

## Public debate questions peace within Islam

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by Chloe Coffman

Hundreds of people poured into the Skirball Center last night to take part in a debate on one of the more controversial issues facing the country today — the growing militarism of Islam. The motion for the debate: "Is Islam a religion of peace?"

The night, moderated by ABC News' John Donvan, featured four panelists, two speaking for the motion and two speaking against it. In favor of the proposal were writer and advocate for Muslim American civic engagement Zeba Khan and Maajid Nawaz, a former Muslim extremist who has since renounced Islamist ideology and now speaks up for Amnesty International as a "prisoner of conscience." Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who led a campaign to reform Islam, and bestselling author and award-winning journalist Douglas Murray opposed the argument, linking Islam directly with violence.

Prior to the debate, the audience was polled as to what they thought about the issue, and results showed 41 percent were for the motion, 25 percent were against it and 34 percent were undecided. While a number of arguments were brought to the table, the dialogue was mainly rooted in questioning the original Islamic principles of violence against the doctrine of peace, both of which are dealt with in the Quran. The main issues raised included the necessity to put the more violent passages of the Quran into historical context.

Those speaking against the motion said absolutist believers failed in their attempts to contextualize the Quran. But Khan said extremists were simply circumnavigating the issue at hand.

"[The absolutists] are using Islam to cover for their political grievances," he said. "Their real issue lies with Western domination."

At the end of the debate, the opposing side concluded that while reformed Muslims do exist in the Western world, existing extremists are living by the Quran in its entirety, including the violence it contains.

After the debate, poll results revealed a drastic change from the results at the beginning of the night — 36 percent were for the motion, 55 percent were against it and 9 percent were undecided. Several students voiced their opinions on the debate.

"It was an incredible experience," CAS freshman Zack Barker said. "Originally I was for [the motion] but ultimately I changed by mind. Douglas made some excellent points and really persuaded me."

But LSP freshman Nidhi Bhatt said her vote fell with the minority in the end.

"I thought that if the pro side had been more articulate, then they would have won more votes," Bhatt said.

Others, such as CAS freshman Billy Shaw, said they were still unsure of which side presented the stronger argument.

"The debate was intense and it included the two most controversial issues of today: religion and politics," Shaw said. "I am ultimately undecided because politically, the opposition is right and religiously, the proposition is right."