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**7-1 Understanding Political Islam**

**Approaches to International Relations in an Age of Terror: Places, Spaces and Risks  
III ROSINE**

## **Alternative Islamic Voices for Religious Extremism**

### **Abstract**

Islamic extremism has increasingly occupied the arena of public discourse in the Muslim world. Aggressive and narrow interpretations of Islam have been common and there has only been limited space for criticism or counter arguments towards e.g. the Islamic doctrine, traditions or culture – either by non-Muslims or Muslims themselves. On the other hand, mainstream Islam representing the conventional and traditional ideas of Islam has remained the main option for the majority of Muslims. However, a growing number of Muslims, living in the Muslim world or in diaspora, have explicitly or implicitly produced alternative discourses, interventions, and communication. The aim of this contribution is to examine these alternative Islamic voices: *who are the people behind these voices; what are the means and contents of the alternative discourses in relation to religious extremism and mainstream Islam.* The concept of alternativity – *alternative Islam* – will be studied in the context of the Internet and the global public sphere. The Internet reflects and reproduces the world outside the Internet, but, on the other hand, it also creates its own reality by extending the borders of “ordinary” life. In addition to the Internet, the empirical focus is on the *global expressions* of alternative Islam.

## 1. Islamic mainstream and extremism and their alternatives

In research, and increasingly also in the public discourse, the homogeneity of Islam has been neglected. It has been emphasized that Islam is a multifaceted, heterogeneous phenomenon which cannot be reduced to a single model. However, research related to Islam and Islamic actors often concentrates on the highly politicized dimensions of Islam. Over the last years, especially Islamic terrorism and extremism have received considerable media coverage, and they occupy the content of Islamic public sphere. Furthermore, the relation between Islam and Europe or the West in general has been formulated through rigorous contradictions related e.g. to ideas of democracy and human rights in Islam vis-à-vis European norms and values (see Salvatore 2007, 135).

There are, however, an increasing number of different Islamic actors that have consciously or unconsciously created a diverse Islamic discourse and public domain. It can be argued, that there is an internal rivalry taking place in the Muslim world: at the moment, “Muslim social and political actors around the world... are working hard to establish how, where, when and why claims to authority expressed in an Islamic idiom do matter for the re-organization of a global (Muslim) community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Volpi & Turner 2007, 1).

Actors – other than extremists – and their intentions have not been targets of wide interest. In this contribution, the idea is to explore these “hidden” and “minor” Islamic voices which could be understood as alternatives to the mainstream understanding of the presence of Islam. “Alternativity” refers here to alternatives *within* Islam and the Islamic world, and, therefore, it does not take into account alternatives outside Islam, for example those related to the West, Western values, Israel, etc. Those relations have been studied thoroughly elsewhere.

Alternativity cannot be studied without the idea of authority: whose voice is considered the most powerful; who can speak on behalf of Islam? Even though it is widely recognized that there are no formal clerical structures in Islam, authority is still based on religious scholars and leaders of brotherhoods. Over the last decades, these traditional forms of authority and knowledge production have been dispersed. The main contextual element here is globalization which, according to Peter Mandaville, “can be seen to represent a further shift in the extent and intensity of debate about the meaning and nature of the authoritative in Islam” (Mandaville 2007, 102). In other words, globalization represents a tendency towards decentralized authority in the context of globalized Islam. (Mandaville 2007, 101-102)

In general, Islam could be roughly described as a triangle with three dimensions: Islamic extremism (including terrorism and politically active Islam), traditional Islam (basically referring to mainstream Islam) and alternative Islamic trends (cf. Turner 2007, 130). These three dimensions form the political dynamic within current Islam: contradictions between them explain many of the internal differences in the Muslim world. In terms of relative size, the alternative and extreme Islamic trends form only a minority of the Muslim world; whereas the mainstream Islam with its variables represents the major tendencies (see Mandaville 2007, 111). In addition, mainstream Islam and Muslims most probably do not engage in socio-political processes as strongly as extremists and “alternativists”; their political articulation of Islam is weaker, perhaps even non-existent.

In this paper, the main focus is not on the relational dynamics between these three dimensions. Instead, the focus is on the very idea of alternative Islamic trends because of its rather poor state of development. Alternative Islam is used here as an umbrella concept referring to the idea of

progressive, liberal, moderate and secularized forms of Islam. Mandaville has defined progressive Islam as “a further renegotiation of the relationship between and the various roles to be played by religion, the individual and public life” (Mandaville 2007, 106). This definition could be used in a heuristic way also to describe the idea of alternative Islam: it is a phenomenon that covers pluralizing tendencies of the Islamic doctrine as well as Islamic practices and world views (cf. Mandaville 2007, 109-113). Even though alternative Islam is used as a concept, it is not considered a coherent, homogenous phenomenon but a kind of umbrella for diverse ideas loosely linked together by the concept.

In this paper the special focus of interest is on the *global* forms of alternative Islam. Generally speaking, the global Islamic reawakening has changed the idea of belonging to the Islamic community. Politicized and Islamically articulated ideas have a strong cross-national emphasis. Globality is an intentionally constructed idea which could attract potentially numerous Muslims. When speaking about European young Muslims, Mandaville argues that many of them “have little knowledge or experience of their religion beyond a recently discovered desire to find some sense of moral certainty and a place in the world, are given an identity compass whose discourse of ‘global Islam’ allows them to understand themselves as part of larger struggle against hegemony, imperialism, and godless capitalism.” (Mandaville 2007, 111)

The globalizing tendency of Islam is intertwined with the deterritorialization of religion: “religion and culture no longer have relationship with a territory or given society” (Roy 2004, 38). In this sense, there exists a process of disconnection between religion and culture (Roy 2004, 108) in which original cultural markers in a given socio-cultural context have been faded. According to Roy (2004, 158), the traditional idea of Dar-ul-Islam is not attached to a territory anymore; it can be seen as an “environment” where “good Muslims convene.”

## 2. The Meaning of the Internet

Why, then, Islam and the Internet? Gary Bunt argues that “Islam does not need computers.” As a religion it can function without the Internet; it is not dependent on virtual connections or frameworks. (Bunt 2003, 1) However, the situation is different when we speak of Muslims and the relations between Muslim people, organizations, and states in a global constituency. Modern information technology, including the Internet, has changed the social and political conditions by which also power relations and forms of authority are produced. On the one hand, it reflects and reproduces the world outside the Internet, but, on the other hand, it creates its own reality, extending the borders of “ordinary” life.

Concentrating on the Internet and web-based information systems is not an arbitrary choice. The Internet constructs a platform which potentially has a particular position also among Muslim people. Information society as a whole is not easy to control or govern by governments or religious leaders. The majority of Islamic Internet sites are not constructed by official Muslim organizations, but by people outside the official authority. (See Turner 2007, 117, 127). According to Wheeler, “the Internet is a vehicle for change, as well as a tool with which to maintain the status quo. It’s a vehicle for the voice of the small, at the same time that it is a tool of the state security apparatus (the strong)” (Wheeler 2002). In other words, the Internet has a double face: it can enforce a change in a given context, or it can be part of the status quo:

“While some have argued that the web enhances connectivity among peoples and cultures and thus is a force for positive social change, others have argued that the Internet simply mirrors the diversity and differences that encompass our day to day

reality; cyberspace is simply an extension of the contexts from which it is accessed. Two innovations linked with the Internet are the tool's ability to make marginal voices seem central, and as well, to interrupt traditional mechanisms for verifying the authority of a text or author. These factors are particularly challenging in Muslim contexts where textual/religious authority often shares an organic relationship with political authority." (Wheeler, 2002)

The Internet is especially relevant in politically or culturally closed societies. In many cases, the Muslim states do not have clear regulations on the freedom of speech, which does not provide a proper possibility to participate in open discussions in any spheres of public life, be they religiously articulated or not. Therefore, any medium offering open access to the media sphere is in an important position. Like Bunt argues, "substantial minority of Muslims and Islamic organizations would be bereft of their significant propagation and networking tool, unable to dialogue, research and disseminate their message to followers or to interested (Muslim and other) observers. Some would be bound by the shackles of state censorship, unable to access other forms of media, and restricted in the forms of local and global contact and dialogue facilitated through the Internet." (Bunt 2003, 1-2)

In addition to the Muslim state system, Islamic religious and cultural practices have not enforced open political participation or, accordingly, freedom of speech. Alternative ways of communication have been legally restricted and not tolerated culturally or religiously. In this sense, the Internet provides a powerful forum for alternative Islamic expressions which might be aimed against mainstream ideas and ideologies in different Islamic domains. Safety is one of the main factors for using the Internet as a tool for communication. It also provides a wider public presence, which would not have been possible earlier in this manner: geographical, political and cultural marginality could be altered by the power of the Internet:

"Two innovations linked with the Internet are the tool's ability to make marginal voices seem central, and as well, to interrupt traditional mechanisms for verifying the authority of a text or author. These factors are particularly challenging in Muslim contexts where textual/religious authority often shares an organic relationship with political authority." (Brückner 2001)

In the context of this contribution, the globality of the Internet is in an especially relevant position. Earlier, communication and political activity were restricted mainly to local and national contexts. The means of communication could not provide suitable or "productive" channels for transnational communication or connections between Muslim people. The Internet is able to connect remote Muslims and also non-Muslims together. This paper focuses on web sites where Muslims somehow participate in global actions (cf. Juris 2005, 195). Therefore, globality can be considered a conscious choice of actions.<sup>1</sup>

### **3. The Choice of Data**

In the Muslim world, the use of Internet is developing even though the level of access and availability of connections are still low. However, an increasing number of governmental offices, organizations, and individuals are present in virtual reality. The study of Internet and Islam is not a novel one. In many cases, though, the public interest has been directed toward the use of the

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<sup>1</sup> Like altMuslim.com states its approach, "Global perspectives on Muslim life, politics & culture" (<http://altmuslim.com/>), or Islamonline: "Global presentation: Addressing humanity; avoiding ties with or speaking for any country, party, group, council, or organization." (<http://www.islamonline.net/English/AboutUs.shtml>)

Internet as a form of Muslim politics – Islamic *e-jihad* – and as a forum for political organizations – cyber *fatwas* – i.e. phenomena referring to mainstream or extreme tendencies within Islam (cf. Bunt 2003a, 3; 2003b, 168).

Diversified “Islamic” pages have been studied for this contribution: I have scrutinized several hundreds of “Islamic” homepages or portals, focusing especially on pages related to civil society and its activities somehow representing “alternative Islam.” Therefore, governmental sites, Islamic universities, and official Islamic organizations are excluded. Different information portals representing mainstream Islam have also been excluded, as they could be seen as a reproduction of “what is available to hear within a local mosque” (Bunt 2003b, 166). Furthermore, also “pure” political organizations have been excluded (like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Palestinian groups). Political organizations occupy the Islamic discourse and are therefore one of the main objectives of the alternative voices explored here.

Some sites are multilingual and directed to non-Muslims and non-Arabic Muslims. The focus here has explicitly been on English sites. This delimits the focus, but the core idea of the contribution has been to explore global demonstrations of Islam not directed to the (Arab speaking) Muslim population only, but to a global audience dominated by the English language. This sentiment is rather widely shared among the web sites under examination and aptly shown by the following example:

“The use of the English language as the principal means of communication is not meant to be disrespectful of our Bahasa Kebangsaan. ... For the audience that we wish to engage with, we felt that the English language may be more effective and appropriate in our dialogue and discourse. After all, globally, the English language is Islam's second language today.” (<http://www.mpf.org.my/>)

#### **4. Participants in Alternative Virtual Islam**

Who are the people participating in or representing themselves at web sites? First of all, variation among the Muslim people participating on the Internet is remarkable. Even though the Internet enables the participation of “conventional” actors, it might be more interesting to find out how new actors could widen the idea of Islamic actorness. Alternative Islam also means alternativity of actors: new actors also change and reconstruct the very idea of Islam. In this way, the Internet shows its most powerful element: it can open up possibilities to political participation for new groups of people. Eickelman and Anderson argue: “In Muslim cyberspace, we see that “Islamic discourse has [...] become accessible to significantly wider publics, it has also become framed in styles of reasoning and forms of argument that draw on wider, less exclusive or erudite bodies of knowledge, including those of applied science and engineering” (Eickelman and Anderson 1999, in Brückner, 2001)

When studying web pages from the point of view of alternative Islam, it can be noticed that some pages gather only a specific type of Muslims (eg. gender based pages), whereas some pages gather a very heterogeneous collection of Muslims (eg. large Islamic portals such as IslamOnline that include all kinds of activities). Who, then, represents alternativity? The sites examined here represent in one way or another the idea of alternative Islam as presented by Muslims, i.e., people who articulate their ideas in terms of Islam and consider themselves Muslim. NGOs, networks and communities collecting different types of people, form a major target of interest in this context. Furthermore, some academic institutions and think tanks have Islamic goals with an alternative tone

in their programmes. (See appendix 1 for the list of organizations, communities and networks of alternative Islam.)

Web based communication and actions also enable individual commitment. In the context of this contribution, influential individuals are often also behind institutional websites, which may be based on a single person's ideas even though their scopes are wider than that. In addition, there are several websites produced by (or dedicated to) one person. Both cases may include actors representing alternative Islam.

First, there are the politically orientated Muslims (but not politicians per se). For example, Muslim peace activists and advocates for democracy belong to this group of people. Among others, Egyptian-American Ahmed al-Mansour (<http://www.ahmed.g3z.com/>) is an advocate for democracy supporting secular political organizations.

Second, Muslim scholars form a rather "conventional" group of people representing alternative Islam. Scholars living in diaspora or in Muslim countries have traditionally been people who have tried to promote open discussion within Islam. For example, Indian Asghar Ali Engineer (<http://ecumene.org/IIS/>; <http://www.dawoodi-bohras.com>), Turkish Fethullah Gulen (<http://www.fethullahgulen.org/>), Iranian Kadivar Mohsen ([www.kadivar.com](http://www.kadivar.com)), Muqtedar Khan (<http://www.glocaleye.org/>), Egyptian-American Ahmed al-Mansour (<http://www.ahmed.g3z.com/>), Turkish-American Edip Yuksel (<http://www.yuksel.org/>), Iranian Abdolkarim Soroush (<http://www.dr.soroush.com/>) have combined academic work to a reformation of Islam and political activism. Muslim feminists like Fatema Mernissi (<http://www.mernissi.net>) also have a long and profound meaning in this sense. Individual thinkers form a kind of "sub-category" of academics. For example, the Swedish-based intellectual S. Parvez Manzoor (<http://www.pmanzoor.info/>) has written extensively e.g. about Islam, modernity and secularism. Yunus Yakoub Islam has created the so-called Tasneem Project (<http://www.bayyinat.org.uk/dihliz.htm>).

Third, professionals in different fields have been active in raising their voice in terms of alternative Islam. There are organizations gathering different types of professionals. One of them is the Muslim Professional Forum (<http://www.mpf.org.my>) that emphasizes professional and scientific training in constructing modernized Islam. Furthermore, Muslim lawyers have actively engaged in social and political discussions especially in the fields of human and civil rights. For example, *Karamah* is an organization focusing on Muslim women and human rights in Islam:

"KARAMAH: MUSLIM WOMEN LAWYERS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS is a charitable, educational organization that focuses on the domestic and global issues of human rights for Muslims. KARAMAH is committed to research, education, and advocacy work in matters pertaining to Muslim women and human rights in Islam, as well as civil rights and other related rights under the Constitution of the United States." (<http://www.karamah.org/home.htm>)

Fourth, artists, authors, and representatives of popular culture form an increasingly important group of people in terms of alternative Islam. These people have better channels to express their ideas and worldviews, since it is easier to tolerate unconventional perspectives when they are presented under the umbrella of art and popular culture (although there are examples of opposite situations as well). On Ali Eteraz's site there is an interesting example of artistic work which could easily be considered a rather radical endeavour in the aftermath of the caricature crises caused by Jylland-

Posten in 2006. Ali Eteraz has made a comic about Prophet Mohammed on his web blog.<sup>2</sup> He motivates this action by the following:

“So I asked myself, if in the heart of the believer today (though it wasn’t always), the image is always idolatrous, how then to reconcile that with the primordial impulse inside each of us which seeks to depict reality and depict history by way of the image? Ultimately I asked, how do I speak about the Prophets and the Companions in a medium which can synthesize the respect a Muslim owes to the Messenger with the will to create and render images?”<sup>3</sup>

Fifth, gender, sex and sexual orientation are important denominators of actors. This category gathers very heterogeneous actors ranging from ordinary people to different sexual minorities. Muslim feminists have been active since late 20<sup>th</sup> century, but the Internet has increased the number of people and activities. Canadian Irshad Manji (<http://www.muslim-refusenik.com>) has achieved wide media coverage also outside the Internet. A feminist author, journalist, and academic Asra Q. Nomani (<http://asranomani.com/>) has organized mixed-gender prayers in a mosque.

For sexual minorities (gays, lesbians, bi- and transsexuals) the Internet is a powerful new channel of communication. In most Muslim countries, homosexuality is not considered lawful, and it is not tolerated in cultural terms either. Therefore, homosexuals and other sexual minorities have mostly remained a hidden phenomenon. The Internet provides a forum for communities and individuals to express their feelings and emotions related to sexual orientation:

“Hello there, I’m a 15-year-old boy. I have been keeping this to myself all year but I really need help. I found out that there’s many like me on your Web site whom you’ve helped but I feel I am still not changing. Well I think I may be turning gay. I know it’s *haram*, and I love Allah too much to do such a bad thing. It’s a test from Allah and I feel that I’m failing. The only bad thing I’m doing is thinking about men.” (islamonline)

Sexual minorities are not merely people who suffer from strict cultural and religious norms regarding their sexuality and private life. In many Muslim countries sexual behaviour in general is firmly controlled and, for example, premarital relations are not commonly accepted. In this context, the Internet has opened the possibility of “*cyberdating*”, i.e., finding friends and potential partners through the Internet.

### ***Location of Participants***

Expanding the limits of actorness in the global Islamic public sphere is also related to the *locations* of actors. Conventionally, the Arab Islamic world has been the major player in the field and, accordingly, the Arab countries and Arab political activists and thinkers have been the main denominators of Islamic discourse. Apparently, this is due to the facts that Islam was born in the Arabian Peninsula, the language of Quran is Arabic, and the main Islamic educational sites are located on the Arabian Peninsula. Politically, Arab-Islamic organizations (like the Muslim Brotherhood) have been the most prominent actors, and their influence has spread outside the Arab region.

<sup>2</sup> <http://eteraz.wordpress.com/2006/10/08/muslim-comic-about-muhammad-marriage-of-the-prophet-to-zaynab/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://eteraz.wordpress.com/2006/10/08/statement-of-intent-behind-muslim-comic-about-muhammad/>

There are two main concepts that have challenged this basic logic concerning the location of Islamic actors in the international context: diaspora Muslims and Asian Islam. They are strongly present when studying the idea of alternative Islam on the Internet. Both trends have been instigated by globalization: increased migration has created diasporic communities, and the Asian economic growth has influenced also other dimensions of social life.

The Muslims participating in Internet discussions are mainly immigrants, refugees, and their offspring. Their position could be described with the term *diaspora*, referring to people who have lost their geographical place of origin. Through the Internet those people can find their fellow countrymen and religiously like-minded people. As Turner argues, “the Internet holds the diasporic community together across space and then challenges traditional authority (Turner 2007, 127).<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the diasporic actors, the meaning of Asian Islam to alternative Islam is evident on the basis of studying the Internet. Malaysia and Indonesia represent the most promising “new” geographical locations in Islamic public discourse, not forgetting China and Russia. Turner’s argumentation emphasizes especially South-East Asian Islam, which “may well play an increasingly important role in global Islam” (Turner 2007, 133). As a whole, Asian Islam might be powerfully challenging the Arab hegemony within Islamic public discourse.

Globalizing tendencies within the Muslim world also direct the attention to the grassroot level. Local and global efforts are closely interlinked. The Muslim Women League states the following about its mission:

“Networking with grass roots, civic, religious and other organizations; Participating in global efforts to improve the lives of women. “  
<http://www.mwlnusa.org/about/about.html>

Globalization is “not an elite phenomenon but a mass one, and it has a backlash at the core of countries of origin” (Roy 2004, 109). The current globalization increases the potential group of participants in socio-political processes, although it has frequently been argued that the situation further marginalizes people and groups that have already become marginalized.

## 5. Forms of action

The Internet seems to widen the sphere of potential actors and their geographical locations in the context of global Islam. This widening perspective is apparent also in the *forms* of actions: the Internet is able to provide a large variety of channels and different instruments for alternative Islamic voices. As stated earlier in this paper, the focus is on the global representations of Islam: the participating Muslims have been aware of the global dimension of communication over the Internet.

In order to study the alternative voices in Islam I divided the Internet in two: first, the use of the Internet for “*information delivery*” and, second, the use of the Internet as a *communication tool*. Information delivery refers to e.g. news sites, online magazines, as well as scientific and fictional articles and statements. It also refers to mission-related and other information disseminated by different Muslim organizations, communities, or individuals.

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<sup>4</sup> Oliver Roy (2004, 104) argues that transnational dimension of Islam “should not be thought in terms of diaspora, because there is less and less reference to a country of origin, while patterns of integration do not follow the older patterns of integration and assimilation.”

*Islamonline* – a mainstream approach with a rather modern tone – is an important example of Islam portals containing a wide variety of information and news about Islam and the Muslim world. It defines its position as follows:

“Adopting the middle ground of Islam, avoiding extremism or negligence, rejecting deviant or strange opinions.” (<http://www.islamonline.net/English/AboutUs.shtml>)

Among several news forums there are also quarterly magazines dealing with different Islamic issues in the modern world. For example, *Islamica Magazine*

“aims to broaden perspectives on Islam and to provide a voice for Muslims to articulate their concerns while establishing cross-cultural relations between Muslims and their neighbors and co-religionists.” (<http://www.islamicaweb.com/>)

*Cyberfatwas* are an interesting phenomenon and in many cases related to the conservative and mainstream Islam. But also in the context of alternative Islam, cyberfatwas seem to gain a certain position.

“Information delivery” forms a platform for expressing ideas and thoughts. However, the Internet can also be used as a *communication tool* to maximize its power. Online discussions, blogs, Myspace, Youtube, and cyberdating platforms are widely used for the purposes of alternative Islam. In addition to these, most sites provide applications for communication, comments, and networking.

*MuslimFriends.com* (<http://www.muslimfriends.com/>) and *Muslima.com* (<http://www.muslima.com>) focus on cyberdating, discussions related to marriage, dating, sex, etc. *Muslimyouth.net* is, in turn, a multifaceted platform for young people:

“By profiling the real experiences of Muslim youth in a public forum, muslimyouth.net aims to confront the cultural stigma attached to common social issues such as mental health, drug abuse and sexuality. The forum and chat rooms will allow young Muslims to talk openly and anonymously about the issues that affect them without fear or community reprisal.” (<http://muslimyouth.net/>)

*Islamica community* is intended to be a forum for open discussion among Muslims and between Muslims and non-Muslims (<http://www.islamicaweb.com/>). *Naseeb.com* is a social network and “an online community that connects young, educated, professional Muslims through networks of friends. The site provides a safe, discreet, and trusted environment for meeting other people with similar backgrounds.”

Blogs are a growing phenomenon in the Muslim world (see Lync 2007). As an example, the blog by essayist and activist Ali Eteraz is very provocative and causes a great deal of discussion among its readers (<http://eteraz.wordpress.com>). HU-Islam (<http://hu-islam.blogspot.com/>) explores Islam from women’s perspective and ProgressiveIslam.org (<http://www.progressiveislam.org/>) gathers a wide range of bloggers.

Internet phenomenon called the *YouTube*<sup>5</sup> (<http://www.youtube.com>) has also been used and contributed to by Muslims. In June 2007, there were almost 200,000 video clips related to Islam.

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<sup>5</sup> “Founded in February 2005, YouTube is the leader in online video, and the premier destination to watch and share original videos worldwide through a Web experience. YouTube allows people to easily upload and

(For interesting examples related to alternative Islam, see e.g. Who hijacked Islam??!  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqmMdPKw378>)

By using these forms of the Internet, Muslims adapt themselves to the logic of Western based Internet applications. However, there is a growing tendency to “Islamize” the Internet, i.e., to modify the existing forms of Internet to comply with the ideas of Islam. For example, there is Muslimspace<sup>6</sup> (vs. Myspace), Razipedia<sup>7</sup> (vs. Wikipedia), and IslamTube<sup>8</sup> (vs. YouTube). This “Islamic Internet” is an alternative to Western models. Furthermore, it is an alternative as regards Islam and Muslims themselves.<sup>9</sup>

## 6. The content of alternative voices

In which way are the alternative voices of Islam articulated in the Internet? What are the main categories and contents of these voices? Could they be categorised somehow, and what could be said about the intentions of the Muslim people participating in these forms of communication?

In the context of alternative Islam on the Internet, undoubtedly the most apparent and overarching theme is the *renewal of Islam*. Demands on *ijtihad*, *secularization*, and *depoliticization of Islam* have been articulated in numerous ways. In the post-9/11 era, the question of Islamic terrorism has been burning among Muslims, and therefore also the *denunciation of violence* has appeared as a major goal. Even though terrorist attacks have been condemned widely, open discussions with an alternative tone have remained relatively marginal within Islam. Nonetheless, there are voices which emphasize a clearly articulated position against religious violence and terrorism:

“The Free Muslims Coalition is a non-profit organization made up of American Muslims and Arabs of all backgrounds who feel that religious violence and terrorism have not been fully rejected by the Muslim community in the post 9-11 era. The Free Muslims was created to eliminate broad base support for Islamic extremism and terrorism and to strengthen secular democratic institutions in the Middle East and the Muslim World by supporting Islamic reformation efforts.”

(<http://www.freemuslims.org/about/>)

Violence and terrorism have perhaps not caused a very wide or deep intellectual debate. On the other hand, the secularization and de-politicization of Islam are clearly articulated targets of many organizations and individuals:

“In the last decade we have increasingly heard calls for a “reformation,” a new Enlightenment, or a secularization and liberalization of Islamic thought and practice. And yet there is to this day no organized international response. At the same time, a growing number of secular Muslims and secularists from majority Muslim countries have been undertaking these intellectual and strategic challenges independently. ... The purpose of the Secular Islam Summit is to bring together these thinkers and activists in an ongoing cross-cultural forum and clearinghouse to generate and share

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share video clips on www.YouTube.com and across the Internet through websites, mobile devices, blogs, and email.”

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.muslimspace.com>

<sup>7</sup> Razipedia is sub-project by Ali Eteraz web portal ([http://wiki.eteraz.org/index.php?title=Main\\_Page](http://wiki.eteraz.org/index.php?title=Main_Page)).

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.islamtube.com>

<sup>9</sup> Of course, it should be noted that these Islamized forms of Internet could be used (and have been used) by mainstream and extreme forms of Islam, not only alternative Islam.

new practical strategies and disseminate these to the public and opinion-makers worldwide.”

(<http://www.secularislam.org/blog/post/summit/2/An-International-Forum-For-Secularists-of-Islamic-Societies>)

“AIFD seeks to make a small contribution to the body of thought which articulates an understanding of Islam which separates religion and state and is in complete harmony with the U.S. Constitution and our citizenship pledge.

(American Islamic Forum for Democracy, <http://www.aifdemocracy.org/about/>)

The mission of *Islamic Pluralism* is to... “define the future of Islam in America as a community opposed to the politicization of our religion, its radicalization, and its marginalization, which has taken place because of the imposition on Muslims of attitudes opposed to American values, traditions, and policies.” (Center for Islamic Pluralism, <http://www.islamicpluralism.org/mission.htm>)

Demands for a political reformation of Islam coincide with claims for a renewal of Islam and its doctrines. Here the question of interpreting Islam is crucial; it is related to the authority to declare the proper ideas and content of Islam. The global media including the Internet has “democratized” the idea of interpretation: in principal anybody can claim the role of religious authority.<sup>10</sup> Turner argues: “While orthodox Islam claimed that *ijtihad* of the Qur’an was closed, modern media technology has opened up religious debate, not on a local, but on a global scale, with unpredictable consequences.” (Turner 2007, 121)

*Ijtihad*, i.e., the independent interpretation of Islamic law, is seen as the primary goal. Among the most radical approaches is *Project Ijtihad*, launched by Canadian Irshad Manji in pursuance of promoting a free interpretation of Islam:

“Based on my extensive touring and interaction with young Muslims around the world, I can report good news: the idea of a campaign to revive *ijtihad* is generating huge excitement. Young Muslims and their friends are expressing gratitude, relief, even love for my willingness to help them confront the extremists. There’s no doubt that some young Muslims detest me and my message of *ijtihad*. They tend to be the vocal and vitriolic ones. But everywhere I go, I’m quietly approached by Muslims, especially young women, who are desperate to know that it’s possible to dissent with mainstream orthodoxy while remaining faithful. The challenge now is to help transform that underground hunger for change into an above-the-ground phenomenon.” (<http://www.muslim-refusenik.com/ijtihad.html>; see also <http://www.myspace.com/projectijtihad>)

Inspired by Project Ijtihad, *Ijtihad Boston* (located on the *MySpace* web site) also follows the ideas of free speech and reformation of Islam:

“*Ijtihad Boston* provides a safe space for reform-minded Muslims to speak; and also serves as a place for difficult conversations to be aired between Muslims and non-

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<sup>10</sup> Oliver Roy is sceptical towards this argumentation. He argues that the interpretation of Islam has been withdrawn from the social environment and that the globalized religious corpus lacks traditional religious knowledge: there is no gradation in religious learning. The situation especially among Westernized Muslims is revealing: “the corpus circulating in Western languages among young Muslims in undeniably eclectic” (Roy 2004, 169).

Muslims. Ijtihad Boston is open to individuals of all faiths, genders, sexual orientations, geographical locations, etc. The only guidelines? Speak openly. Challenge yourself and others to confront defensiveness, allegiance, intolerance, violence and, yes...culture. Because culture is never an excuse for violence; and culture and religion are more intertwined than we realize.” (<http://www.myspace.com/ijtihadboston>)

These demands are also interlinked to the idea of *local Islam*, i.e., Euro-Islam, American and Asian Islam, which are influenced by national, regional, or local cultural and political conditions. The hegemony of Arab Islam (with much politicized ideas) has been recognized, and there is growing willingness to articulate Islam differently. The idea of local Islam is also against the global homogenization of Islam represented by more extreme actors who consider the Islamic world to be a coherent entity.

“Pure” political demands accompany other politically relevant areas. Gender equality and the rights of different Muslim minorities, including sexual minorities, receive considerable attention:

“We reject the authoritarian, racist, sexist and homophobic interpretations of our faith as antithetical to the principles of justice and compassion.” (<http://pmuna.org/>)

Gender equality and women’s rights are not seen only as a private or individual concern, but also as a community-level question. Among many others, *Sisters in Islam* is a gender-based website which attempts to emphasize the role of women in developing Muslim communities:

“The participation of Muslim women as full and equal partners in the ummah's socio-economic development and progress is the need of the day. We conclude that it is imperative that the female experience, thought and voice are included in the interpretation of the Qur’an and in the administration of religion in the Muslim world.” (<http://www.sistersinislam.org.my/mission.htm>)

The idea of *Queer Jihad*, relating to the rights of sexual minorities, has been promoted on many sites. The purpose of sexual minorities is to extend the scope of acceptance within the Muslim world:

“Queer Jihad is the queer Muslim struggle for acceptance: first, the struggle to accept ourselves as being exactly the way Allah has created us to be; and secondly, the struggle for understanding among Muslims in general.” (<http://www.well.com/user/queerjhd/aboutqj.htm>)

Open discussion about sexuality and the related themes has often remained a taboo among the Muslim people. The *Sex & the Umma* section of the MuslimWakeup pursues for example the following causes:

“To raise awareness among Muslims of sexual pleasures, problems, challenges, and concerns, from a perspective that affirms life and sexuality. Our views are shaped by egalitarian Muslim values, conceiving of sexuality in a joyous and Islamically inspired way. To address modern day Muslim sexual experiences even if they do not match Islamic prescriptions for sexual conduct.” (<http://www.muslimwakeup.com/sex>)

In alternative Islam, also demands for more liberated manners of expression – humour, popular culture, and art – receive special attention. They have largely been ignored in the discourse of extremists (and sometimes traditionalists as well) since they represent issues that are more or less forbidden, *haram*, in Islam. In alternative Islam they belong essentially to the lives of all human beings:

“A constant theme in our planning is how to promote a *popular* culture of liberty and tolerance in the Muslim world, so as to influence the general public, and not just an intellectual elite.” (<http://www.libforall.org/popculture.html>)

“We affirm the importance of celebrating the arts, culture, and the pursuit of joy in our daily lives. We believe the restrictions imposed by some on instrumental music and the depiction of human forms in paintings and sculpture contravene the rich Muslim cultural heritage from around the globe.” (<http://pmuna.org/>)

Humour and self irony have had a sensitive role in the public Islamic discourse. For example, the caricature crises in 2006 demonstrated effectively the limits of forms of expression. In the case of alternative Islam, there are some interesting examples on the web about the use of irony and humour. *Islamica News* (<http://www.islamicanews.com/>) is a satirical “news” forum displaying provocative and controversial (invented) stories.

The second major theme in alternative Islam is *Islam–non-Islam relations*. Demands for tolerance and non-violence are frequently articulated as well as the need for intercultural communication. Especially in the USA, there are numerous organizations concentrating on Muslim–non-Muslim relations, the Council of American-Islamic Relations being among the most famous of them:

“CAIR's mission is to enhance understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.” (<http://www.cair.com/default.asp?Page=About>)

“Muslim WakeUp! seeks to bring together Muslims and non-Muslims in America and around the globe in efforts that celebrate cultural and spiritual diversity, tolerance, and understanding.” (<http://www.muslimwakeup.com/info/>)

“The idea behind this blog was to present to the American public an alternative Muslim voice. A Muslim who is at once an American by culture and Muslim by practice (and reconciling the two). My hope and aim is to start a lasting and meaningful dialog between myself and my Western counterparts (meaning non-Muslim Westerners).” (The Manrilla Blog; <http://www.manrilla.net/blog/about/>)

The challenging relations between the Muslim world and Jews/Israel have often caused severe consequences. *Arabs for Israel* is one of the rare exceptions articulating that the state of Israel has a right to exist in the Middle East and that Muslims could support that effort:

“We can support Israel and still support the Palestinian people. Supporting one does not cancel support for the other. We can support the State of Israel and the Jewish religion and still treasure our Arab and Islamic culture.” (<http://arabsforisrael.com/whoarewe.html>)

## 7. Discussion

How should we interpret the meaning of alternative communication on the Internet concerning Islam and its relation to the mainstream and extreme trends? Although the data behind this preliminary survey was limited, some remarks and hypotheses can be formulated. In many cases, already the very existence of communication and different forms of Internet activities is important: the Internet may be the only possible communication medium for many Muslim people to convey their non-mainstream ideas. The Internet is particularly powerful in increasing the common consciousness of people sharing a particular situation; they are not alone in the existing political, social, or cultural circumstances. Parallel to the common consciousness, an *individualization* of religious experiencing and understanding is also taking place (cf. Roy 2004, 175, 181). Oliver Roy (2004, 183) argues that “the virtual *ummah* of the internet is the perfect place for individuals to express themselves while claiming to belong to a community to whose enactment they contribute to the enacting of, rather than being passive members of it.” Roy refers to highly personalized websites and their relation to the virtual umma, “as if there was nothing standing between the individual and the virtual *ummah*” (Roy 2004, 184).

The idea of virtual umma in the case of alternative Islam should not be seen too overarching or totalizing like it is in extreme Islam. For example, the mission of Al Qaeda is based on the vision of global, homogenous Islam without borders and on a common understanding of Islamic doctrines.<sup>11</sup> Those who create alternative Islam, in turn, construct a global, non-coherent network of ideas, meanings, and discourses. In this sense, the global umma is not a concrete community produced through practical political actions but merely an inspiring idea of the “spiritual core” of Islam.

There have been many opinions declaring the death of the idea of liberal Islam.<sup>12</sup> However, it is important to focus not only on certain types of political projects (like liberal or progressive Islam) within Islam but also on the overall process related to alternativity in Islam. The change within Islam is not only attached to political groups or organizations but also to a style of living and the roles of academics, professionals, and ordinary people.

The discourse on the extreme tendencies of Islam has strongly emphasized the unique nature of Islam: it covers all dimensions of life. Accordingly, the identity of a Muslim person is defined by Islam alone. If one is a Muslim, s/he cannot be anything else. Alternative forms of Islam, in turn, put emphasis on the idea of multilayered identities; Muslim identity is not considered exclusive; it can exist along with other forms of identity.

Themes related to sex, gender, and sexual minorities have broken the confines of private life, which has been the major denominator of extremist Islamic discourse. Private life has remained “the guardian of Islamic lifestyle” in a situation where many other issues have been secularized or de-Islamized. Alternative Islam has made private life public and open for new ideas and practices.

The dispersion of authority in Islam is apparent in Internet communication. The logic of authority cannot be defined as being legal-rational. Instead, it is dispersed and devolved (cf. Turner 2007, 124): the official authorities no longer explain who is in power in Islam. Therefore, it is not possible

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<sup>11</sup> The MuslimYouthNet states the following: “The concept of the Ummah has, over many years, lost some of its true meaning. More recently the word seems to have been hijacked by extremists and is often used in a political sense to draw people towards extremist ideologies.” (What does it mean to be a Muslim in the global sense? [http://muslimyouth.net/guidance.php?a\\_id=587&id\\_fk=4&id\\_fkis=87&id\\_fkt=215](http://muslimyouth.net/guidance.php?a_id=587&id_fk=4&id_fkis=87&id_fkt=215))

<sup>12</sup> See e.g. <http://www.rsis.edu.sg/publications/Perspective/IDSS0992006.pdf>; <http://sufinews.blogspot.com/2006/11/one-of-strongest-manifestations-of.html>

to achieve any coherent, unified, disciplinary, and homogenous Islam (demanded by many extreme and mainstream Muslim actors) – neither is it appreciated by many actors in alternative Islam. In this way, internal differences in Islam are being recognized and “confirmed.” The articulation of alternative Islam creates wide and multiple contact surfaces to Muslims as well as non-Muslims in relation to Islam. In other words, there will be more and more articulated discussions *within* Islam *about* Islam. Differences between people are being recognized, and there is a growing interest to advance discussion and debate about them.

In the current Muslim world, a crucial debate and change are taking place. The global articulation of the extreme trends of Islam now coincides with alternative voices enforcing a geographical and juridical dispersion of Islam. It remains to be seen what consequences the decreasing relative weight of the Arab Islamic area and the increasing global importance of Asian and diasporic Islam will bring. In any case, the Internet plays a considerable role in reconstructing the global Muslim public sphere, since it provides a communication forum not feasible elsewhere.

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**Appendix 1:** The selected list of organizations, communities and networks of alternative Islam

Liberal Islam Network (<http://islamlib.com/en/page.php>)  
 MuslimWakeup (<http://muslimwakeup.com/index.php>)  
 Progressive Muslim Union (<http://pmuna.org>)  
 Progressive Islam.org (<http://progressiveislam.org>)  
 Minaret of Freedom Institute (<http://www.minaret.org>)  
 Muslim Canadian Congress (<http://www.muslimcanadiancongress.org/index.html>)  
 ijihad.com (<http://www.ijihad.org>)  
 Freedom Movement in Iran (<http://www.nehzateazadi.org/english/history.htm>)  
 The Muslim Public Affairs Council (<http://www.mpac.org>)  
 Muslimstan (<http://muslimstan.net/>)  
 Women Living Under Muslim Laws (<http://wluml.org>)  
 Free Muslims Coalition (<http://www.freemuslims.org>)  
 Muslim Women's League (<http://www.mwlusa.org>)  
 Salaam (<http://www.salaamcanada.com>)  
 Muslim Youth Net (<http://muslimyouth.net/>)  
 Libforall (<http://www.libforall.org/>)  
 International Coalition against Political Islam (<http://www.icapi.org/>)  
 Eteraz.org (<http://www.eteraz.org>)  
 Sisters in Islam (<http://www.sistersinislam.org.my>)  
 Muslim Women League (<http://www.mwlusa.org/>)  
 Muslim Professionals Forum (<http://www.mpf.org.my/>)  
 GayEgypt (<http://www.gayegypt.com/>)  
 Al-Fatiha Foundation (<http://www.al-fatiha.org/>)  
 Safra Project (<http://www.safraproject.org/>),  
 The Center for the Study of Islam & Democracy (<http://csidonline.org/>)  
 The International Centre for Islam and Pluralism (<http://www.icipglobal.org/>)  
 The Sisterhood Is Global Institute (<http://www.sigi.org>)

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 Asghar Ali Engineer (<http://ecumene.org/IIS/>; <http://www.dawoodi-bohras.com>)  
 Fethullah Gulen (<http://www.fethullahgulen.org/>)  
 Iranian Kadivar Mohsen ([www.kadivar.com](http://www.kadivar.com))  
 Muqtedar Khan (<http://www.glocaleye.org/>)  
 Ahmed al-Mansour (<http://www.ahmed.g3z.com/>)  
 Edip Yuksel (<http://www.yuksel.org/>)  
 Abdolkarim Soroush (<http://www.dr.soroush.com/>)  
 Fatema Mernissi (<http://www.mernissi.net>)  
 S. Parvez Manzoor (<http://www.pmanzoor.info/>)  
 Tasneem Project (<http://www.bayyinat.org.uk/dihliz.htm>)  
 Muslim Professional Forum (<http://www.mpf.org.my>)  
 Karamah: Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights (<http://www.karamah.org/home.htm>)  
 Irshad Manji (<http://www.muslim-refusenik.com>)  
 Asra Q. Nomani (<http://asranomani.com/>)  
 Ali Eteraz (<http://eteraz.wordpress.com/>)  
 Islamica Magazine (<http://www.islamicaweb.com/>)  
 MuslimFriends.com (<http://www.muslimfriends.com/>)  
 Muslima.com (<http://www.muslima.com>)  
 Muslimyouth.net (<http://muslimyouth.net/>)  
 Islamica community (<http://www.islamicaweb.com/>)  
 Naseeb.com (<http://naseeb.com/>)  
 HU-Islam (<http://hu-islam.blogspot.com/>)  
 ProgressiveIslam.org (<http://www.progressiveislam.org/>)  
 Muslimspace (<http://www.muslimspace.com>)  
 Razipedia ([http://wiki.eteraz.org/index.php?title=Main\\_Page](http://wiki.eteraz.org/index.php?title=Main_Page))  
 Islamtube (<http://www.islamtube.com>)  
 Free Muslims Coalition (<http://www.freemuslims.org/about/>)  
 Secular Islamic Summit (<http://www.secularislam.org>)  
 American Islamic Forum for Democracy (<http://www.aifdemocracy.org/>)  
 Islamic Pluralism (<http://www.islamicpluralism.org/>)  
 Project Ijtihad (<http://www.muslim-refusenik.com/ijtihad.html>;  
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 Islamica News (<http://www.islamicanews.com/>)  
 Council of American-Islamic Relations (<http://www.cair.com/>)  
 Muslim WakeUp! (<http://www.muslimwakeup.com/>)  
 The Manrilla Blog; <http://www.manrilla.net/blog/about/>  
 Arabs for Israel (<http://arabsforisrael.com/>)