

# Chicago Lawyer

## An International Perspective: In democracy we trust

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In November of last year, authorities said a man born and raised in Arlington, Va., walked into the Fort Hood military base, shot 13 people to death and injured many others. At first glance, images of Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan would not have alarmed even the most bigoted of CNN viewers.

But as reports began surfacing of Hasan's devotion to Islam and witnesses reported he proclaimed "Allahu akbar" - "God is great" - before authorities said he began shooting, it apparently was abundantly clear to many people why Hasan had allegedly carried out his attack. He was Muslim.

Although popular belief tends to suggest otherwise, the terrorist attacks the world has repeatedly been forced to bear witness to over the past 10 years were not carried about by "Muslims," but by Islamic extremists. To many there is no difference between the two; both groups are followers of Islam and thus, they are all potential terrorists.

To sincere Muslims across the world, however, distinguishing those who are willing to kill innocent civilians from those who oppose it is a distinction that has to be made. But with the threat that Islamic extremists pose to our safety and the difficulty of actually pinpointing an extremist, can this distinction really be made?

Speaking to a Muslim friend about this issue before Hasan's alleged attack, I was shocked to hear a simple example of the extent of the discrimination suffered by Muslims. Simple wire transfers she often receives from her family overseas take up to four weeks to arrive in her account - not the standard five business days in which I, with a non-Muslim name, can expect to receive a transfer. Additionally, her father frequently receives calls from U.S. bank officials requiring more information from him before the transfer can be made.

Speaking to another Muslim friend, I was just as shocked to learn that before the birth of her daughter, she debated whether to give the child a traditional Muslim name because of the discrimination she may face growing up.



Maybe the anxiety people experience when around Muslims is understandable. As crass as that may sound, there is simply no way for the uninformed man, and apparently the U.S. government, to determine whether a Nidal Malik Hasan is a sincere Muslim or an extremist.

However, as a black man familiar with racial profiling in an era marked by the election of America's first black president, for me to use this column to justify discriminating against all Muslims because of the actions of a select few would be incongruous, to say the least.

But whereas a police officer's decision to pull me over because I am black may be based on the officer's asinine racial prejudice, can the same be said about a police officer or airport official's decision to stop and search a bearded Muslim man dressed in a dishdasha? Sadly, many would answer that question "no."

One thing that we can all agree on is that Islamic extremists threaten the safety of people everywhere. It is because of this extreme threat, coupled with the inconspicuous nature of these extremists, that many believe it is OK to discriminate against all Muslims. In a USA Today/Gallup Poll taken after the July 7, 2005, attacks in London, 39 percent of respondents said they favored requiring Muslims, including U.S. citizens, to carry a special form of identification as a means of preventing terrorist attacks.

Sad, but true.

But even sadder is the danger that we do not see lying beneath this global discrimination: the demise of our nations' democracies.

Before his alleged attack at Fort Hood, Hasan was an American just like many of you reading this column. Likewise, before the 7/7 bombings, Shehzad Tanweer was a British citizen raised in Leeds, England - just like me. It was only after revelations about their religious beliefs were exposed that these men became "Muslim terrorists."

The problem is that this distinction is being applied to those who are not extremists, but are citizens of Great Britain, America or other nations, who simply choose to follow Islam. For example, after Hasan's alleged attacks, the call was to ban "Muslims" from the armed forces, not American soldiers who hold extremist beliefs.

Our failure to distinguish those who harbor extreme Islamic beliefs and instead discriminate against all Muslims goes against all that our democracies are meant to represent. Without social equality for all, none of our democracies can survive.

Despite this, we continue to discriminate against those among us who are Muslim in the name of "national security." Although national security is of paramount importance, should it come at the cost of millions of our fellow citizens' civil rights?

Distinguishing a Muslim from an Islamic extremist is a determination that cannot be made based on a person's name, dress or decision to wear a beard.

Such a determination can and should be carefully made by the trillion-dollar homeland security systems that each of our countries boasts.

We can choose to sacrifice the rights of millions of people around the world because of the violent actions of a few who claim to trust in God. Or we can choose democracy.

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