

# Muqtedar Khan Spins Islamism as Liberal Reform

by Andrew E. Harrod



University of Delaware Professor [Muqtedar Khan](#) had a “very bad mix” of Islamic terminology and Western liberalism in his October 9 Georgetown University [book presentation](#), according to Iranian scholar [Amir Mohammad Soori](#). A Visiting Researcher at Georgetown’s Saudi-founded Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACMCU), Soori’s comment from the audience accurately judged the superficiality and pitfalls of Khan’s attempted progressive Islamism.

While ACMCU Professor [Jonathan Brown](#) moderated, Khan discussed his [new book](#), *Islam and Good Governance: A Political Philosophy of Ihsan*. His small audience of about twenty-five included, along with Soori, past and present ACMCU professors [John Esposito](#) and [John Voll](#) as well as Georgetown’s Muslim chaplain [Yahya Hendi](#). Former State Department adviser [Peter Mandaville](#) also attended.

With a Georgetown doctorate and past ACMCU fellowship, Khan is no stranger to Washington's power circles. He served as a Pentagon consultant and [Academic Director](#) of the State Department's National Security Institute from 2017-19. Today he holds the same title at State's American Foreign Policy Institute.

The book developed from Khan's recurring, ahistorical thought after Al Qaeda's September 11, 2001, attacks that "this can't be Islam." His rose-tinted studies revealed in Islam "so much emphasis on being compassionate, being merciful." *Islam and Good Governance* examines the concept of *ihsan*, a word derived from the Arabic for "beauty" that has over 190 Quranic references and often is translated as "to do good" or "beautiful things."

Khan elaborated with a hadith (canonical saying) from Islam's prophet Muhammad, that "*ihsan* is to worship or serve Allah as if you have seen him; if you cannot see him then know that he sees you." He contrasted that "if you just focus on the second part, then you become frightened of God," a "surveillance entity" who scrutinizes legalisms like beard length or nail polish wear. The first part instead emphasizes "not the law as much as the love of God," and therefore Muslims should "live life as if we have made eye contact with God."

Similarly, to "bring *ihsan* into political life . . . became the foundational question of the book, which ultimately dabbles with mysticism," his fundamental flaw. The mystic Khan himself admits that "I don't think that we can ever see God in his entirety" given a "huge ontological difference." This statement evokes [fundamental controversies](#) over whether human reason reflects God, or, as in predominate, voluntarist Muslim orthodoxy, an arbitrary divine will simply exceeds all merely human categories of right and wrong.

Khan consistently found interpretations of an *ihsan* practitioner or *muhsin* "as one who follows the sharia," or

Islamic law, yet he noted just how unbeautiful such *ihsan* could be. While sharia advocates claimed that the law's "purpose was to create a just society," his calls "to think outside the traditional box" included "freedom from *ijma*," or the historic Islamic scholarly consensus. Otherwise, for example, "unless you challenge the consensus of the past scholars, you won't be able to find gender equality."

Other elements of Khan's heterodoxy included "sharia by *shura*," or consultation. "Let the masses decide what they want" under sharia through debate in order "to extract the most beautiful meaning" from God's words, he argued. Yet again he noted that beauty could vary radically in the eye of the Muslim beholder, for "Muslims sometimes don't read the book, they just kill you" as a blasphemer.

Similarly, a "freedom to apostate" was on Khan's Muslim wish list. "I don't know why Muslims are so scared that everybody will leave Islam and join some other religion if we don't threaten to kill them," he said. [Yusuf al-Qaradawi](#), the Qatar-based spiritual guide for the Muslim Brotherhood, would beg to differ, for he has [claimed](#) that Islam would have disappeared without a death penalty for apostasy, notwithstanding Khan's liberalism.

During the audience question period, Soori reflected on how words are not what they seem at first glance in Islam, as his native Iran "really had a bad experience" historically with Islamic "downgrading" of Western concepts. "In Iran, we did one century ago try to mix between some modern words, some modern concepts like freedom or state, to Islamic thought, Islamic words," he noted (and has [previously written](#)). Yet in Islam there can be "*shura* [consultation] with just one person," so "*shura*, as you mention, is not like Congress in USA, or *hurriya* [freedom] is not freedom."

Khan's modern references to "American political Islam today" as a "force for good" remind that the devil is in the details.

He casually cited Muslims working for Democratic presidential primary candidate Senator Bernie Sanders. Khan failed to mention such [individuals](#) as [Linda Sarsour](#), the radical, anti-Semitic Muslim-American political activist, or anti-Semitic comedian and law professor [Ahmed Zahr](#), both of whom recently became Sanders campaign surrogates.

Anti-Israel, pro-Islamist opinions over Khan's career prove that this remark was not off-the-cuff. A [bitter critic of Israel](#), he [refused](#) to participate in a 2007 University of Delaware panel with Campus Watch Fellow Asaf Romirowsky, a [fluent Arabic speaker](#) who has lectured throughout the U.S. and Israel, where he spent nineteen years. But because the Israeli-American had performed Israeli military service, Khan outrageously objected to "being on the same panel with an Israeli soldier who was stationed in West Bank" with an "occupying force."

Following Army Major Nadal Hasan's 2009 Fort Hood massacre, Khan [wrote](#)

[Hasan] was in an army that was at war with his co-religionists and he had difficulty dealing with that. He was frequently taunted and harassed for being a Muslim by his own colleagues. After years in the military and after years of caring for soldiers as a doctor, he did not feel as if he belonged and perhaps that was the key to why he could turn on his own.

The next year Khan [excused](#) Palestinian terrorism against Israelis:

How can we ask [the Palestinians] to forgive the Jews for what they have done? You cannot. There must be justice first.

His long record of bigotry and Islamist apologias reveals Khan's professed liberalism as little more than a ruse, a cynical pretense of chastising extremists while simultaneously

excusing their beliefs. This strategy works: Khan's State Department [grants](#) alone total over \$1 million. That federal bureaucrats in the administrative state and Khan's colleagues in the corrupt Middle East studies establishment would support such a charlatan isn't surprising, as both are long overdue for thoroughgoing reform. But Khan's saccharine rhetoric shouldn't fool the taxpaying public and his students.

*Andrew E. Harrod is a [Campus Watch Fellow](#), freelance researcher, and writer who holds a Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy and a J.D. from George Washington University Law School. He is a fellow with the Lawfare Project. Follow him on Twitter at [@AEHarrod](#).*