

# Coming to grips with ‘political Islam’

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By Kent Walz / Journal Senior Editor

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Emile Nakhleh is the director of the University of New Mexico's Global and National Security Policy Institute. He formerly worked for the CIA, where he was awarded the Director's Medal. (Marla Brose/Albuquerque Journal)

## **Editor's note:**

**Emile Nakhleh has studied terrorism and its causes as a CIA senior intelligence officer. Now retired from the agency and living in Albuquerque, he wants to put that knowledge to work at the University of New Mexico.**

Like many people, Emile Nakhleh knows exactly where he was and what he was doing when terrorists crashed commercial airliners into the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

Unlike most of us, as a CIA employee in charge of the agency's efforts to understand and come to grips with "political Islam," he wasn't completely surprised by the attack that day. And right after 9/11, he and his colleagues went to work to make sure it would not be repeated.

"I was in Lahore (Pakistan) at the airport trying to catch a flight to Peshwar and the airport director said, 'Look what happened in your country,'" Nakhleh, retired from the CIA and living in Albuquerque, said in a recent interview. "At first, I said, 'Oh. my gosh, it's a horrible accident.' Then the second plane hit.

"So I tried to get the hell out of there, and that night I was able to find one seat on Pakistan Air to London, so I worked in the embassy there for a week before I was able to come back."

Shortly after that, Nakhleh was involved in briefing the president and "he told us very clearly we need to do whatever, turn whatever stone, to make sure that nothing of this sort happens again."

"We all became laserlike focused on terrorism. We became more proactive in looking at and expanding counterterrorism, working in closer cooperation with other intelligence services. Our contacts expanded tremendously." He and his wife loved to go to the Chesapeake Bay, but after 9/11, he said, there would be no weekends off for the rest of his CIA career.

## On a mission



Emile Nakhleh, right, is photographed with George Tenet, former director of the CIA. While with the agency, Nakhleh was in charge of efforts to understand and come to grips with “political Islam.” (Courtesy of Emile Nakhleh)

A Palestinian born in Nazareth, Nakhleh came to the United States to go to college and became a U.S. citizen in 1970. He retired from the CIA in 2006 and has been awarded the Distinguished Career Intelligence Medal and the Director’s Medal. Nakhleh writes extensively, including books and pieces for blogs like “The Cipher Brief” and “LobeLog” that deal with foreign policy, national security and intelligence.

And he is on a mission here to create a world-class Global and National Security Institute at the University of New Mexico – a program that would bring together UNM faculty, people from the national laboratories and companies engaged in national security work to offer a master’s degree and a broad curriculum that goes beyond classic terrorism to deal with its root causes.

But back to the aftermath of 9/11.

“In retrospect I wasn’t surprised,” he said. “Bin Laden had control from the top down, but, in the last minute, he gave the terrorists freedom of action. There was a lot of support from Saudi and “Gulfies” to Al Qaida. The story about Saudi Arabia and 9/11 has yet to be told. It’s not by accident that 15 of the 19 attackers were Saudis. That they were Wahabi and Salafis (two ultra-conservative segments of the Sunni branch of Islam). It’s not by accident they got money and training from the (Persian) Gulf.”

### **‘The other 99 percent’**

At the CIA, Nakhleh was front and center advocating that the United States needed to increase its efforts to understand the Muslim world as part of its security efforts.

“We wanted to know more about Muslim communities and societies worldwide,” he said. “If we killed one leader, another takes his place. Where do these foot soldiers come from and why? ”

“The good thing about the CIA is they realized that we as a government didn’t know much about the Islamic world. Some of us focus on terrorism, but if even that accounts for 1 percent of the 1.6 billion Muslims, what about the other 99 percent we didn’t know much about.”

Which explains how Nakhleh came to join the agency.



In this Sept. 11, 2001, photo, the twin towers of the World Trade Center burn behind the Empire State Building in New York City, after terrorists flew two passenger jets into the structures that morning.

One of seven siblings in a poor, Greek Orthodox family in Galilee – his father was an olive tree farmer with a fourth-grade education – Nakhleh managed to land a full scholarship at Saint John's University, a Benedictine school in Minnesota.

After arriving in the United States “with \$70 in my pocket,” Nakhleh, who also speaks Arabic, Hebrew and “elementary” Farsi, earned a degree in political science, then advanced degrees from Georgetown and American University.

He was teaching at Mount Saint Mary University in Maryland when he began doing stints as a visiting scholar at the CIA – a small program limited in part by the rigorous security clearances required for academics who want to participate.

Nakhleh said the CIA director stopped by his office one day and asked exactly what a scholar in residence did.

“I said, well, I sit and I think, and I look at your research programs and talk to analysts, and once in awhile, I go downtown and give a special briefing. The director said, ‘and we pay you for this?’ and I said, ‘damned right.’ ” Nakhleh eventually began a second career, joining the agency as a senior intelligence officer, directing the agency's political Islam efforts.

His first assignment? “The director told me to write my own job description.”

### **Enormous poverty**

Part of that job description was to educate the CIA and political leaders on Islam and its relationship to terrorism.

One of those terrorism drivers, he says, was the poverty and unemployment that provided fertile grounds for radicalizing efforts by Wahabis. Problems that are still there today.

“When you look at unemployment in most Muslim countries, particularly in the Middle East, from Turkey to Pakistan, it ranges from the most optimistic 25 percent to the most pessimistic 75 percent. So you have millions of young men with nothing to do.”

Countries like Egypt, where the tourism-based economy is in shambles, can no longer afford to provide for all those people, he said, and even in oil rich countries like Libya and Nigeria, the poverty is unbelievable.

“When I was with the agency, I went to every Muslim majority and minority country across the globe, except for Iran. The poverty even in rich countries is enormous. The oil wealth – you don't see it filtering down at all. It makes you angry.

“In the villages of Northern Nigeria you see Saudi money come in, establish these Islamic organizations and preach the Wahabi doctrine,” Nakhleh said. “It happened in the 1990s, and so we began to trace this development of radicalization.”

“They would come in and build a Quranic school – a tiny one room where the kids would sit on the floor and memorize the Quran – and those who do well they would go to high school, and they take them to Saudi Arabia and train them in these religious universities, and they come back as teachers/preachers. That’s all they do. So it is a force multiplier of this ideology and economics drives it. Unemployment drives it.”

In mosques all over the world, he said, the Saudis have provided Qurans where the script is unchanged, but the margins around the words contain Wahabi “interpretations” – further promoting an extreme interpretation of Islam.

### **Shrinking diplomacy**

Nakhleh thought going into Afghanistan after 9/11 was the right thing to do, but after we defeated Al Qaida and the Taliban, “we should have asked ourselves, what are we here for.”

“That question has never been answered to this day.” Nakhleh laments what he describes as shrinking American diplomacy, including the pullback that allowed Russia and Iran to flex their muscles in Syria.

“Power abhors vacuum, which means somebody is going to fill it, and we clearly see that Russia and Iran are filling it.”

“So the path forward for the United States, if we want to envision a path that serves our national interest, is to re-engage. We cannot just let it be. I say this not because of moral qualms but because of national security.”

“I am not partisan. My sole focus is national security.” Nakhleh said that if the U.S. chooses a path of U.S. engagement in Syria and the Middle East, “we can almost write the script.”

He said there is no question about U.S.’s military power. “I always said in briefings there is no question we can defeat Saddam’s army, because if we can’t, we have bigger problems than we thought – but we need clear, consistent diplomacy.

“The previous administration took the position that (Syrian President) Assad must go, but didn’t do much to make that happen.”

And the current administration has shrunk diplomatic efforts. He says his problem with the Trump administration decision to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem is that “we didn’t get anything for it.”

“It was the last card we had to play,” he said.

What should we do now in Syria?

“I would start actively on a peace conference to design a future without Assad,” Nakhleh said. “Even the Russians and Iranians – if they are ready to play – would not necessarily stick by Assad.

You can design that future. It might be six months or a year until some kind of elections, but hopefully. we can begin to draw a future that is a bit more stable.”

Nakhleh understands the reluctance to deal with Russians, given the political climate here, and with the Iranians over their support of terrorism. But he takes the pragmatic view that “if we are not going to talk to countries with which we disagree, we are not going to be talking to anybody.”

### **No genteel gardener**

Nakhleh and his wife, Ilonka Lessnau, were attracted to Albuquerque after visiting his son who at the time was a graduate fellow at Los Alamos National Laboratory.

Ilonka was born in Berlin but her family moved to Australia in the early 1950s, and the Southwest reminded her of the Outback.

“We looked around the country. It makes no sense to live in D.C. with the traffic and expense unless you work for the government or you are ‘old money.’ California is expensive and has fires and mudslides. Albuquerque has the best climate – if we just had two more inches of rain – with no natural disasters and no mosquitoes.”

Nakhleh, who jokingly says his age is “classified,” is physically fit and attributes that to his gardening hobby. “Not genteel gardening but really work. You have to keep your mind and body active if you want to live long.”

Mission accomplished.