

THE BOOK ON DANIEL
Pipes believes the debate
in America over Islam is
becoming harsher.

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

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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

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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

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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 roiled 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 become 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



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the fact that he talked about (or, some would say, was obsessed by) radical Muslims long before they were a topic most people ever considered.

Pipes came to the subject in college. Growing up in Boston, the oldest child of Polish Jews who had fled Europe on the outbreak of WWII, he had wanted to be a mathematician, but after his sophomore year at Harvard—where his father Richard taught Russian history—Pipes realized he was in over his head. Instead, he decided to study Islamic history, an interest sparked by summer trips to the Sahara and the Sinai. His undergraduate experience seared itself on Pipes in another way as well. He began his freshman year more or less apolitical, but graduated convinced he was a conservative; he felt no sympathy for his fellow students who commandeered University Hall in 1969 to protest the presence of ROTC on campus, and remembers wondering aloud why his classmates would skip meals and classes they had paid for.

Upon graduating, he spent two years studying Arabic in Cairo, haunting the salons of the city's elite as well as the backstreets and cafés where modern Islamism was born, then returned to Cambridge to get his Ph.D. in medieval Islamic history. Around the time Pipes finished his thesis, though, Ayatollah

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 infamously 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, argue 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 Strausz-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 interests in the Middle East,” and considers those interests to be “fighting radical Islam, whether terroristic or lawful; working for Palestinian acceptance of Israel; improving the management of U.S. democracy efforts; reducing energy dependence on the Middle East; more robustly asserting U.S. interests vis-à-vis Saudi 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 restaurants, and he tends to spend his downtime indoors—with a book (P.G. Wodehouse) or on the treadmill at home. This isn't surprising. Pipes has built a life around propagating 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 persona 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 Center in Washington, where he is participating in a panel discussion on the Iraq war sponsored by the center's foreign policy journal, *The National Interest*. (Pipes sits on its advisory 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 Kyrgyzstan.

Pipes is impressive in such forums. He combines an encyclopedic knowledge of Islamism with a polemicist's talent for pithiness. In the Pipes lexicon, Westerners who submit to Muslim restrictions on free speech, as he believes most American and British newspapers did by refusing to reprint the Danish Mohammed cartoons, are playing by the “Rushdie rules,” a reference to the famous Iranian fatwa on the author of *The Satanic Verses*. He describes the

“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 fad, 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

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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 organized 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 innuendo 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 resolution of conflicts, CAIR spearheaded an effort

to deny him the position by organizing a massive 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 ideology. He is still quick to pounce on any special exceptions for Muslims—women demanding the right to wear the headscarf in driver's license 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. “Daniel 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 fewer people for Pipes to argue with. Five years 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 specifically 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 abandon their plan to accommodate the drivers. Islamist Watch, says Pipes, will seek to replicate that success on other fronts. 

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