

A BATTLE FOR THE SOUL OF ISLAM

After the opening prayers and welcoming, ISNA's leadership invited the keynote speaker, Imam Siraj Wahhaj, to open the convention with a speech. I had never before been to a meeting of ISNA. The mere mention of ISNA evoked a visceral response from me due to a letter I had received from them burned into my memory from 1991. That was my only previous contact with them. The letter was addressed to me from ISNA and other so-called leading American Muslim organizations, and it beseeched all active-duty U.S. military Muslim personnel to refuse to participate in the Persian Gulf War on the grounds of "conscientious objection." But that was just a letter, which I angrily destroyed.

Four years later, I now found myself at their convention. I was pulled into listening to Siraj Wahhaj's address to the gathered Muslims. He was a slick, magnetic speaker who used anecdotes and sarcasm to subtly talk about his love of Islam, which I found compelling. But he also insinuated a subtle Islamic supremacist undertone that made me rather uncomfortable and disgusted. Nothing enraged me more than when he not so subtly began talking about the U.S. Constitution. He picked up the Qur'an and said, as I recall, "You know, I was sitting on an airplane minding my own business, reading my Qur'an, and imagine, a Jewish passenger sitting next to me asked me about the Qur'an I was reading—she asked me if Muslims became a majority in America, would we replace the U.S. Constitution with the Qur'an?" He laughed out loud and said, "Can you imagine someone wondering if a document made by humans would be superior to a document made by God?" He went on to describe our duty as Muslims to bring the Qur'an and its teachings and legal system to the United States.

I got lightheaded from how upset I became and sat down. After he was done with his speech, the president of ISNA and their board, all apparently delighted with his speech, then gave

an opportunity for Muslims to come to the microphone and announce events during the convention or ask the leadership questions. These were usually platitudes. I went to the microphone and said, as I stood there in my Navy whites, "I cannot believe the silence in this room after that offensive speech by Imam Wahhaj. Not only as an American military officer, but as an American Muslim I am summarily offended. I'm not sure if you understand American law, Imam Wahhaj, but as I understand it you have just violated the Sedition Act. You're free to disagree with foreign and domestic policy, but you cannot talk about the overthrow of the U.S. Constitution and its wholesale replacement by another document as if we are an insurgency." I then encouraged other military personnel in the audience to leave and all members who disagreed with his sedition to publicly dissociate themselves from ISNA because they were violating their citizenship oath to this country. I then made it abundantly clear that to whatever extent my presentation at the Islamic Medical Association afforded me any membership in ISNA, I was publicly renouncing that membership. Even more concerning than Wahhaj's speech and ideas and the pleasure of ISNA's board at his thoughts was the reaction of the thousands in attendance. It was disturbingly silent. The few who came up to me seemed to think I was "overreacting to something Wahhaj mentioned and would never happen," but their muted response exuded deep guilt. I thought to myself, what does this have to do with the real purpose of this event, to bring together Muslims from all over the country to socialize and to appreciate how Islam unites us spiritually wherever we may come from? That is, unless there were other theo-political evangelical purposes at play.

This event stayed with me for a long time. If my time at the University of Wisconsin was an eye-opener as far as Islamism was concerned, this event with naval officers present let me know just how brazen the Islamists could be and the depth of their

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ideological conflict with their chosen nation. Did they not feel the least bit embarrassed to air such views in front of U.S. armed services personnel and other patriots who might be there? Apparently not. From what I could tell, they definitely believed that those in the room valued religion, political Islam, and Middle Eastern geopolitics over loyalty to our country. It made me wonder if there were members of the armed services present who agreed with the speaker. This awakened me to the organized threat to our nation of the ideologies of political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood legacy groups like ISNA in America. This was 1995. The events of 9/11 were still several years away, and while I could never have predicted such horrific events, I was worried about the level of animosity such Islamists showed. I felt in my heart that while they may have been nonviolent, their separatism and inherent disgust for American freedoms and liberty were part of a deep animus for Western society permeated with a dangerous superiority that was bound to create a cadre of disaffected youths and disenfranchised communities. They were here in the United States, but seemed to have no real ideological loyalty to their adopted country, much less gratitude for all the liberty and rights it had given them. Their politics and religion seemed inseparable, and just as with the imam back in Milwaukee, there was no room for discussion. It was obvious by the glares I got from others in the room that my point of view was considered completely out of line. How dare I question such a position? And even if I was right, how dare I say it publicly, take on the “real” Islamic scholars, and air dirty laundry? I was learning that not only were our problems ideological, they were compounded by tribalism and groupthink.

Just as in Milwaukee, I held out the hope that such conflicts would be resolved by Muslims in a generation or so. Call me an eternal optimist.

There was another incident that prodded my concern over