trial. They evolved and started to change their messaging, but today they are basically an arm of the Muslim Brotherhood. This isn't something that frightened people are just making up. It's right there in their own paperwork.

Harris: I guess the most amazing thing, from my point of view, is that secular liberals act as though a person's deeply held religious or moral beliefs do not matter.

Hirsi Ali: Well, they seem to make the greatest exceptions for Muslims.

Harris: Correct. In almost every other context, everyone understands that a person's beliefs largely determine his behavior. For instance, last week, a former grand dragon of the Ku Klux Klan murdered three people outside a Jewish community center in Kansas. This man spent his entire adult life espousing his hatred for Jews, and upon his arrest he shouted, "Heil Hitler." There is not a person on earth at this moment who is wondering whether his beliefs about Jews were the effective cause of his behavior. And yet, if he had been a Muslim shouting "Allahu Akbar," most liberals would say that his behavior had nothing to do with his religious beliefs.

Hirsi Ali: That's the paradox of their argument. I saw someone being interviewed by CNN who made exactly the same statement, to the opposite effect: "If he had shouted 'Allahu Akbar,' we would spend so much time and money worrying about jihadist terrorism, when we face a much bigger threat from white-supremacist hatred in this country." Which, obviously, is empirically not true.

Harris: Especially if one considers the global reality of jihadist violence, the incredibly destructive aspirations of groups like al-Qaeda, the eagerness of their members to be martyred, and the support they have from millions of otherwise ordinary people in the Muslim community. The Ku Klux Klan and other white-power groups are a fringe phenomenon. But how many Muslims *truly* believe that apostates should be put to death? Is it 300 million? Or is it triple that number? It's just a false comparison.

Hirsi Ali: And yet that is the way the comparison is used. Clearly, everyone understands that this white supremacist was driven by his beliefs. But for Muslims, we make excuses. And we ignore the fact that the idea of jihad is backed even by rich Muslim states like Saudi Arabia and Iran, and that Islamist movements across the world are destabilizing international politics, from Africa to Asia. You mentioned the Boko Haram in Nigeria that abducted more than 200 girls from their school. I'm going to quote from the reporting of PBS's *NewsHour*, hardly a place of conspiracy theories and extremism: "Boko Haram insurgents have been trying for at least five years to turn Nigeria into a strict Islamic state. Lately, they have stepped up attacks on communities, most recently by burning a school and bombing a bus station in addition to the abductions." The reporter, Larisa Epatko, goes on to say, that prior to the latest and largest school abduction, Human Rights Watch documented the kidnapping of women and young girls from the streets of Maiduguri in November. Boko Haram fighters would brazenly pick up the girl of their choice and throw a bit of money at the parents and declare they had taken the girl as a wife. And Human Rights Watch says the fighters are now using these women and girls "to take the place of

their wives for domestic chores or sexual services.” How can speaking out about these kinds of atrocities possibly be seen as an assault on Islam?

Harris: One thing we should say at this point is that neither of us is arguing that Islam is the *only* source of terrorism or sectarian conflict. In fact, Islam doesn’t even have a monopoly on *suicidal* violence. Consider the kamikaze pilots in World War II, or the Tamil Tigers of Ceylon. Of course, these examples are frequently submitted as proof that suicide bombing has nothing, in principle, to do with Islam. But that is a logical fallacy. We can freely acknowledge that there are other paths to becoming a suicide bomber without denying the link between jihadist violence and the doctrine of Islam. Also, the kamikazes and the Tamil Tigers were local and idiosyncratic phenomena—and they no longer exist. With jihadism, we are talking about a worldwide movement supported by a theology that is accepted by *most* Muslims. What’s more, this ideology is contagious.

We now have myriad examples of ordinary Westerners becoming convinced of the necessity of waging jihad because they have converted to Islam. If they became Buddhists or Scientologists, there would be no possibility of their acquiring this belief. Again, we’re not talking about a distortion of the “true” Islam. The ideology that gives us jihadism is arguably the *most plausible* version of the faith available, according to an honest reading of the scriptures. That’s why millions of people venerate jihadis as martyrs when they die. Presumably, many of these people would never wage jihad themselves, but they understand it to be a central tenet of their religion. Similarly, I trust that most Muslims would not personally murder one of the Danish cartoonists, but vast numbers of them—a majority in many countries—would consider such a murder fully justified.

In fact, you’re in a position to talk about this with some authority, because you used to share this mind-set. Remind our readers how you felt about Salman Rushdie when you were twenty.

Hirsi Ali: I think of myself back then as analogous to a sheep. Everyone in my community believed that Rushdie had to die. After all, he had insulted the Prophet. I believed that if you insult the Prophet, well, then you have to face the consequences—which means you have to be killed. I didn’t question the merits of that idea. I thought it was moral for Ayatollah Khomeini to take steps to ensure that this apostate who had insulted the Prophet would be punished, and the appropriate punishment was death. I didn’t make that up, of course, and I didn’t just get the idea from my friends; it came from scripture and from my religious teachers.

Harris: Funny enough, that was something you had in common with [Cat Stevens](#). Incredibly, it’s possible for a Western rock star, who has every advantage in life, to acquire such a view. And this is not an accident. Death for apostasy really is a tenet of Islam.

Hirsi Ali: Yes, absolutely. But I think the good news is that an increasing number of Muslims are growing uncomfortable with Muhammad and the Koran as moral guides. I don’t know if you recall the story of Hamza Kashgari, the twenty-three-year-old Saudi journalist who tweeted something like “Muhammad, I love you, but I’m not sure I follow everything you said.”

Harris: Yes, I remember.

Hirsi Ali: Everyone called for his death, and he fled. The Saudi government used its influence to get him back from Malaysia. But recently I heard that he was quietly released from prison. Examples like these reveal that I’m not the only one

who has questioned the morality of her father's and mother's religion. More Muslims in more places are doing it.

I've been following what has been called the Arab Spring and its aftermath as closely as I can. Right now, in Tunisia, you have a face-off between people who want *sharia* law and people who don't—all of them Muslims. In Egypt, we saw the same thing. They demonstrated against the first elected Muslim government, and there was a coup. But what this shows is that a substantial number of Muslims in Egypt do not want to live under *sharia*. And yet they think of themselves as Muslims. So, is there hope? Yes.

Muslims who do not want to live under *sharia* law are attempting to separate religion from politics. But they won't be able to do that unless they address these doctrinal issues. They won't be able to win the argument against the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, because like every other Islamist or jihadist organization, the Brotherhood is delivering a message consistent with what's really in the Koran and the *hadith*. If you want to stand up to these people, you have to address the doctrine. You have to look at the Koran and say that there are parts of it you don't consider moral anymore.

Harris: Which is obviously a very heavy lift. It requires that Muslims repudiate some of the central doctrines of their faith.

One thing I think we should concede is that the political grievances of Islamists, and even jihadists, are often perfectly understandable—or at least they would be understandable if these people weren't being driven morally insane by their religious beliefs. Take Boko Haram, for instance: The Nigerian state is hopelessly corrupt. Who wouldn't want to rebel against a government that has stolen something like half a trillion dollars from the people? But what explains the fact that these particular rebels are now kidnapping girls and blowing up children in their schools? The explanation is simple: Members of Boko Haram are not merely at war with a corrupt state. They are at war with what they consider the sin of Western-inspired secularism—and this delusional commitment is the direct result of their religious beliefs. So Western liberals are right to point out that corrupt dictatorships, which our governments often support, are part of the problem. But many of the people who are inclined to rebel against these dictatorships want to replace them with theocracies. The alternative to authoritarianism is often worse, given what the people believe about God.

Hirsi Ali: In a way, it's easier for Muslims and their friends on the Left to go after people like me and you than it is to go after Boko Haram, the Muslim Brotherhood, or any of these other groups who say they are going to fight corruption by creating some kind of puritanical utopia based on scripture, because moderate Muslims share the teachings of the Koran and *hadith*. So, intellectually, they never get beyond the point of saying, "Oh, those passages have been misinterpreted." That's as far as they ever go.

The reason the so-called Muslim "extremists" are so successful at recruiting, keeping, inspiring, and mobilizing people—and then finally getting them to wage jihad—is that what they're saying is fully consistent with the teachings of Muhammad. For an intelligent 20-something-year-old, if you say, "Don't believe me; just read it in the Koran," he will understand. And then he must make a choice. He must choose whether to stick with Islam or not. And those who stick with it tend to get sucked into this way of life. The moderates don't do anything about this. They just come after people like you and me.

Harris: But this is the core issue: The moderates can't reasonably claim to be *representing* Islam, because the faith has no truly moderate wing. There's no branch of Islam that says, "Say whatever you want about our Prophet. He's a big boy. He can take it!" Unlike Christianity and Judaism, every branch of Islam insists that scripture is infallible and that apostasy is a

serious crime. Where are the moderate Muslims who will honestly discuss the gravity of this problem? Where are the moderates who have grasped its implications, realized that they are calamitous, and are working to transform Islam itself?

I'd like to recall a point that Paul Berman made in his great book, *Terror and Liberalism*. I think he was specifically talking about the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, but it applies across the board. He pointed out that liberals tend to assume that people everywhere want the same things and that they behave badly only when they're treated badly. (Of course, this applies only to powerless people; people with power can more or less be counted on to be evil.) This liberal intuition suggests that if one sees otherwise powerless people acting in extraordinarily barbaric ways—practicing suicidal terrorism against noncombatants or using human shields, for instance—they must have some commensurately enormous grievances against the people they're attacking. Thus, the nihilistic behavior of some Palestinians can only be explained by how extraordinarily badly they're being oppressed by the Israelis. The same holds for 9/11 or any other jihadist atrocity—the fault must lie with Israel or U.S. foreign policy, because nothing else could account for the willingness of ordinary Muslims to murder innocent civilians and throw their own lives away so casually in the process.

Hirsi Ali: Yes, and every time there's an incident, that reasoning is torn apart. Look at the Boston bombers: The brother who's alive now and on trial clearly says that he was moved to act in this way by his religious convictions as a Muslim. He says, "As Muslims, we are one body. If you hurt one, you hurt everyone else." And yet for a full year, we have heard the most ridiculous analysis about how this was a dysfunctional family. There are dysfunctional families all over the world—why doesn't every one of them produce this type of violence?

Harris: The Boston bombing was an especially interesting case for me because I had just had a very public fight with Glenn Greenwald over his tarring me as an Islamophobe. Ten days later bombs exploded in Boston, and in the immediate aftermath, Greenwald wrote another silly article saying how terrible it was that there had been a rush to judgment defaming Islam.

Apart from one Saudi man who was briefly a suspect, not only was there no rush to judgment but we *still* can't get people to admit that this was jihad. People seem to imagine that ethnic Chechens who were devoted to Islam could have a thousand motives for murdering and maiming their neighbors in Boston. The Tsarnaev brothers had every reason to be grateful for their chance to live in America. They had received a lot of help from this country and were living far better than they would have in Chechnya. Given their religious beliefs, however, it is no mystery that they felt a murderous hatred for infidels and a kinship with jihadists everywhere. Rather than a rush to judgment against Islam, we still see this commitment to discounting the role that its doctrines played in their thinking, even a full year after the bombing—and even with the surviving brother, Dzhokhar, still rattling on about jihad.

Everyone reports that the brothers were motivated by our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—the implication being that U.S. foreign policy is to blame. And yet, as you point out, the only plausible reason that a Chechen American would murder innocent people in protest over the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan would be that he accepted the Islamic doctrine of jihad. *Islam is under attack. The infidels have invaded Muslim lands*—these grievances are not political. They are religious.

Hirsi Ali: It makes you wonder, when the surviving brother repeatedly says he was waging jihad, why hasn't there been a single headline calling it jihad?

Harris: I remember what it was like to not know who had set those bombs and to wonder whether it was a homegrown

terrorist like Timothy McVeigh or some other psychopath who had no connection to Islam. Everyone seemed poised to use this case to show that all forms of violence are equivalent, and that Islam really isn't ever the problem.

But if the Boston Marathon bombing *had* been the work of someone like Timothy McVeigh, that wouldn't exonerate Islam for all the other crimes that are clearly linked to its central doctrines—of which, once again, Muslims are the most frequent victims. Some young Sunni will wake up tomorrow morning, and despite the fact that he has other prospects in life—and probably a wife and 4.2 children—he will blow himself up in a Shia mosque somewhere. This act will have nothing to do with U.S. foreign policy. It will be based entirely on his belief that Shiites are apostates and that a person can get to Paradise by killing them.

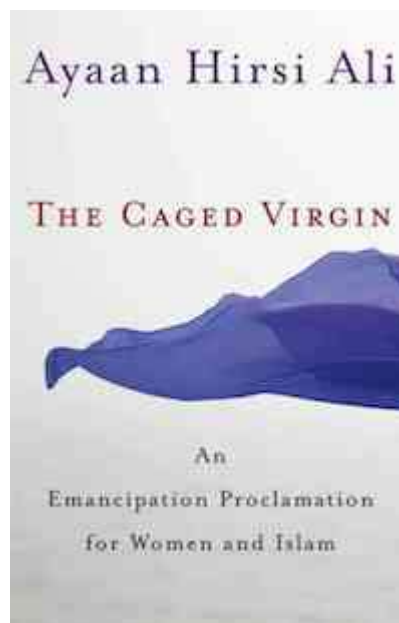
Hirsi Ali: You know, Organization of the Islamic Conference countries send diplomats to the West to dictate what our newspapers may or may not write about Islam—restricting the use of the word “jihad,” for instance. That's what I find so ridiculous: The leaders of these governments work harder at censoring the media in the U.S. and Europe than they do at addressing the problem of jihadis in their own countries.

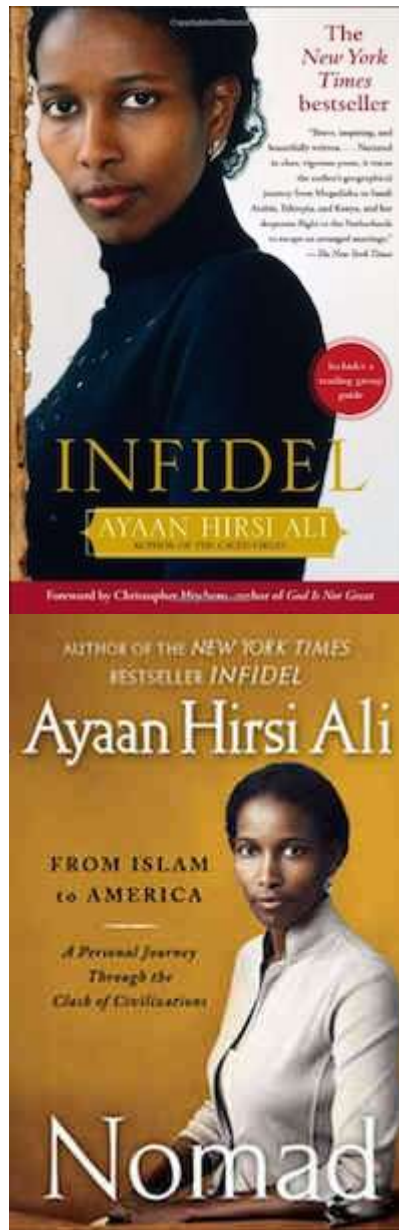
Harris: And, of course, many of these states—Saudi Arabia in particular—actively export the ideology of jihadism and Salafi-style Islamism to mosques all over the world.

Hirsi Ali: And sadly, both Western governments and the Western press stay silent.

Harris: Well, Ayaan, I think we've gotten ourselves sufficiently worked up. There are surely many other things we could talk about, but this has already been a very long conversation, so I think we should leave it here. Thank you for taking the time to do this. I know that I speak for thousands of our readers in wishing you the greatest happiness and encouraging you to keep up your important work. When I announced that I would be speaking with you this week, many people wrote to me asking how they can support you. I believe I can answer that question: They can donate to [your foundation](#) and they can read your wonderful books. I hope they will do both. Thanks again, Ayaan.

Hirsi Ali: Thank you, Sam. It was great speaking with you.





Notes

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