

# AS A BRITISH MUSLIM, I ADVISE YOU: Don't be alarmed by Stephen Schwartz<sup>1</sup>

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**L**IKE DANIEL PIPES and Steve Emerson of the United States, Schwartz feeds on ignorance and fear to create, justify and foster a climate of suspicion and hostility. Whereas Pipes believes that between 10 to 15 percent of US Muslims are potential killers, Schwartz settles for casting suspicion on one million Muslims as potential *Jihadis* (read: terrorists). Rather than seeking out and defining the nuances of the debate, Schwartz opts for the easy option of reducing the Muslim world into a black and white canvas, ironically, something that all extremists are rightfully condemned for doing. To assert that radicalisation among young Muslims has little to do with (British) foreign policy is to deny *one* of the very root causes of radicalisation, rendering any genuine attempt to eliminate it impotent. While two of the 7/7 suicide bombers left us their recorded messages and blamed British policy in Iraq for their actions, a Home Office and Foreign Office dossier ordered by Tony Blair in 2004 confirmed that Iraq was a “recruiting sergeant” for extremism. The bottom line is that foreign policy has *every bit* as much to do with this cancerous pathogen as does a literal interpretation of Islam’s sacred texts. Trying to understand the cause of terrorism should not be interpreted as a justification of it; that is as insane as denying that it has multiple causes.

Far from being breeding centres of radicalisation, the only thing that mosques are guilty of is employing imams from “back-home” who have alienated a generation of young Muslims. Increasingly, most young Muslims cannot speak or understand their mother tongue—the first language of most imams. While there are exceptions, the fact remains that most imams tend to have a limited understanding of the complexities of modern secular life and the challenges faced by young Muslims who seek an identity and

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<sup>1</sup> A reply to Schwartz’s article: “As an American Muslim, I warn you: Britain has a unique problem” *Spectator*, pp. 14–15, vol. 301 # 9288

just want to “fit-in.” Very rarely do imams attempt to make sense of the political climate or equip themselves to do so; they prefer to focus on matters of piety and faith. The young radicals that I have spoken to over the past five years typically have become more and more frustrated at and alienated by this general attitude in mosques and so looked elsewhere to acquire their Islamic “education.” The internet has been a great source for the propagation of a literalist theology and the multi-media experience of seeing footage of Muslim men, women, and children killed by secular “collateral damage” adds fuel to a fire that is ripe for exploitation. Yes, published books heavily subsidised by certain Middle-Eastern countries have nurtured this hate crime that Schwartz is so apt at repudiating, however, most mosques in the UK have fallen victim to their literalist, a-historical reading of Islam and Muslims are warned to look out for tell-tale signs of damnation. As such, both Barelwi and Deobandi Mosques are labelled as places of “evil-innovation” and Muslims are warned to avoid them.

So far, we have learned that identifying which mosque Muslims attend won’t help a lot in profiling potential terrorists. Sajad Badat, the *would be* suicide bomber, who at the last minute decided not to go through blowing up an airplane, came from a Deobandi background, whereas Asif Mohamed Hanif who *actually did* blow himself up in Israel came from a Barelwi-Sufi background. I doubt that Schwartz would claim that all Sufis are therefore potential killers, so why castigate suspicion on the Deobandis? Today, one can no longer simply brush both the Deobandis and Barelwis with one colour (despite the temptation) for each have their varying flavours and varieties, particularly when we have second-generation scholars of British origin who are trying to reconcile their traditions with the modern context with varying degrees of success.

While Tariq Ramadan insists that he should be judged not by his lineage but by his message (which is fair enough) and Tariq al-Suweidan actually *hasn’t* spoken on the “Radical Middle-Way” programme, it is genuinely sad to see Schwartz trying to demonise Hamza Yusuf.<sup>2</sup> In most of his articles that he has written of late, Schwartz, in a most unscholarly way, has repeatedly and unfailingly attempted to convince his audience that Yusuf is a Wahhabi and/or a secret/closet radical/Jihadist. Schwartz either chooses to

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<sup>2</sup> See my “Schwartz’s Words of Mass Distortion” posted at:  
[http://www.zaidshakir.com/Articles%5CSchwartz\\_words\\_of\\_mass\\_distortion.pdf](http://www.zaidshakir.com/Articles%5CSchwartz_words_of_mass_distortion.pdf)

remain ill-informed or he is deliberately trying to sabotage Yusuf's credibility—an attempt which only serves to discredit his own work and sets the “agenda” alert flashing. Schwartz's approval of Dr. Irfan al-Alawi as “an outstanding British Muslim adversary of the extremists” is apt to prove the point. Dr. al-Alawi would find it very difficult to even contemplate Schwartz's libellous description of Yusuf. I know—I called him after reading Schwartz's article and asked him for his thoughts. Like many others, al-Alawi knows that Yusuf was instrumental in purging the extremist theology that haunted young Muslims during the 90's. He filled the void that had been created by a dearth of English-speaking imams and in truth was (and is) the reason why many Muslims (from diverse backgrounds) reaffirmed or adopted all the things that Schwartz would readily identify with mainstream Islam. This wasn't the first time I had to call al-Alawi for his thoughts. In yet another article, Schwartz implied that al-Alawi had indicated that Yusuf was an extremist—something which al-Alawi robustly denies even having entertained or even mentioned at the Washington conference that is cited by Schwartz. Perhaps because Yusuf is outspoken on current affairs he is labelled a radical? Well, surprise: many secular people would agree with his comments and concerns about the “war on terrorism”, so would that make them secular radicals/terrorists? I am not sure what point Schwartz is attempting to prove or allude to when in passing, he unfailingly notes that Yusuf also has an English name (which actually isn't Joe). Unless I am mistaken, even Schwartz has his own Muslim name: Stephen ‘Suleyman Ahmad’ Schwartz, so should that be sufficient to raise concern about him?

Leaving aside for the moment his gaping factual errors, I would agree with Schwartz in that Muslims need to do more to bring about imams that are trained at home; citizens of the West that are at ease with both modernity and their tradition. Narrow readings of Islam will only leave us orphaned from the evolving story of Muslim civilisation and those who accuse others as deviating from a pristine, idealised Islam should not deter us in the least. There must also be a serious reassessment on the prolonged dependence on ideologically-driven texts written during the twentieth century against the backdrop of colonial resistance that serve no benefit in the context of Muslim minorities living in the West. The Muslim community also needs leadership that is rooted in traditional learning, encapsulated in a moral and ethical outlook. Myopia has robbed

our intellectual discourse of any coherent vision for too long. Spirituality that has proven its transformative power time and time again, must once again find a major role in the lives of Muslims and relearning its sciences will provide us with some hope in producing great Muslim souls, as was once done in the past, and with that, the ability to enrich Great Britain.

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