To the Editor—

I wish to reply to Richard B. Parker's letter in the Winter 1994 issue of Journal of Palestine Studies and Shaw J. Dallal's in the Spring 1995 issue. Both of them are responding to my challenge that those who accuse me of harboring bias against Islam should "produce a single piece of my writing where I express anti-Muslim sentiment.

Ambassador Parker concedes that he may be wrong about my being biased, but he then goes on to report about an "informal sounding" he conducted at the Middle East Studies Association in Phoenix, where he found a "unanimous reply" to the effect that I am not "a friend of Muslims."

This reminds me of a distinction that S. Abdallah Schleifer of the American University in Cairo likes to draw between American and Arab journalists. When an event takes place, he says, the American goes to the scene to make inquiries and get first-hand information. In contrast, his Arab counterpart goes to a cafe and asks interpreters of Middle East Studies at College of the Holy Cross and one of America's foremost interpreters of Islam, wastes no time getting to the heart of the matter. His first sentence asks, "Are Islam and the West on an inevitable collision course?" He wonders: Has fundamentalist Islam replaced Marxism-Leninism as our main enemy?

In the last paragraph, Mr. Espositoffers his clearest answer. "Islam and most Islamic movements are not necessarily anti-Western, anti-American, or democratic . . . they do not necessarily threaten American interests. Our challenge is better to understand the history and realities of the Muslim world." With this plea, Mr. Esposito closely anticipated the policy of Edward P. Djerejian, the chief American diplomat dealing with the Middle East, recently announced that "the U.S. government does not view Islam as
the next 'ism' confronting the West or threatening world peace."

Are they right? Or do Messrs. Esposito and Djerejian represent that familiar breed of establishment specialist unable to see an enemy until he lands a fist in his face?

Well, yes and yes. They are right in so far as nearly one billion Muslims are deeply divided among themselves. "Muslim governments cooperate with the West more often than they threaten it: think of Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Indonesia. Further, as the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait confirmed, Muslims are not politically unified and never will be," Mr. Esposito writes. Therefore, anything like a unified jihad against the West lies outside the realm of the plausible.

But the establishment is wrong to soft-pedal the dangers of fundamentalist Islam, the radical elements of which espouse the world's most virulently anti-American ideology. Mr. Esposito argues that fundamentalists merely resent our policies: in fact, they hate the entirety of our civilization. Theorists such as Sayyid Qutb (an Egyptian) and Abul Ala Maududi (a Pakistani) go beyond politics to condemn the very essence of the West—its culture, customs and institutions—as the source of the problem. The ever-pithy Ayatollah Khomeini captured the sentiment this way: "We are not afraid of economic sanctions or military intervention. What we are afraid of is Western universities." Symbolic of this sentiment, just last month an influential Iranian religious figure attacked Tehran's doctors for wearing neckties.

Some radical fundamentalists even boast they will battle and overcome Europe and America. A Tehran daily claimed in 1990 that "the world movement of Islam" can defeat the West. In a speech to the French judge handling his case, a Tunisian convicted of setting off bombs that killed 13 people in France in 1985 and 1986 declared: "I do not renounce my fight against the West, which assassinated the Prophet Mohammed. . . . We Muslims should kill every last one of you." These hair-raising views are hardly exceptional. But they are notably absent from "The Islamic Threat."

Instead, Mr. Esposito focuses on the milder aspects of fundamentalist Islam. That's akin to excusing communism by praising the benign qualities of Swedish social democracy. If the intent is to reconcile, the effect is to mislead.

This book lacks something else too. Mr. Esposito says not a word about low Western birthrates and the millions of Muslim immigrants to Western Europe and North America. Yet the prospect of cultural submergence is the Islamic threat that alarms European right-wingers even more than Muslim missiles and hostage-takers. Writing in The Spectator, for example, Charles Moore recalls T.S. Eliot's caution of "hooded hordes": "Because of our obstinate refusal to have enough babies, Western European civilisation will start to die at the point when it could have revived with new blood. Then the hooded hordes will win, and the Koran will be taught, as Gibbon famously imagined, in the schools of Oxford." Jean-Marie Le Pen, the French fascist leader, expresses his fears more pungently: "I don't want the French to become like the Red Indians—annihilated by immigration."

Such xenophobia ranks today as probably the single most divisive social issue in Western Europe. It resonates less here, but that may yet change. Patrick Buchanan has already written fearfully about "the whimper of a Moslem child in its cradle" spelling the end of the West. We can look for the issue to grow before long.

Mr. Esposito offers an informed and reasoned discussion of Islam in politics. But he fails to recognize the hostility and ambition of radical fundamentalists and to consider the implications of growing Muslim populations in the West. "The Islamic Threat," in other words, provides little guidance to the Islamic threat.