

Discussing Islam in East Tennessee

By Frankie Martin

How best to deal with Islamophobia in the US today?

I glimpsed the answer on February 7, 2018, when I accompanied Ambassador Akbar Ahmed, the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University, to Knoxville, Tennessee, where he became the first Muslim to deliver the prestigious Ashe Lecture at the Howard H. Baker, Jr. Center for Public Policy at the University of Tennessee.

The center is named after Howard Baker, who served as a US Senator from Tennessee, President Ronald Reagan's Chief of Staff, and US Ambassador to Japan. The talk was arranged by my good friend Harrison Akins, a doctoral student and researcher at the Baker Center who previously worked with Ahmed. Understanding the current negative climate concerning Muslims, the widespread common misperceptions of Islam and Muslims, and the fear evident in the Muslim community with rising incidents of violence and intimidation, I was curious how an East Tennessee audience would react to a Muslim scholar.

The day's program began with a meeting with a group of undergraduate and graduate students. This was followed by a lunch with faculty members and prominent university supporters. Welcoming us were Dr Matthew Murray, the director of the Baker Center, and Dr Krista Wiegand, a professor of political science and head of the Baker Center's global security program. We were also joined by Ambassador Victor Ashe, the former US ambassador to Poland and former mayor of Knoxville who endowed the Ashe Lecture series, and Ambassador James Knight, the former US ambassador to Chad, along with his wife Amelia.

Ahmed's lecture, entitled "Being Muslim Today: Building Bridges in an Age of Uncertainty" was delivered to a standing room only audience of students, faculty, community members, and prominent citizens including Ambassadors.

At the beginning of his talk, he discussed the difficult situation facing Muslims across the world in countries like Syria and Myanmar, including in the United States, and also highlighted the plight of minorities in Muslim countries such as the Christians in Pakistan and Egypt. He stressed the importance of knowledge and thinking for oneself through the example of Socrates, whose base assumption for philosophical inquiry was the recognition that the only thing he knows is that he knows nothing. Ahmed spoke about his quartet of research projects exploring relations between the West and the Muslim world conducted with this goal of contributing to greater knowledge and understanding and its latest installment, *Journey into Europe: Islam, Immigration, and Identity* (Brookings Institution Press, 2018).

It was an imperative for us to think for ourselves and seek accurate information about Islam, he argued, because of its importance in the world today and the widespread dissemination of false information about it. Yet, Ahmed concluded, there could be no understanding or interfaith dialogue without knowledge, and he called on Muslims also to live up to their own ideals concerning the subject, quoting the Prophet of Islam's saying that "the ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr." He called on Americans to understand the world as it is and play their role on the world stage by showing the best of America, which had attracted him and many other Muslims to the United States.

Following the talk, the audience had an opportunity to ask questions, and audience members inquired about topics from how to understand US-Pakistan relations to the definition of sharia which Americans believed Muslims wished to impose on them. Yet the most interesting exchange occurred when a male audience member aggressively and angrily asked Ahmed why he and the Islamic



A full-house audience of students, faculty, and Knoxville civic leaders gather for the Ashe Lecture featuring Ambassador Akbar Ahmed



Ambassador Ahmed receives a standing ovation for his lecture at the Baker Center at the University of Tennessee



Ambassador Ahmed (center) and his former chief of staff Harrison Akins (third from left), who is currently earning his PhD at the University of Tennessee (UT), gather with UT students prior to Ambassador Ahmed's lecture

scholar Tariq Ramadan, who the questioner asserted he had written an article with, criticize America but ignore how horribly Islam treats women including female genital mutilation and stoning. Why, the man de-

manded to know, do professors of Islam not denounce these practices in their own "native languages"? I immediately understood him to be reflecting the common Islamophobic sentiments held by many who see Islam as an

inherently violent and barbaric religion that is the enemy of the United States and western civilization and must be resisted. Given that we were in a largely Republican area that overwhelmingly supported President Trump, these statements were perhaps expected. The same questions with almost exactly the same wording were being asked across the country.

In his response, Ahmed calmly but directly and forcefully refuted the man's accusations, including his assertion that he and Tariq Ramadan had written a paper together. This was simply false, and he was directed to "get your facts right." Ahmed asked if the questioner had actually read anything he had written, as he has been speaking against what he called the "disgraceful" treatment of women in the Muslim world for many years. Ahmed rejected the notion that female genital mutilation was an Islamic custom, noting that it was instead a tribal practice and both Muslim and Christian tribes in East Africa practice it. He also explained that Islam gave women rights such as the right to inherit and to divorce in the 7th century and that sadly such rights continue to be denied to Muslim women so many centuries later. He said that members of his wife's family had been targeted and killed by the militants for opposing their interpretation of Islam and stated that the questioner's ignorant view disregarded those Muslims who are standing up for women's rights and modernist Islam in Muslim societies at great cost to themselves. "They will win the battle," he stated, "not you sitting here making these comments." He said that he did not want to engage in tit for tat comparisons but noted that while there has been no female president in the US, there have been female prime ministers and presidents in the Muslim nations of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia. He reminded the questioner of his theme of knowledge and suggested the man gain more education about the subject.

The response from the largely non-Muslim audience, though with a strong showing from the local Muslim community, was immediate. They began applauding during his answer to the man's accusation. When the lecture concluded the audience rose enthusiastically in a standing ovation. It was the first standing ovation for any speaker in the Ashe Lecture series, we were told several times. Speaking with us afterward, audience members were effusive in their praise and spoke with emotion and appreciation. One non-Muslim Baker Center employee said she nearly began crying and a non-Muslim graduate student stated that she was profoundly moved by the talk as never before. A Muslim Kurdish student told Ambassador Ahmed that she and the Muslim community have to face daily the kind of hostile questions that the man had posed and thanked him for responding so effectively.

Thinking about the event afterward, I believed that I understood why the Knoxville audience had responded so positively to the talk, and it partly had to do with the hostile question and Ahmed's response. There is a steady flow of utterly false information about Islam fed through the media and constantly repeated and reinforced by political figures that ordinary Americans are absorbing on a constant basis. This information tends to go unanswered or unchallenged. Many people may feel uneasy about stereotyping and responding with hatred towards a large group of people but lack the understanding and arguments to effectively push back against such voices. In Ahmed's response, I believe they encountered a fact-based argument that made sense and appealed at the same time to the cherished American ideal of religious freedom and liberty. The challenge is to have more of these events and for the increasing hatred of Islam and Muslims to be refuted in this manner in public events and in the media.

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