

NATIONAL PRESS CLUB LUNCHEON WITH AYAAN HIRSI ALI

SUBJECT: CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS: ISIS, ISLAM AND THE WEST

MODERATOR: JOHN HUGHES, PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

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JOHN HUGHES: (Sounds gavel.) Good afternoon, and welcome. My name is John Hughes. I'm an editor for Bloomberg First Word, that's our breaking news desk here in Washington, and I'm the President of the National Press Club. The Club is the world's leading professional organization for journalists. We are committed to our profession's future through programs just like this, and we fight for a free press worldwide. For more information about the Club, visit our website Press.org. To donate to programs offered through our Journalism Institute, visit the website Press.org/institute.

On behalf of our members worldwide, I want to welcome you to today's luncheon. I'd also like to welcome our C-SPAN and Public Radio audiences. You can follow the action on Twitter. Use the hashtag NPCLunch. That's NPCLunch. And remember, the public attends our lunches, applause you hear is not evidence of a lack of journalistic objectivity. After our guest's speech, we'll have a question and answer period and I will ask as many questions as time permits.

Our head table guests include guests of our speaker as well as working journalists who are Club members. Let me introduce them to you right now. I'd ask each person to stand briefly as names are announced. From the audience's right, Joseph Morton, Washington bureau chief for the *Omaha World Herald* and National Press Club Membership Secretary; John Rosenberg, strategic advisor on Africa Sonoran Policy; Christopher DeMuth, fellow at the Hudson Institute and a guest of our speaker; Angela Greiling-Keane, a Bloomberg News White House correspondent and former President of the National Press Club; Maggie Jaffe, assistant to our speaker and her guest today;

Donna Leinwand Leger, reporter for *USA Today*, Vice Chair of the National Press Club Speakers Committee, and a former President of the National Press Club.

Skipping over our speaker for a moment, Doris Margolis, President of Editorial Associates Health and Science Communications, and the NPC member who arranged today's program. Thank you, Doris. Michelle Carter, Vice President for Worldwide Speakers Group and a guest of our speaker; Paul Shinkman, national security reporter for *U.S. News & World Report* and a third generation member of the National Press Club; Joel Whitaker, editor and publisher of Kane's Beverage News Daily and the former Secretary of the National Press Club. (Applause)

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is an author, women's rights activist and former Muslim and an outspoken critic of the religion she renounced. Her latest book, *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now* posits that ordinary Muslims are ready for a change. In a recent essay, she points to rising U.S. immigration from countries where many hold views that Americans would see as extreme. She wrote, "People with views such as these pose a threat to us all, not because those who hold them will all turn to terrorism, most will not. But such attitudes imply a readiness to turn a blind eye to the use of violence and intimidation."

Hirsi Ali was raised in a strict Muslim family in Somalia and survived female genital mutilation and a civil war. Her family emigrated to Saudi Arabia, then Ethiopia, and later settled in Kenya. After she said her father arranged for her to marry a distant cousin in 1992, she fled to The Netherlands. She was granted asylum and later citizenship. In 2003, she was elected to Dutch parliament. One year later, she and Theo van Gogh collaborated on a film critical of Islam's treatment of women. Van Gogh was assassinated and Hirsi Ali received death threats.

She moved to America in 2007, obtained citizenship in 2013 and co founded the AHA Foundation. She is a fellow at Harvard's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and a visiting fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. The topic of her talk today is Clash of Civilizations: ISIS, Islam and the West. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in a warm National Press Club welcome for Ayaan Hirsi Ali. (Applause)

MS. HIRSI ALI: Thank you, John, for having me back again at the National Press Club. I want to start by acknowledging Chris DeMuth, who was the former President of the American Enterprise Institute and among so many things that he has done, he brought me to America. Thank you. (Applause)

When I was last here about 4 ½ years ago, and Chris was here, I was invited to come and speak to you on the proposition Islam is a religion of tolerance. I don't know how far back your memory extends. But you will forgive me for enjoying this moment that I back then took the position that Islam was not a religion of tolerance, it was not a religion of peace. Of course, in October 25 of 2010, that's the day I was here, I

acknowledged that there are millions and millions of Muslims who are peace loving and who are tolerant. But I was confident that Islam unreformed as a creed was neither peaceful nor tolerant.

In 2010, I published a book, *Nomad*, and there's one chapter in there where I acknowledge that okay, I was born into Islam and through an evolution, an intellectual journey, I was able to shed religion not just Islam. And in my youthful enthusiasm, I thought that oh, if you get liberated from hellfire, you will join me in my atheism. And in 2010, I was disappointed that X Muslims, the X Muslims that I interacted with and I encountered, were not willing to join me in my atheism. And I thought, well what the heck? If you want another religion, it might be possible, I was kind of thinking the way Americans think, there is a problem, there must be a solution. And if the problem was I want to believe in a God, in 2010, I thought, well there are so many gods, there is a benign God, the Christian God. And back then, I was promoting the idea if you're a peace loving tolerant Muslim and you want to be religious, why not just convert to Christianity? And I write a very naïve letter to the Pope saying, "Why don't you capture the hearts and minds of all these millions of people who are spiritual in search of redemption?"

Unfortunately today, I have to admit to you that the Pope did not follow my advice. There is no program, Catholic program, that wants to capture the hearts and minds of Muslims. If it is there, I don't know about it. He has not involved me in it.

It's five years ago, nearly five years ago, and I've come to the conclusion as we all grow and as we all evolve, that you don't shed a religion that easily. It's not like taking off a shirt and wearing another shirt. People are attached to their traditions, they're attached to their religions. And I'm here to say that I have matured and I've learned and I've come across more and more Muslims who instead of converting to something else, instead of deserting their religion, would actually like to reform it.

And that brings me back to the statement, is Islam a religion of peace and tolerance? In 2010, it was a matter of debate. It was still open for debate. And I got questions from this audience, and we went back and forth. And I remember saying, "Well, okay, dear journalists, why don't you go ahead and research it?" But today, I feel that there is a change. There's a shift in opinion toward my side. And I don't want to claim that triumph. It is not-- if you have changed your mind, if you have come to accept the position that Islam is not a religion of peace or tolerance, it's not because I have persuaded you. It is because events may have persuaded you.

I just want to run through a list of those events just to highlight them. The Arab Spring. Some people want to think of it as the Arab winter. I honestly think that is open for debate because I think of it as a spring, something happened there. That is not what many of you expected, it wasn't sort of a triumphant, we want a liberal democracy along the lines of the American constitution. It wasn't American revolution, it wasn't a French revolution, it wasn't a Prague revolution.

But what happened is what happened to me in 2002, which was you simply start asking questions. This person, this entity, this institution, that claims absolute authority. Who the heck is this, who the heck are they? And as they overthrew despots, some countries succeeded in doing that, some countries did not, but the central question, the big question mark that sticks out in the heads of those people who were demonstrating was I'm not going to allow myself to submit to something that I don't want to submit to. And if you're an Egyptian and you say, "Mr. Mubarak, who are you? Why do you want absolute authority over me?" you are simply going to have the same question. If you're a wife to a husband, why should I obey you unconditionally? If you're a teacher and a student, that relationship, why do you have the last word? May I ask some questions?

And this takes you to the next level. Because in Islamic context, everybody's going to say, "That's what God wants you to do. That's what the Prophet Muhammad instructed," and it's only a matter of time before you say, "Well, maybe I don't agree with God. Maybe I don't agree with the Prophet Muhammad." So the Arab Spring, even though it is not dismissed as a winter because we had false expectations, but if you had this type of expectation, you're going to still see it as a spring. It's a remarkable development.

The second point coming from that Arab Spring are the elections in Tunisia and Egypt. It seems to me that there's enough evidence in Tunisia that there is a substantial body of the population who when they were presented with an agenda for political change based on Sharia law versus one based on secular law, however imperfect, we've seen this struggle and we're going to continue to see it, that in Tunisia, a majority of Tunisians, at least a meaningful majority of Tunisians, made the choice to go with a secular government. It's fragile, it's not yet there. But it is something that we need to note. In my view, I think if we can do anything, we need to help Tunisia survive.

But we also saw the election in Egypt and in the first instance, people supported and subscribed to a government based on Sharia law, divine law. It was one year old when, again, many Egyptians inspired to make that change, they still had that energy, made a choice between two very bad options; Sharia law that came about through the ballot box versus back to secular military law. And a meaningful number of Egyptians went with secular law.

Then we saw the civil wars; Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya. Or if you want to be more accurate, sectarian wars, a proxy war between Sunni Saudi Arabia and Shi'a Iraq. In 2010, it was a completely different context. We had not seen Boko Haram. Do you remember the hashtag, Bring Back Our Girls? The capture of Mali, it was unthinkable in 2010 that the likes of al-Qaeda would take over a country as large as Mali. and yes, together with the government of France and the U.S., but with France in the lead, al-Qaeda was kicked out and something, some measure of order is restored but Islamic extremism made the point.

And, of course, this is what keeps us all awake; the proclamation of a caliphate by a man named Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. That wasn't there in 2010. It was still if you wanted

to say Islam is a religion of peace, it's a religion of tolerance, well you could be on this side or you could be on that side. But there was no caliphate. And in response to the caliphate is the Obama Administration's pledge to degrade, destroy and chase to the gates of hell that particular caliphate.

And even more shocking and disturbing, the stream of volunteers, individual volunteers, from 80-something countries, to the call of al-Baghdadi, including many women. And even more disturbing, including to citizens from the liberal west, from the U.S., from France, from Britain. So in 2010 when we were discussing and debating is Islam a religion of peace and tolerance, I could say you know, go ahead, you dear journalists and do your research. But today, with all of these events unfolding before your very eyes, I don't think a day goes by without a headline about what is done in the name of Islam that is even more shocking.

The latest Good Friday was in Garissa, Kenya. I grew up in Kenya. The man who masterminded that atrocity was a refugee in Kenya. He went to Jermo [?], Kenya to university, Ohuru University. He grew up in relative comfort, at least if you lived in Kenya you would be envious of his position. He went to Saudi Arabia and got radicalized. And today, that is what he does for a living; masterminding terrorist actions in Kenya, the country that welcomed him. You'll only appreciate this if you're a Somali because if you're a Somali, living in a country of perpetual-- in a context of perpetual civil war, the first place that you go to in the hope of a better future is not really the USA or the west, it is Kenya.

And so there are thousands if not millions of Somalis who are enjoying something relatively better than what they would have had a home. And it is to me personally not only a deep shock of what happened, but a source of shame and embarrassment that our neighbor that has given us refuge, that we repay them in this way. And I would like Somalis, wherever they are, to stand up and then denounce this in a specific manner.

But I don't want to hold you up. You understand that I still hold the position that is Islam is not a religion of peace, not yet, not yet, and that is the evolution in my own thinking. Of course, we all know that millions of Muslims are desperate for peace and tolerance. I thought that in 2010, I still think that. My encouragement for Muslims to join Christianity, I don't think that's going to work. So the question is then what needs to happen? And I know that if you operate in the world of policy, either as a policy maker, policy advisor, or policy observer, you have a list of measures that you weigh in on and this will be military options. Of course, we have to destroy and degrade and chase to the gates of hell ISIS. I get that, we all get that. Just do it efficiently and do it fast.

Of course, we understand that there is an economic equation. We understand that there might be something to gain through diplomacy. But ultimately, ultimately, because this is a creed and ideology that one-fifth of humanity believes in, we cannot get away from the reality that there is something within Islam inherent in Islam, that inspires, incites, and mobilizes millions of people to engage in what our president euphemistically calls nonviolent-- no, he calls it violent extremism.

And so then what is the answer? If you come to my position 4 ½ years later, if we accept the position Islam is not a religion of peace, then what happens? What do you do? I struggled with this question for a long time and I thought, “All right. Instead of pretending that there are several Islams, let’s accept that there are three sets of Muslims, or rather, several sets of Muslims.” Of course, you can have as many sets of Muslims as you like, we’re looking at one-fifth of humanity, but I settle for three. And the first set I would describe as the Mecca Muslims. When the Prophet Muhammad founded Islam, he was going from door to door telling the Arabs, Arab tribes, “Please give up all of your gods and unite under one God.” And in those days, he was preaching charity, he was preaching humanity, he was preaching peace. Maybe that’s where the Islam is peace thing comes from, the Mecca Muslims. And there are Muslims, and I think that’s the majority of Muslims, who when they reflect on their religion, wants to follow the Prophet Mohammad and the Koran in the Mecca period.

And then there's a second set of Muslims. Muhammad makes a hijra [?] or an emigration from Mecca to Medina. In Medina, his status changes. He becomes a war lord. He becomes a politician. He’s a legislator. He’s a leader. And there's a lot to admire him about during that period. But, in 2015 if you want to apply Muhammad’s moral guidance then you are going to end up with something called the Islamic State, or al-Qaeda or Boko Haram, or all the anomalies we think are anomalies to Islam, but are actually inherent.

And then we have a small group of people, individuals within Islam today, I didn't see them in 2010, I see them now, who are saying, “There's something wrong within our own scripture. Our scripture, the example of the Prophet Muhammad, that provides too much inspiration to too many bad people, the Medina set of Muslims. And what can we do about it?” And they're struggling to bring about a change.

And here's the interesting thing. If we move the debates to okay, Islam needs something. Maybe not an exodus of Muslims out of Islam, but something else, a reformation. Christianity, a great religion, went through a reformation, Judaism went through a reformation. If Islam needs to go through a reformation, then to the Muslim reformers, what is it that needs to change?

When you turn on the television and you feel yourselves inspired and heartened by the words of the current President of Egypt, and you know how he came to power, and he says, In Al-Azhar, the thousand something year old university in Egypt, most prestigious, he looks at the clerics and he tells them, “We need a revolution, a revolution in religion.” What does he mean, what does he want? I don't know. I just know that the very fact that he’s doing that is new and incredibly brave. And I have five amendments that I think Al-Azhar-- the Al-Azhar leadership can make. I don’t expect them to, I don't think any change is going to come from them. But hey, let’s give them the benefit of the doubt.

But I think I know what Mr. el-Sisi is looking for. And it is five amendments. Muslims, those of us how are born into Islam, we need to change our attitude toward the Koran and the hadith. The document must be read in its context, accept that it's the work of human hands. Maybe divinely inspired, but the work of human hands. And Muhammad as a moral guide after Mecca is really problematic. And I'm being PC.

Number two, a second amendment I would like to make in Islam, growing up as a young Muslim girl, woman, child, we invest far more in life after death than in life before death. And there we need a change in priority.

Number three, Sharia law. Do I need to describe that? When it's applied, it manifests itself under the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iran, Islamic Republic of Iran, and its worst manifestation, the Islamic State founded by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. There's a less known concept called commanding right and forbidding wrong. And if you want to understand the worst manifestation of what that looks like, I would like you to revisit the images of the Afghani woman who is accused of burning the Koran. She did not burn the Koran. She was accused of burning the Koran and some random man calls and says, "This woman burned the Koran," and a mob of men come out and lynch her. That is commanding right and forbidding wrong.

And then, of course, jihad, holy war. That should be replaced with holy peace. If these five amendments are made, and given the time that we have I can't delve into every one of them, but I do get into depth within the book, I think that we will have a separation of religion from politics in Islam. I think that we in the west, because that is obviously the last question, what can we in the west do to help this process of reformation, if anything, I would say we have to side with those individuals and those groups who are trying to bring about that kind of change. This is my five-cent commitment to it. And now, I welcome your questions. (Applause)

MR. HUGHES: Thank you so much. So, reforming major world religion in such a fundamental way as you describe seems to be a huge undertaking. Do you view yourself as someone who's planting the seed for change that will happen maybe decades down the road, centuries down the road? Or do you think that there's some reformation that can take hold and happen much more quickly?

MS. HIRSI ALI: Well, first of all, I want to say of course it's going to take decades. This is a process that could take very long. I won't be around when it happens. I wish I were, but I won't be around when it happens. Do I see any hope? Yes. And I list that. I'll just give you a few examples that have caught the attention of the press. If you're living within Saudi Arabia and you grow up in Saudi Arabia, you must have heard of this man, Hamza Kashgari, who starts to Tweet about his doubts of the prophet. And because of technology, he's able to share with not only Saudis but anyone who can read and write and has an access to the internet in the Islamic world what his doubts are. That is new. That's revolutionary. So the internet is one-- the internet is to Islam what the printing press was to the Christian reformation.

Number two, there's an urban elite that has-- if you're in Tunisia today and your source of income was because of two reasons, museums, the beaches, everything, you have a vested interest, immediate and dire, to keep up the tourist industry. And all across what you see in the Middle East is an urban elite that is Muslim, maybe pious in varying degrees. But invested in not having Sharia law applied because if Sharia law is applied, they're out of a job. They can't put bread on the table. It's very important to know that. There was an urban elite during the Christian reformation that had an interest in reforming the church.

And finally, I see states, all of them despotic, trust me. But these despotic states that before the Arab Spring found refuge only in repression and are coming to understand that they have to take Islamic extremism head on. I've mentioned Egyptian President, but the government of the UAE, the government of Saudi Arabia, declared the Muslim Brotherhood as an entity-- I mean, if you know anything about the Muslim Brotherhood, they want Sharia law, but they want to get it by peaceful means.

And then there are the groups that don't want it by peaceful means. But these governments, the King of Jordan, you name it, they all feel threatened by Islamic extremism. And so, the time is ripe, the time is ripe, to say maybe now is when a Muslim reformation will take hold and most importantly of all, there are individuals who are literally risking their lives, literally risking their lives to get this done. All of these combined, again, it is a wonderful opportunity that we should not miss.

MR. HUGHES: Is there an individual out there whose voice could rise above other voices and be heard to move forward? Or is it somebody that needs to emerge down the road that can make that happen? And the other part to the question is what can Americans do, or non-Muslims do, to advance this cause?

MS. HIRSI ALI: You know, because we live in a world of order, we think some individual is going to come and we're going to rally around this individual. I think if that's the line of thinking you take, you will be disappointed. Maybe, who knows? Some charismatic individual will rise up and just have all Muslims subscribe to a new and reformed Islam, hopefully with these five amendments. But I really think in the world we live in, it's not going to happen like that.

I also want to say the nature of Islam, there is no hierarchy, it's flat. All men are equal before God. Now, you can see that as an advantage, but you can also see it as a disadvantage because the way the Islamic thing is done, you have a choice only between obeying the leader, the imam or the mullah or the cleric, or complete anarchy, fetna. In the modern world, and after having seen grass roots movements, I personally think that it's better to invest in something more like a grass roots-- and this is all new, it's very young. And that's what the west can do. We can discriminate between who is really interested in meaningful change versus who's pretending to change things.

So, when I have two individuals before me, I debated a woman, Linda Sarsour, at the Diane Rehm Show. And she has sold herself and her program to the United States of

America and the American government as a leader of change. But she hasn't convinced me because as she and I debate, she starts with Islam is perfect, and I think end of conversation. If you think it's perfect, then out. So we need to talk to the individuals within Islam who are saying it is not perfect, and that's a beginning. And from there, you ask the question, "If it is imperfect, then what do we need to do?" And then bring them together and then hopefully take it from there. Many of them are very, very advanced, and not all of them are ex-Muslims. In fact, most of them are not ex-Muslims. Some of them are clerics, some of them are in government.

So for me, I would say what we can do, and we have a vested interest in that, is to say let's empower this group of people and then go about it the way we went about the Soviet Union. What we're dealing here with is an ideology, a political ideology. It is religious in many ways, but it's not a problem, A, that is new to America; and B, that American cannot defeat. It's that we choose not to do it.

MR. HUGHES: You made reference to ISIS and said that's a threat that needs to be dealt with quickly, efficiently. What do you think of the U.S. approach on ISIS and the Obama Administration has said no boots on the ground. They want to deal in the way they're addressing now without committing U.S. troops. Is that the right approach?

MS. HIRSI ALI: Wow, I think our approach to the Middle East today, and I just want to use the most politically correct word that I can come up with now, is it's incoherent. Let me just give you an example of that incoherence. We're fighting ISIS alongside Iran, Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni governments are our allies. They're waging proxy war in Iraq, in Syria, in Yemen and we're supporting both of them but we're also opposing them. We're having nuclear negotiations with Iran. Iran is out there saying death unto America, death to Israel. It's not that I-- our policies and our approach to the Middle East right now is incoherent and the Middle East is in a crisis. What was called the Islamic civilization is in a crisis. Unfortunately, millions of Muslims find themselves in the grip of Islamic extremism.

I think we need to take a step back, we need to review our relationship with the Middle East. We need to take this in a more coherent way. I don't think I can influence that. But whatever we do, whatever the next presidential candidate does, or whatever the next administration does, whatever Congress does, you will have a number of policies on the table that Americans are comfortable with. They'll be military, they'll be economic, they'll be diplomatic. What we're most uncomfortable with when it comes to Islamic extremism is that we're dealing with an ideology. And I still think that we haven't made any effort to invest in persuading these myriads of people that a vision to organize society around Sharia law is a wrong way to go and that we have an alternative.

If you look at what the Islamic extremists are saying about America in their writings and to the Muslim people, whether they're here or whether they're elsewhere, it's stereotypes like America is greedy. America just wants to come and take your oil. America is supporting despots to feed their consumerism.

What we don't tell and don't highlight, and I wish we would, is what America really is about. In covering ISIS, and you look at the number of people that the Islamic state beheaded or killed, we saw the journalists. It was easy for the leaders of ISIS to tell the Muslim world these guys were spies so they deserved to be beheaded. But there was a young woman from Arizona who went there, probably against the advice of her parents, to help the people of Syria and they killed her. That is something-- that is an aspect about America that I would like to advertise to the rest of the world. To say how many American volunteers are there across the world selflessly trying to help people in turmoil? How much money do we spend?

I know a lot of Americans will think but that would be boasting, this and that. But that is America, that is something about America that local people know. And that's the story that we don't tell them. When we have a confrontation within America about the situation of the gays, the blacks, female emancipation, all of that, in an open society people will take only one side of the story and apply it again to that American stereotype, which is we're just monsters.

And I think that what our government fails to do, and what our society fails to do, is that we're the most philanthropic nation in the world. That our youth are the most generous. They not only give money, they give their time and maybe even their lives. That we're the most innovative world. I've spent some time with the Silicon Valley people and they go all over the place trying to innovate and invent solutions to the problems of water shortage. The Middle East is facing-- it's not the sectarian war, that's one problem, that's a big problem. But pretty soon, they'll be faced with a water shortage problem. If that is solved, who is doing it? It's Americans.

I think we need to sell ourselves and it's not selling, but it's to inform, it's a campaign of information, to inform ordinary Muslims what America is really about and not stereotypes.

MR. HUGHES: You referenced in your speech the Obama Administration's use of the word violent extremism to describe the threat. A questioner asks why you think that the administration wants to stick to that terminology? Obviously, you do not. But if the goal of the administration is to not encourage discrimination against the millions of peaceful Muslims out there, is that really a bad goal?

MS. HIRSI ALI: Well, first of all it's not this administration, it was the last administration and the administration before that and the administration before that and probably most of western governments, which is we, the United States of America and the rest of the western world, we are not at war with Islam. There are people who are using Islam as a religion and taking the lead and who are at war with us. That's a different story, but we're not at war with them.

What the American government wants to do over and over again is convince Muslims whether they're here, again, or abroad, we're not at war with you. If we were, the circumstances would be very different. I'm going to leave that to your imagination. We're

not at war with Islam. And I think it demonstrates a restraint, a sense of restraint. We can be, but we're not.

And here's what frustrates me. We're not seeing the necessary reciprocity. And I'm not talking about ordinary people, but allies like the government of Saudi Arabia. We give them a finger, they take the whole hand. Analyze the negotiations with Iran. The more we give, the more they take. And I think in this kind of negotiating context, you would want to see the United States of America put its foot down. That doesn't mean to go to war, it just means to negotiate differently.

And that's what we're not seeing. I don't care if the President says, you know, if he calls it violent extremism or mixed salad, I don't care. That's how governments operate anyway. It's a whole bunch of things that we're supposed to agree to and it's in the nature of democratic government to use euphemisms for controversial issues. I really don't care what he calls it.

What I care about are the policy outcomes. If our President picks up the phone and calls the King of Saudi Arabia about a gentleman who is going to get a thousand lashes and he ends up being lashed, then I think that as the most powerful country in the world, we are being taken for a ride. These negotiations about whether Iran is going to have a bomb or not, again I'll leave that to the experts. But the way it's going, I feel like we're just giving too much. And a lot of people think it's just this president. I'm actually pessimistic. I don't know if it is just this president. It could be the next and the next. It is not-- if western society finds itself in big trouble, it's not because Islam is strong or destructive, or because China is strong or destructive, it's because we are no longer confident in what we are about and what we believe in. (Applause)

MR. HUGHES: Some of your critics have said that your criticism of Islam crosses the line. So the Council on American Islamic Relations about a year ago when they wrote Brandeis University, said that you practice religious prejudice and that honoring you would be similar to awarding white supremacists or anti-Semites. Now, Brandeis withdrew plans to give you an honorary degree a year ago. How do you respond to this group's suggestion that your criticism of Islam is amounting to prejudice and intolerance?

MS. HIRSI ALI: I just want to highlight that they have a hidden agenda. And that hidden agenda has been made manifest by a woman called Asra Nomani, who was a journalist for the *Washington Post* and she wrote a wonderful essay on the honor brigade, on which the Council of American Islamic Relations is one. And she wrote this in January of this year, 16 January, and I'd like you all to read it and you just know how it all works. And I think that it's unfortunate that Brandeis submitted to this, that they caved in. But it's not only Brandeis. It's government, it is the press, it is-- there are so many of our institutions who have been taken in by the honor brigade. And as the press community, I really would urge you to take that essay and read it because it gives a wonderful answer to the question you are all asking. Why is it so hard to criticize Islam? Read Asra Nomani, *Washington Post*, 16 January this year.

MR. HUGHES: Okay, you have said that the Muslims are responsible for majority of violence in the world, 70 percent was one percentage quoted, but I think maybe that's changed. But in any event, it was responsible for a majority of violence. This questioner says does this excuse the U.S. government in contributing at all to the violence in the Middle East? And the questioner cites the Iraq invasion. So has the west played a role in increasing violence?

MS. HIRSI ALI: See, the thing about the Iraq invasion is if you want to use the Iraq invasion, Iraq policies as an excuse for the emergence of ISIS and al-Qaeda and for the crisis that Islam is in, then that's one thing. If you want to use the Iraq invasion in that way, and I would say the person who's putting the Iraq invasion on the table right now to discuss how can we stop ISIS and Islamic extremism, just wants to shut down debate. Of course, there are policies, American policies, European policies, western policies. And I really think that it is extremely important, and it happens all the time, to analyze our own policies, rework them, review them, and change them.

But I've been following this since 2001 and what I've seen is the debate in the United States of America about its foreign policy is robust and whichever way you want to pull it, the people of America have a say in it. The people of China do not have a say in their foreign policy. In the Muslim world, people don't have a say in their domestic or foreign policies and so on and so forth.

So please don't allow, don't allow, these despots when you start to take about their human rights records and their domestic policies records and their foreign policy records, don't allow them to use American and Israeli policies as an excuse to change the subject. (Applause)

MR. HUGHES: A couple of questioners want to drill down a little more deeply on the ideas you express. One says violence in the name of Islam is endemic, but where is the problem? Is it the religion itself or is it the practice by some of today's Muslims? And another questioner says is Islam not only because of religion, but a combination of religion, legal system, political system, military philosophy, social system and maybe more?

MS. HIRSI ALI: Pick up *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*. Thank you. (Laughter and Applause)

MR. HUGHES: You mention the recent terrible attack. In the United States, do you think that there's likelihood of seeing some of those devastating type attacks, or do you think that the Homeland Security and other governments have largely taken the necessary protections?

MS. HIRSI ALI: Homeland Security, the FBI, the CIA, all our agencies have done a remarkable job, remarkable and wonderful job, and I really think you need to applaud them. We need to applaud them. We in the United States of America have said

we're not going to let this happen again, ever. Some incidents have taken place. There have been some policies that were calling what happened at Fort Hood in 2009-- you have a member of the military who kills other members of the military because he's not loyal to our military, but he's loyal to something else. Calling that workplace violence, that generates just bad will. It's awful, we shouldn't have done that.

But if you, from 2001 until now, if you evaluate, you'll say we spend trillions and trillions and trillions of dollars not to have an incident like 9/11 ever happen here again. But what kind of guarantee do we have that it won't happen again? We know that there is the determination, the will, that the enemy has these resources, they tell us what they want. and they try and they try and they try and they try again. And we foil and we foil and we foil and we foil every attempt. If they succeed at one attempt, we-- and they've never had anything spectacular as 9/11, but we'll be upset and sad. But I'm confident that we can defeat them.

But I think where we're not taking them on, where we're spending all of that money on, is we're being reactive. They try something, we try to stop it. They try something else, we try to stop it. What we're not really taking them on is in the battlefield of ideas. And that's what this book is about. That if we bring about public diplomacy, again as it used to be during the Cold War, and we take them, we engage them that way so that more Mecca Muslims come to our side instead of going to the Medina Muslims or the general reformists, I think that's where we'll really defeat them and it's much cheaper.

MR. HUGHES: We're almost out of time, but before I ask the last question, I want to remind everyone about upcoming speakers. Ban ki-Moon, Secretary General of the United Nations will speak on April 16th. Navy Secretary Ray Mabus will address the Club on April 30th. And Vint Cerf, chief internet evangelist for Google and a father of the internet, will speak on May 4th.

I'd now like to present our guest with the traditional National Press Club mug. We've been talking about a lot of heavy things today, but when you enjoy a quiet moment, this is a wonderful way to have a beverage. (Applause)

MS. HIRSI ALI: Thank you.

MR. HUGHES: Our final question, I just wanted you-- we just have a couple of minutes left, but you had renounced Islam and said that you're an atheist. And do you think that's where you're firmly entrenched, or how do you think of your spirituality evolving from where it's been and where is it going? Is this where it's going to stay?

MS. HIRSI ALI: I think my spirituality is just fine. (Laughter) But I just want to take this moment on the question of spirituality, to share with you that religions are different. I've been promoting this book now for the last two weeks and you've probably seen my conversation with Jon Stewart, and others. And it always goes to but is Christianity any different from Islam? And my observation is yes, Christianity is different from Islam, Judaism is different from Islam. These two religions have gone through a

process of reformation. That will not say that I'm converting to them. But I just want to make it clear that the Christian God in 2015 is different from the Muslim God in 2015. And the worst thing that a Christian has ever said to me, the rudest thing that a Christian has ever said to me, the thing that has made me most uncomfortable that a Christian has ever said to me, is, "I'm going to pray for you. I hope you'll be safe, and I hope you'll be redeemed."

But within my own family and my own community and when I say, "You know what? I'm in doubt about the Koran and Muhammad and life after death and all that," it's, "Well, then you ought to die." So I just want to point out the differences between the religions. You can mock Christianity and Judaism and all these other religions as much as you like. You can't say a thing about Islam. And that's the kind of, you know, what makes me really angry is the moral equivalence, the moral equivalence.

Now, religion gives us faith in the future, hope in the future. My hope and faith in the future is that one day, one day, Islam and Muslims will become so civilized and so peaceful and so tolerant as Christianity and Judaism. And I know that is controversial, but I'm going to leave it at that.

MR. HUGHES: A round of applause for our speaker, please. (Applause) I'd like to thank our speaker and thank our audience and thank the National Press Club staff including the Journalism Institute and Broadcast Center for organizing today's event. And if you'd like a copy of today's program, or to learn more about the National Press Club, go to our website, Press.org. Thank you, we are adjourned. (Sounds gavel.)

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