Radical Departure

Is the country's most controversial Middle East scholar mellowing?

BY SADANAND DHUME

THE FIRST THING THAT STRIKES YOU ABOUT DANIEL PIPES is his size. He's six feet, four inches tall, with a slight stoop and a wingspan that would send a piano teacher into rapture. The second remarkable thing about Pipes is something you notice only after he has led you into his book-lined corner office at the Middle East Forum, the Center City think tank he's run for the past 16 years, a place where the stray workplace embellishments include a journalism award from the Zionist Organization of America and a small picture of himself towering over Margaret Thatcher: It's his voice, a carefully modulated hush that forces you to glance anxiously at your tape recorder with a silent prayer.

The gentle demeanor is not what you'd expect of Pipes. Over the years, from his perch at the MEF and in countless books, newspaper op-eds, and appearances on talking-head TV shows, he has become an archetype of the hard-hearted
views

ideologue, anchoring the most conservative pole in the debate over the Middle East, Islam and terrorism. He has called for religious profiling of Muslims in America, and described the global battle with Islamists—those Muslims who strive for a society governed by their interpretation of sharia, or Islamic law—as "a cosmic battle over the future course of human experience." His views on the Israel-Palestine peace process are, in the words of writer Christopher Hitchens, "somewhat to the right of Ariel Sharon." Once, on the television show Politically Incorrect, actor Alec Baldwin turned to Pipes and declared, "You seem to be in support of every crypto-fascist idea."

On this afternoon in early October, Pipes has just finished hammering out a piece for the New York Sun, where he has a regular column, concerning a group of Muslim taxi drivers at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport who have demanded the right to refuse to pick up passengers carrying alcohol. Instead of simply canceling the drivers' licenses or asking them to forfeit booze-laden fares, airport authorities are considering a compromise: Drivers will be allowed to place an extra light on their roofs signaling their willingness to ferry the offending cargo. "From the airport point of view, this is completely satisfactory," explains Pipes. "Passengers are not stranded. Taxi drivers are content. But from the larger point of view, this has incredible implications: The sharia is now in effect in Minneapolis airport with two different lights. ... Think of all the people the drivers might not want to take: Hindus, homosexuals, unmarried couples. ... I mean, where does one stop?"

The extended riff is delivered in a tone that blends muted outrage with boyish infectiousness, and for a moment it dusts Pipes, 57, with the manner of an adolescent. It also captures the Pipesian method: the placement of the seemingly trivial in a broader political context, the effortless accretion of detail building up toward a crescendo, the conclusion that teeters on the edge of hyperbole and yet appears perfectly
logical. By the time he’s finished, you may be forgiven for fretting that the Twin Cities are on their way to resembling Tehran.

Such rhetorical skill is one of the reasons why Pipes—the director of a little-known think tank and author of 14 books that few in the general public will ever read—has managed to occupy an almost mythic space on the ideological plane where people are paid to argue over post-9/11 foreign policy and national security; someone whose bare-knuckled approach to radical Islam delights fans and enrages foes from Peoria to Pakistan. When the Mohammed cartoons rolled much of the world last year, the leftist newsletter CounterPunch went so far as to lay some of the responsibility for a Danish paper commissioning the cartoons at Pipes’s door. When a British Muslim organization gave out its “Islamophobe of the Year” award, he was among the contenders. (Other Americans short-listed have included George W. Bush and Condoleezza Rice.) His personal website, danielpipes.org, attracts three million visitors a year, according to Pipes.

Yet, five years after 9/11, five years after he became a fixture of Fox News and a familiar face on CNN, Pipes is confronting a new challenge. While his views on radical Islam have changed little since he became a member of the prime-time pundit class, the debate over Islam in this country has changed dramatically. And though Pipes continues to joust with his old adversaries on the left—from academics to the media to mainline churches—he now also worries about a view of Islam born of the right, one that sees the religion itself, rather than the radical ideology it spawned, as inherently hostile to Western ideals. For the first time, the man who has long been among the world’s most polarizing thinkers finds himself in an unfamiliar role—urging restraint.

Pipes employs a catchphrase that captures, if it doesn’t adequately explain, his worldview: “Radical Islam is the problem; moderate Islam is the solution.” According to Pipes, there’s a distinct difference between Islam the religion and Islamism the ideology. The former, says Pipes, is a centuries-old faith for which he has always professed respect. But the latter, he says, is a modern set of beliefs whose adherents seek to create societies based on a political, social and legal system—the sharia—that he sees as misanthropic, misogynist, anti-modern, anti-Christian, anti-Semitic and terroristic, among a long list of other unpleasant things.

In 2007, this doesn’t sound particularly radical. Even President Bush has drawn lines between Islam and what he called “Islamofascism.” But Pipes’s standing—among those who both love and loathe him—stems from the fact that he talked about radical Muslims long before they were a topic most people ever considered.

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Khomeini set the Iranian Revolution in motion, and there were few people in this country who were able to explain what was happening. Pipes was one of them, and he soon decided to shift his focus from medieval to modern Islam.

One of the reasons Pipes seems to draw so much fire is that, unlike most academics, he takes an approach to his subject that is essentially adversarial, a method he seems to have inherited from his father. Along with being a Russian history professor, Richard Pipes was a tenacious anti-communist. Daniel Pipes continued the oppositional tradition. In his second book, he famously wrote that Muslim scholars had “added relatively little” to the understanding of Islam. Later, he expressed dire warnings about the increasing number of Muslim immigrants in America. Even the way Pipes defines “moderate Islam” is pointedly unsympathetic, argues his critics. “For him, anyone who has legitimacy in the mainstream of Islam can’t be a moderate,” says Ibrahim Hooper, national communications director for CAIR, the Council on American-Islamic Relations. “He thinks that if a woman wants to wear a headscarf, it’s the beginning of the end of Western civilization.”

In the early 1980s, Pipes taught at the University of Chicago, Harvard and the Naval War College, but he failed to secure a tenure-track position. Around this time, Middle Eastern studies were in the midst of a profound makeover, and it became clear that there was little room for someone with his political leanings, he says: “I looked around, and the choices were very meager.” In 1986, he moved to Philadelphia to run the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a think
tank founded in 1955 by staunchly anti-
totalitarian Viennese émigré Robert Strauss-
Hupé. Eight years later, Pipes spun off the
Middle East Forum as a separate entity.

According to its mission statement, MEF aims
to "define and promote American inter-
ests in the Middle East," and considers those
interests to be "fighting radical Islam, whether
terrorist or lawful; working for Palestinian
acceptance of Israel; improving the manage-
mation of U.S. democracy efforts; reducing en-
ergy dependence on the Middle East; more
robustly asserting U.S. interests vis-à-vis Sandi
Arabia; and countering the Iranian threat." It
has an annual budget of about $1 million, and
gets financial support from institutions such as
the conservative Bradley Foundation.

Pipes may live and work in Philadelphia,
but he is not really of the city. He doesn't
count himself a regular at any local restaur-
ants, and he tends to spend his downtime
indoors—with a book (P.G. Wodehouse) or
on the treadmill at home. This isn't surpris-
ing. Pipes has built a life around propa-
gagating a certain view of the world; the view
itself, as well as its real-world consequences,
resonates most loudly among a thin slice of
the terminally wonkish. And though he spends
much of his life on the road, traveling
to various speaking engagements—and
has been in the public eye almost constantly
since 9/11—he has managed to maintain a
nearly hermetic seal between his public per-
sona and private life. He declines to share
the names of his three daughters or what they
do. He prefers not to reveal his home
phone number or where he lives, except to
say that it's in the city and he hasn't moved
since he first came to Philly. For security
reasons, he doesn't use his own name when
calling a cab or limousine to his home. When
traveling overseas, he occasionally checks in
at a hotel under a different name.

A few weeks after speaking with him in his
office, I catch up with Pipes at the Nixon Cen-
ter in Washington, where he is participating in
a panel discussion on the Iraq war spon-
sored by the center's foreign policy journal,
The National Interest. (Pipes sits on its ad-
sory council). Black-and-white pictures of the
former president line the walls of a conference
room, which quickly fills with a handful of
women and two dozen formally dressed men,
each of whom you suspect knows the capital of
Kosovo.

Pipes is impressive in such forums. He com-
bines an encyclopedic knowledge of Islamism
with a polemician's talent for pithiness. In the
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"slow and painful way people wake up to the
problem of radical Islam" as "education by
murder," an evolution that has included 9/11,
the Madrid train attacks, and the 2005 bus
and train bombings in London.

As pointed as he can be about Islamists or
those who refuse to take the threat of radical
Islam seriously—whether in the government
or the media or the general public—Pipes
employs his verbal skills most mercilessly when
discussing his erstwhile colleagues in
academia. Several of them, including Jessica
Stern of Harvard (who has likened jihad to
"a global hit, rather like gangsta rap"), are
listed in an "Idiots' File" on Pipes's website
for their views regarding radical Muslims.
In 2002, Pipes set up a site called Campus Watch
as a way to expose the "analytic failures" and
political bias in the field of Middle Eastern
studies, "the way Consumer Reports judges
a vacuum cleaner to see if it's doing a good job,"
he says. The website at first featured dossiers
on eight prominent Middle Eastern scholars.
A firestorm of protest followed, with more
than 100 professors writing letters to the site.
Pipes eventually dropped the dossiers, but the
watchdog function of Campus Watch remains.

Though critics have argued that the project
stinks of McCarthyism, Pipes finds it ironic
that he's accused of trying to shut down free
speech on campus. "If you took the Fortune
500, you'd find much more political diversity
than if you took 500 Middle East specialists,"
he says.

Pipes's blunt views of radical Muslims—
particularly his assertion that 10 to 15 percent
of the world's Muslims are Islamists—have
made him few friends in America's orga-
nized Muslim community. Several years ago,
someone bought the domain danielpipes.com
and linked it to a page on the website of the
Council on American-Islamic Relations that
attacked Pipes. He had to threaten a lawsuit
to win back the domain, and mutual dislike
remains between him and CAIR. Pipes has
long accused the organization of being on the
wrong side in the war on terror, a charge that
CAIR's Hooper says is based entirely on innu-
endo and guilt by association—"on what my
Great-Aunt Tilly did in 1902." In the spring of
2003, after President Bush nominated Pipes
to fill a vacancy on the board of the federally
funded U.S. Institute of Peace, a nonpartisan
organization dedicated to the peaceful resolu-
tion of conflicts, CAIR spearheaded an effort
to deny him the position by organizing a mass-
ive letter-writing campaign. (Bush eventually
got him on the USIP via recess appointment.)

For all the attention Pipes has drawn for
being an alleged Islamophobe, however, he
has always drawn a line between Islamists
and Islam, between the religion and the ideol-
ogy. He is still quick to pounce on any special
exceptions for Muslims—women demanding
the right to wear the headscarf in driver's li-
cense photos, those Minnesota cabdrivers—as
examples of Islamic law slipping through the
backdoor, but he also decries the view of 40
percent of Americans who believe Muslims
should carry special identity cards. It's "illegal,
immoral, inefficient, you name it," he says.

It's a view that, five years after September
11th, has put him in a new position; no longer
is he the bad boy of Middle East punditry. The
discussion has changed, and the man once
considered the most hard-line anti-Islamist
finds himself worried about critics holding a
darker view: that Islam is an inherently evil
religion. Pipes doesn't have to look far to see
how much the conversation has changed; by a
five-to-one margin, readers of his own website
now disagree with him about his take. "I find
myself in the middle now between these two
views," he says, "saying Islam is irrelevant to
the issues and Islam the religion is the key."
Even CAIR backhandedly recognizes Pipes's
new place on the ideological spectrum. "Dan-
iel Pipes had his day in the sun as the nation's
premier Islamophobe," Hooper says. "In a
strange way now, he's almost on the B-team
of Islamophobes. The real attacks are coming
from those who say that Islam itself is evil and
must be challenged as a faith."

Of course, it may just be that there are few-
er people for Pipes to argue with. Five years
ago, post-9/11, both George W. Bush and Tony
Blair have, rhetorically speaking, moved in
his direction, shedding vague nostrums such
as "War on Terror" for formulations that spe-
cifically identify Islamism as the problem. No
longer is the first response to a terrorist attack
to declare that "Islam is a religion of peace."

But the fight is far from over. Pipes's latest
project, called Islamist Watch, "combats the
ideas and institutions of nonviolent, radical
Islam in the United States and other Western
countries," "exposes the far-reaching goals of
Islamists," and "works to reduce their power"
and "strengthen moderate Muslims. The day
that Pipes's column on the Minneapolis
taxi drivers ran, a flood of outraged e-mails,
including several from Britain, Europe and
Australia, forced airport authorities to aban-
don their plan to accommodate the drivers.
Islamist Watch, says Pipes, will seek to repli-
cate that success on other fronts.