



Muslim Moderates Under Siege

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[Robert Spencer](#)

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Since I began work on my new book [*The Truth About Muhammad*](#), I have often been asked whether I really think it will do any good to discuss the actions of Muhammad that jihadists use to justify violence. Doesn't that alienate moderate Muslims? I have responded that actually no Islamic reform can possibly take place without an acknowledgment that there are elements of the Qur'an and the example of Muhammad that need searching reevaluation: how can reformers succeed if no one admits that anything needs any reforming?

At the same time, however, Islamic reformers have a difficult road. They are often targeted as apostates by jihadists, and often physically threatened. Farzana Hassan Shahid, the new president of the Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC), is the

latest victim of this phenomenon. After her liberal views on many Islamic hot-button issues became known, she began receiving death threats from Muslim hardliners who considered her positions evidence of her falling away from Islam. One called her the "younger sister of Satan." Another accosted her husband at an Ontario mosque and demanded he "control his wife."

Consequently, Farzana Hassan Shahid [explained](#), "there is an underlying fear all the time...that uneasy feeling is part of my daily life. I have been declared an apostate twice, for opposing the Sharia [Islamic law]. We have asked [Ontario Attorney General] Michael Bryant to include or acknowledge accusation of blasphemy and apostasy into the existing hate laws so the public and legal

frame work is sensitized to this issue.”

Hassan Shahid is not the first MCC official to be targeted by jihadists. Up until recently, Tarek Fatah was the MCC’s communications director. But in August [he abruptly resigned from his position](#), as well as from the group’s board, severing all ties with the organization, although he had been one of its founders.

Fatah had excellent reasons to want to get out of the limelight. He had long been one of the most high-profile Muslim spokesmen in Canada: he was host of *Muslim Chronicle*, a current affairs TV-show focusing on Muslims in Canada. And as communications director of the Muslim Canadian Congress, he never shied away from controversy, endorsing positions on homosexual rights and other issues that deviated from Islamic orthodoxy – positions that Hassan Shahid has now echoed. Fatah even opposed the 2005 campaign to introduce arbitration courts based on Islamic law into Canada.

All that took courage. But instead of receiving congratulations from the Canadian Muslim community at large, Fatah became the target of an email campaign initiated by a Muslim student group, the Canadian Islamic Congress (CIC). The CIC claimed that Fatah didn’t represent the majority of Canadian Muslims. Fatah commented: “This is as close as one can get to issuing a death threat, as it places me as an apostate and blasphemmer.”

And Fatah, like Hassan Shahid, has received outright death threats. He told the Toronto Police that he has been receiving death threats since 2003, but lately they’re grown in number. And they’re credible enough in content to move him to resign and duck out of sight.

Voices of moderation or reform within Islamic communities are at a distinct disadvantage because jihadists can so effectively use the Qur’an and Sunnah against them to lend credence to their charges of apostasy. Also, all the schools of Islamic law mandate that an apostate male must be killed -- a command rooted in the teachings of Muhammad, who said, “If somebody (a Muslim) discards his religion, kill him” (Bukhari 4.52.260). Thus a death threat can become an act of piety.

It is bitterly ironic that Western non-Muslim observers who know little or nothing of Islam assume that voices of liberalism and reform are the dominant mainstream within Islamic communities in the West and elsewhere, when the reality is that people like Hassan Shahid and Fatah are, despite their popularity among Westerners who like to pride themselves on their “tolerance,” only marginally influential among Muslims -- and are, above all, hunted.

Muslim reformers deserve all the support we can give them. But we should stop deluding ourselves into thinking they’re the majority. And above all, government and law enforcement officials should stop

building policy on the assumption
that people like Farzana Hassan

Shahid and Tarek Fatah are the ma-
jority.

Robert Spencer is a scholar of Islamic history, theology, and law and the director of [Jihad Watch](#). He is the author of five books, seven monographs, and hundreds of articles about jihad and Islamic terrorism, including [Islam Unveiled: Disturbing Questions About the World's Fastest Growing Faith](#) and [The Politically Incorrect Guide to Islam \(and the Crusades\)](#). He is also an Adjunct Fellow with the Free Congress Foundation.