

March 11, 2006
The Saturday Profile

Muslim's Blunt Criticism of Islam Draws Threats

By [JOHN M. BRODER](#)

LOS ANGELES, March 10 — Three weeks ago, Dr. Wafa Sultan was a largely unknown Syrian-American psychiatrist living outside Los Angeles, nursing a deep anger and despair about her fellow Muslims.

Today, thanks to an unusually blunt and provocative interview on Al Jazeera television on Feb. 21, she is an international sensation, hailed as a fresh voice of reason by some, and by others as a heretic and infidel who deserves to die.

In the interview, which has been viewed on the Internet more than a million times and has reached the e-mail of hundreds of thousands around the world, Dr. Sultan bitterly criticized the Muslim clerics, holy warriors and political leaders who she believes have distorted the teachings of Muhammad and the Koran for 14 centuries.

She said the world's Muslims, whom she compares unfavorably with the Jews, have descended into a vortex of self-pity and violence.

Dr. Sultan said the world was not witnessing a clash of religions or cultures, but a battle between modernity and barbarism, a battle that the forces of violent, reactionary Islam are destined to lose.

In response, clerics throughout the Muslim world have condemned her, and her telephone answering machine has filled with dark threats. But Islamic reformers have praised her for saying out loud, in Arabic and on the most widely seen television network in the Arab world, what few Muslims dare to say even in private.

"I believe our people are hostages to our own beliefs and teachings," she said in an interview this week in her home in a Los Angeles suburb.

Dr. Sultan, who is 47, wears a prim sweater and skirt, with fleece-lined slippers and heavy stockings. Her eyes and hair are jet black and her modest manner belies her intense words: "Knowledge has released me from this backward thinking. Somebody has to help free the Muslim people from these wrong beliefs."

Perhaps her most provocative words on Al Jazeera were those comparing how the Jews and Muslims have reacted to adversity. Speaking of the Holocaust, she said, "The Jews have come from the tragedy and forced the world to respect them, with their knowledge, not with their terror; with their work, not with their crying and yelling."

She went on, "We have not seen a single Jew blow himself up in a German restaurant. We have not seen

a single Jew destroy a church. We have not seen a single Jew protest by killing people."

She concluded, "Only the Muslims defend their beliefs by burning down churches, killing people and destroying embassies. This path will not yield any results. The Muslims must ask themselves what they can do for humankind, before they demand that humankind respect them."

Her views caught the ear of the American Jewish Congress, which has invited her to speak in May at a conference in Israel. "We have been discussing with her the importance of her message and trying to devise the right venue for her to address Jewish leaders," said Neil B. Goldstein, executive director of the organization.

She is probably more welcome in Tel Aviv than she would be in Damascus. Shortly after the broadcast, clerics in Syria denounced her as an infidel. One said she had done Islam more damage than the Danish cartoons mocking the Prophet Muhammad, a wire service reported.

DR. SULTAN is "working on a book that — if it is published — it's going to turn the Islamic world upside down."

"I have reached the point that doesn't allow any U-turn. I have no choice. I am questioning every single teaching of our holy book."

The working title is, "The Escaped Prisoner: When God Is a Monster."

Dr. Sultan grew up in a large traditional Muslim family in Baniyas, Syria, a small city on the Mediterranean about a two-hour drive north of Beirut. Her father was a grain trader and a devout Muslim, and she followed the faith's strictures into adulthood.

But, she said, her life changed in 1979 when she was a medical student at the University of Aleppo, in northern Syria. At that time, the radical Muslim Brotherhood was using terrorism to try to undermine the government of President [Hafez al-Assad](#). Gunmen of the Muslim Brotherhood burst into a classroom at the university and killed her professor as she watched, she said.

"They shot hundreds of bullets into him, shouting, 'God is great!' " she said. "At that point, I lost my trust in their god and began to question all our teachings. It was the turning point of my life, and it has led me to this present point. I had to leave. I had to look for another god."

She and her husband, who now goes by the Americanized name of David, laid plans to leave for the United States. Their visas finally came in 1989, and the Sultans and their two children (they have since had a third) settled in with friends in Cerritos, Calif., a prosperous bedroom community on the edge of Los Angeles County.

After a succession of jobs and struggles with language, Dr. Sultan has completed her American medical licensing, with the exception of a hospital residency program, which she hopes to do within a year. David operates an automotive-smog-check station. They bought a home in the Los Angeles area and put their children through local public schools. All are now American citizens.

BUT even as she settled into a comfortable middle-class American life, Dr. Sultan's anger burned within. She took to writing, first for herself, then for an Islamic reform Web site called Annaged (The Critic), run by a Syrian expatriate in Phoenix.

An angry essay on that site by Dr. Sultan about the Muslim Brotherhood caught the attention of Al Jazeera, which invited her to debate an Algerian cleric on the air last July.

In the debate, she questioned the religious teachings that prompt young people to commit suicide in the name of God. "Why does a young Muslim man, in the prime of life, with a full life ahead, go and blow himself up?" she asked. "In our countries, religion is the sole source of education and is the only spring from which that terrorist drank until his thirst was quenched."

Her remarks set off debates around the globe and her name began appearing in Arabic newspapers and Web sites. But her fame grew exponentially when she appeared on Al Jazeera again on Feb. 21, an appearance that was translated and widely distributed by the Middle East Media Research Institute, known as Memri.

Memri said the clip of her February appearance had been viewed more than a million times.

"The clash we are witnessing around the world is not a clash of religions or a clash of civilizations," Dr. Sultan said. "It is a clash between two opposites, between two eras. It is a clash between a mentality that belongs to the Middle Ages and another mentality that belongs to the 21st century. It is a clash between civilization and backwardness, between the civilized and the primitive, between barbarity and rationality."

She said she no longer practiced Islam. "I am a secular human being," she said.

The other guest on the program, identified as an Egyptian professor of religious studies, Dr. Ibrahim al-Khouli, asked, "Are you a heretic?" He then said there was no point in rebuking or debating her, because she had blasphemed against Islam, the Prophet Muhammad and the Koran.

Dr. Sultan said she took those words as a formal fatwa, a religious condemnation. Since then, she said, she has received numerous death threats on her answering machine and by e-mail.

One message said: "Oh, you are still alive? Wait and see." She received an e-mail message the other day, in Arabic, that said, "If someone were to kill you, it would be me."

Dr. Sultan said her mother, who still lives in Syria, is afraid to contact her directly, speaking only through a sister who lives in Qatar. She said she worried more about the safety of family members here and in Syria than she did for her own.

"I have no fear," she said. "I believe in my message. It is like a million-mile journey, and I believe I have walked the first and hardest 10 miles."