

In Defense of Moderation

C. Holland Taylor's campaign against Islamic extremism.

BY JENNIFER RUBIN

July 26, 2010, Vol. 15, No. 42

C. Holland Taylor doesn't look like a man radical Muslims should fear. He is trim, unassuming, and speaks with a faint southern accent. His stylish blond haircut and trim suit give him the appearance of a fortysomething European businessman. He possesses no arsenal of weapons, holds no government post, and operates no intelligence service. Yet he runs the world's most potent and innovative anti-extremist network and may hold a key to defusing the ticking bomb of Islamic terrorism.

Taylor, a multilingual former telecom magnate who has spent substantial time in Muslim countries since his youth, has a deep interest and expertise in Islamic theology, history, and culture. Over the last quarter century, he has observed the encroachment of radical Islam on previously diverse and relatively tolerant Muslim countries. He cofounded with the late Abdurrahman Wahid (the moderate president of Indonesia) a private foundation, LibForAll, which aims to increase and magnify moderate Muslim voices in combating Islamic extremism. "Ideology is more dangerous than bombs," Taylor explains. LibForAll works to "identify, mobilize and encourage moderate Muslim leaders who generate a counter-narrative" to jihadism in theology, mass media, pop culture, and government.

As a child, Taylor recalls, he would rarely see an Egyptian woman wearing a head-covering; now many do. In his youth, Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan exhibited few signs of radical Islam; they are now on the front lines of jihadists' war against the West. He observes matter of factly, "In Gaza they would kill [those working with LibForAll]. We can't do what we do in Gaza." But not every Muslim country or region is Gaza, at least not yet. Where the jihadists don't have a totalitarian grip on the population, they may still use intimidation and violence to perpetuate a "complicity of silence." That complicity is what Taylor and his organization seek to disrupt.

LibForAll's greatest success has come in Indonesia. In the spring of 2009, in anticipation of nationwide elections (and in concert with two high-profile Islamic organizations), LibForAll launched a book in Indonesia entitled *Ilusi Negara Islam* ("The Illusion of an Islamic State"). Based on two years of painstaking research, the book documented the Saudi Arabian Wahabbists' efforts to export radical Islam to Indonesia and the Indonesian PKS party's connection to international Muslim radical groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood. It became the most widely discussed book in Indonesia, helping to undermine the candidacy of



C. Holland Taylor with muslim theologian (and LibForAll board member) Kyai Haji Mustofa Bisri

the PKS nominee for vice president. Moreover, it exposed radical Islam as a foreign influence, a reversal of the jihadists' usual narrative that pluralism and tolerance are a type of Western infiltration of their societies.

To alter the country's political discourse, LibForAll made use of Southeast Asia's best known Islamic pop icon, Ahmad Dhani, who released a smash hit "Laskar Cinta" ("Warriors of Love") drawing attention to the Islamic radicals' message of hate and violence. ("No to the warriors of jihad! Yes to the warriors of love," the lyrics implored.) Six to seven million copies were sold, Dhani's press conference announcing the release drew international media, and his concerts sold out.

Western media greeted Taylor's efforts with skepticism. In October 2009, the *Washington Post* reported that the Indonesian elections raised "a tricky question: Should Americans stand apart from Islam's internal struggles around the world or jump in and try to bolster Muslims who are in sync with American views?" The article concluded that there was good reason for the Obama administration to "stay out" and back away "from overt intrusions into religious matters." A USAID official sniffed to the *Post* that we should "avoid theology and help Indonesia 'address some of the problems here, such as poverty and corruption,'" while derisively noting that LibForAll "jumped into the theological fray with gusto." LibForAll meanwhile changed the course of the Indonesian election.

The impact of LibForAll's Indonesia success still resonates. Says Taylor, "At its recently concluded national convention, the PKS declared that it is 'moving to the center' and becoming a 'nationalist,' rather than 'Islamist,' party, open to people of all faiths. They've even adopted a new slogan, 'PKS for All.' As they say, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

While it is not clear this is anything more than strategic rebranding, it does suggest that LibForAll transformed Indonesia's political landscape.

The Swedish National Defense College's Center for Asymmetric Threat Studies studied LibForAll's success and describes it as a "cross-sector network" program that gathers religious leaders to "garner the requisite intellectual and theological support for a pluralistic and tolerant interpretation of Islam; pop idols who have massive support from young people; government leaders who are able to address social factors as an underlying factor of extremism; as well as business leadership that can offer requisite financial support." The study concluded: "The development of extremism in Indonesia has been successfully stemmed by cultural factors . . . and a strategically coordinated initiative, primarily promoted by LibForAll."

LibForAll's other efforts include a 26-part TV documentary that seeks to discredit Islamic extremism and undermine the message of radical Islamists. Taylor enlisted and interviewed for the program the Grand Mufti from Egypt's Al-Azhar Mosque and University, who made the theological case for opposing Muslim extremism.

But Taylor's greatest challenge (aside from the financial disparity between his small foundation and the great wealth which Islamic extremists can access) may be the Obama administration. John Brennan, the administration's top counterterrorism official, commented earlier this year that "our enemy is not terrorism," while President Obama has excised from official communications the terms "jihadist" and "Muslim extremist."

“They are playing to the radicals,” Taylor says bluntly. “This is exactly their game plan.” He explains that the administration, like many Western governments, is badly advised and is “so woefully ignorant that we are not even capable of vetting those who are advising them.” The administration’s language is “extremely discouraging to people we are trying to encourage.” He contends that this is partly attributable to the bureaucratic mindset that seeks to avoid conflict. A high ranking U.S. Naval officer in the Pacific Fleet, he recalls, expressed admiration for Taylor’s work, but asked, “Now how do we do this without pissing people off?” He laughs, explaining that of course his counteroffensive against jihadists is going to annoy the radicals.

The West, he fears, is hobbled by a “civilizational crisis of confidence.” A LibForAll program was approved and funded by the EU, but the project soon collapsed as European leaders became angst-ridden over the notion that they should defend their societies from radical Muslim influences. Taylor asked an official from one of Germany’s four political foundations what he planned to do about the Muslim Brotherhood, which desires that European Muslims see themselves not as British, or French, or Dutch but “as radical Muslims seeking to impose *sharia*.” The official replied, “Well, we are a democracy. If the majority vote for Muslim law that is what we will have.” A representative from Al-Azhar attending the meeting commented upon leaving, “They have no manhood.”

Taylor’s contacts with the Obama administration have been similarly dispiriting. He met with officials in the State Department counterterrorism office. Terrorism, he told them, is like a bomb with blue, yellow, red and green (the color of Islam) wires. “I’m an expert green wire cutter,” he said. “If you don’t go after the green wire, then you are willing to let the bomb go off.” But they bristled and tried to shush him whenever he used the terms “Muslim extremist” or “jihadist.”

What would he advise U.S. officials? “In medicine there is an expression: ‘First do no harm.’” They need to develop an expertise in Islam. “They need to understand the landscape. They can’t even evaluate the landscape so they are like a rogue elephant. They think they are helping but they are only creating chaos.” Then, he says, they need to develop policies that reduce the influence of radicals and bolster moderates. And finally, they need to “institutionalize” these policies so new administrations don’t start from scratch.

In this administration it may be impossible to overcome the institutional lethargy and aversion to promoting Muslims who can counteract the ideological underpinnings of jihadism. But it would be a positive step were Obama’s team merely to adopt Taylor’s first step (“do no harm”) and cease undercutting moderate Muslims by denying that radical Islam is terrorism’s foundation.

It may well be private citizens and groups like LibForAll that will have to be at the forefront of the ideological counteroffensive against jihadism. As Taylor says, “If you see a train wreck coming but do nothing about it and say ‘I am not an engineer or a conductor. It is not my affair,’ then you have walked away from your duty as a human being. It is incumbent on all of us to act.”

Jennifer Rubin is contributing editor to Commentary magazine.

<https://www.weeklystandard.com/articles/defense-moderation>