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“The Empire’s Desperate Search for the ‘Moderate Muslim’ ”

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Developments associated with the contemporary imperial discourse on Islam and Muslims have caused a great deal of confusion among Muslims trying to swim through the present stormy waves. Western political discourse and intellectual culture have decided to use the term *moderate* to specify the degree to which a Muslim will comply with whatever Islamophobic claims made by neo-Orientalist pundits. What should be a core characteristic of the benign *moderate Muslim* today is to see no threat more perilous than that of *Islamic fundamentalism*. Such issues of the day as poverty, exploitation, neo-liberal economics, and militarism of powerful states are considered quaint. *Moderate* Muslims can criticize certain policies of the imperial order, but only on grounds of strategy and means, not ends. *Moderate* Muslims are only allowed to render advice on how to effectively manage the Empire through more peaceful means, ignoring the fact that these peaceful means have had pretty horrific consequences for tens of millions who have died and continue to die from AIDS, malnutrition, and starvation, and easily treatable diseases because of systemic global inequalities. These are the *moderate* Muslims in which Washington is now interested, and hence, cultivating through various means, in hopes of ameliorating the US image in the Muslim world without making any changes in its foreign policies. Following the script of the now infamous Rand Report titled “Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies,” these *moderate* Muslims are being relied upon to civilize the masses of backward Muslims, to counter their propensity for violence. The category of extremism remains confined to the bearded mullahs from some backward lands. Instead of limiting the focus to the retail extremism of individuals and groups with unpleasant social views, perhaps there is also a need to expose the wholesale extremism of a global system of socioeconomic apartheid that has produced enormous misery and suffering. Many confused and frightened Muslims are flocking to this club of moderates, since doing otherwise would risk them being labeled as the *bad* Muslim in an Islamophobic environment that has concocted such coarse binaries as the *good* and the *bad* Muslim. Therefore, calls for internal reform of Islam, even if slightly successful at producing a less rigid or militant Islam in the West (since Islam in the Muslim world can perhaps be expected to become more militant in the face of greater imperial intervention and aggression), are not going to solve the more pressing problems created by the modern world system on which Muslims by themselves have only marginal influence.