



**American Islamic Congress, Inc.**

1718 M Street NW, #243, Washington DC 20036  
Phone: +1.202.595.3160 Fax: +1.202.315.5838

**American Islamic Congress  
Distinguished Speaker Series**

**Topic:**

**Islam vs. Islamism: Defining the struggle between religion and politics**

**Panelists:**

**Hussain Abdul Hussain: Media Analyst & former editor of Beirut Daily Star**

**Dr. Ayse Kadayifci: School of International Service, American University**

**Dr. Tamara Cofman Wittes: Middle East Democracy and Development Project,  
Saban Center, Brookings Institution**

**Moderator:**

**Zainab Al-Suwaij: Executive Director, American Islamic Congress**

As Ramadan ends, the October session of AIC's Capitol Hill Series explores a central struggle in the Muslim world: What is the threat posed by Islamic fundamentalism, and how can Muslims take the lead in countering it? Who are "moderates," and what defines effective action against extremism? How can US engagement with Muslim societies help moderates succeed?

On October 15, 2007 AIC brought in media analyst and former editor of *Beirut Daily Star* **Hussain Abdul Hussain**, Assistant Professor at the School of International Service at American University **Dr. Ayse Kadayifci**, and Director of Middle East Democracy and Development Project at Brookings Institution **Dr. Tamara Cofman Wittes** to answer these questions and more.

**Dr. Wittes** defines Islamism as "any political manifestation that says it's drawing on Islamic ideas," though he adds: "interpretations of what Islam means for politics can vary intensely."

**Mr. Hussain** examines the historical background of Islamism. He states that the defeat of the Muslims at the hands of Napoleon "promoted Muslim thinkers to ask themselves how they could catch up with other civilizations." At first, Islamic Scholars instituted progress by adapting Western innovation to Islamic tradition. Over time, this ideology mutated. In order to close the gap between Western civilization and Islam, all Western impurities that permeated Islam should be removed. This left the monarchies with radical

Islam, which has also been adopted by dictators. Attempts at reforms to return to moderate Islam have been bogged down and defeated. Globalization and colonization have pressured Muslims to view the Western world in a different, more negative way.

There are three distinct groups of political Islamism, according to **Dr. Wittes**. Extremist groups, or jihadists have a totalitarian ideology that uses violence as a means to create a certain future. Local militants or revolutionaries share some of the jihadists' ideologies but are focused on a local political grievance. Both groups tend to use military power to gain influence in weak states. The third group category comprises of unarmed political groups. These groups tend to exist in strong states, use institutions to organize themselves, do not allow much political organization to occur, and are the most prominent oppositionists in the world. In order to combat these Islamist groups, peaceful organizations are needed.

"Islam is just like any other religion," **Mr. Hussain** explains, "you need proper scholarship from moderate individuals." This will lead to a more tolerant, less violent society. A psychology of aggression has been created as some Muslims perceive the West as disrespectful of Islam. To avoid this, Muslims must start being more proactive and less reactionary.

American Muslims can help bring an end to Islamism. American Muslims can provide financial backing or institutions to these Muslim peace activists in the Middle East. Furthermore, as **Dr. Kadayifci** points out, "it becomes important for American Muslims to establish institutions for capacity building, not only out there, but here." Also, there must be intra-Muslim dialogue within the United States, including dialogue with other religions, to bring about change in the Muslim World. By creating a more constructive dialogue in the U.S., it is possible generate a moderate movement in the Muslim World.

Instead of imposing from outside, we must focus how to bring change from within." **Mr. Hussain** agrees and adds, "[America] can't just force democracy on the heads of everyone, it should be handled in a complex way and must respect cultural boundaries." Forcing issues upon Muslims will only breed more extremism. In order for moderate societies to flourish, the U.S. should engage them in dialogue, support political and economic freedom, and facilitate the establishment of institutions and rule of law.