



A DEADLY

MISUNDERSTANDING

A CONGRESSMAN'S QUEST
TO BRIDGE THE MUSLIM—
CHRISTIAN DIVIDE

Mark D. Siljander

Foreword by Ban Ki-moon, U.N. Secretary-General



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*A Congressman's Quest to Bridge
the Muslim-Christian Divide*

Mark D. Siljander

with John David Mann

Foreword by Ban Ki-moon



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Foreword

We live in troubled times. All around us, intolerance and religious tensions are on the rise. Extremist dogma is gaining ground, and moderate voices are being undermined. Every day brings new instances of the harmful impact cultural misunderstandings can have on relations between communities, both within countries and across national borders.

The greatest schism appears to be between followers of Islamic and Christian traditions. Many of today's global challenges—though mostly political in nature—are being aggravated and rendered intractable by this worrying development.

Many column inches are devoted to bewailing this trend, yet few individuals have taken active steps to address it. With this important new work, Mr. Siljander has courageously stood up to be counted. A man of deeply held faith and conviction, his journey began in the halls of the U.S. Congress and took him from meeting rooms at the United Nations all the way to the back alleys of Beirut and the shifting sands of the Sahara. Along the way, he engaged with academics and clerics, statesmen and stateless men, and scores of ordinary Christians, Jews, and Muslims on the meaning of their faith and traditions. Throughout, he also devoted countless hours to a close textual study of the holy books of the great religions.

A Deadly Misunderstanding chronicles this journey of discovery and presents Mr. Siljander's simple yet powerful insights. For instance, he explains that the term *Allah* is simply the Arabic word for God. Thus "some twenty million Christian Arabs pray

to Allah every day, and Jesus himself . . . used the nearly identical Aramaic version of the word, *Alaha*, when he spoke about God.”

Through his scholarship and his sojourn, Mr. Siljander builds a compelling case that any faithful reading of religion and its teachings should serve to unite, not to divide. He documents what many of us instinctively believe: that people of the great faith traditions all share the same core beliefs and ideals; that compassion, solidarity, respect for life, and kindness toward others are but some of the many common threads tying together men and women of faith.

Today, there is an urgent need to rebuild bridges and to enter into a sustained and constructive intercultural and interreligious dialogue, one that stresses common values and shared aspirations. It is my fervent hope that *A Deadly Misunderstanding* helps jumpstart this much needed conversation.

Ban Ki-moon

Secretary-General, United Nations

On the Green Line

With its glamorous history, mix of European and Arab influences, and liberal, cosmopolitan culture, Beirut had once been known as “the Paris of the Mideast.” But those days were long past. There was no mistaking the street where I stood: we were in the center of a war zone.

It was the fall of 1982. Israeli troops were poised all along the country’s southern border, ready to go in and wipe out the Palestinians, who were dug in along that same border and determined to repel the Israelis at any cost. It was a standoff ready to explode at the smallest spark. I had just spent an hour visiting Camille Chamoun, the eighty-two-year-old Christian former president of Lebanon, hoping to get his read on the situation. The conversation had been inconclusive.

Chamoun’s house was located on the Christian side of the barren strip of scorched earth that divided Beirut into its two warring, irreconcilable halves: East and West, Muslim and Christian. The desolate strip of land had been dubbed, with an irony I’m sure nobody intended, the Green Line. I’d never seen anything less fertile, less evocative of life, less *green*, than this parched place.

We emerged and stood for a moment, blinking under the glare of the Mideastern sun and chatting with our Israeli security guard, when suddenly a shot rang out.

I should have ducked, but instead I froze. This was only my second trip to the Mideast, and I hadn't yet acquired the war-zone reflexes that would come in the years to follow. Like a carpenter's calluses or coal miner's cough, a kind of hair-trigger vigilance comes with the territory, part and parcel of the seasoned diplomat's trade. In central Africa, you learn how to cope with mosquitoes; in Beirut, you learn how to duck bombs and bullets. But as a freshman congressman just learning the ropes, I was pretty green myself, and I was still staring dumbly at the rubble-strewn streets, looking vaguely for the source of the sound, when I was grabbed and yanked roughly to the ground—and a sharp *pinninggg!* rang out, tearing a small cloud of dust from the wall just inches from where my head had been. The young Israeli dragged me ten or fifteen feet to a bus, pitched me in, and jerked the door closed. Palestinian snipers were closing in.

With the sound of my heartbeat pumping in my ears, one thought flooded through my racing brain: *What the hell am I doing here?*

Once the danger passed, I stayed on and surveyed the area for a while, climbing through the rubble, hoping to catch a clear glimpse of the PLO forces on the other side of the Green Line, the Muslim side. At the time, I didn't realize what a vivid metaphor this effort was for the direction the rest of my life would take.

Suddenly I caught movement out of the corner of my eye, and the next moment I was staring into the barrel of an Uzi. I had stumbled onto an Israeli lookout post hidden among the rubble, and a young Israeli soldier, having no way of knowing who or what I was, was about to blow my head off. Nobody was reading anyone any Miranda rights here—this was war, kill or be killed.

My reflexes were a little sharper this time, and fortunately I had learned a bit of Hebrew since my first trip to the Mideast some months earlier. I knew just enough to shout out, "B'vaka

sha, ani esh-congress!" *Please, I'm a congressman!* The boy's finger froze on the trigger, and he slowly lowered his Uzi.

In a few short hours, I had nearly been killed twice, and whether delivered by a bullet from the Christian side or Muslim side of that deadly Green Line, my death would have been just as final. No matter which side of an armed conflict one supports, both sides are ultimately sponsors of the same end: destruction.

This is not a book about Beirut, but it is a book about a world rift by its own Green Line, split like a macrocosmic Lebanon into two warring, seemingly irreconcilable halves. More particularly, it is about the efforts of one man, clambering about the rubble straddling that pervasive Green Line, to peer over at the other side and see what ground the two sides might possibly share.

THIS WAS NOT the path I set out to follow twenty-five years ago, as a conservative Republican congressman and Evangelical Christian just entering the world of Washington politics. At the time, I believed that Islam was a religion of violence, that the Qur'an preached the destruction of all non-Muslims, and that the Qur'an and Islam were of the devil, as godless as the great evil of communism whose defeat was then the defining purpose of American foreign policy. I believed that Islam and Christianity were contradictory at their core, that the Eastern Islamic and Western Judeo-Christian cultures were irretrievably opposed to one another, and that the only possible solution to this conflict was the conversion of "them" so they would come to think like "us." My worldview could not have been clearer or simpler—or more myopic.

In the years that followed, I was led to question the truth of these axioms. In time, I learned that every one of them was utterly, categorically false. I learned that when we stop buying into our cultures' prejudices, assumptions, and prevailing habits of thought and begin to investigate the texts of our different holy

books in their original languages, conflicts between crucial terms and entire passages that have traditionally been viewed as irreconcilable begin to evaporate.

I learned that the deadly misunderstanding dividing our world today need not do so tomorrow.

What follows in these pages is not some new form of ecumenism or syncretism where Christians, Muslims, or anyone else is expected to give up cherished and long-held beliefs or creeds. It is rather a chronicle of one person's search for a rich common ground that exists between these faiths and cultures. It has been a constant source of both astonishment and inspiration to find that this common ground is not some far-fetched ideal but is textually sound and eminently practicable. In some extremely delicate and hostile political situations, I've seen it work miracles.

Mark D. Siljander

Hostage

One day in the fall of 1983, as I prepared for a speech at a rally in Washington, D.C.'s Lafayette Park in support of Soviet Refuseniks,¹ I received a visit at my congressional office on Capitol Hill.

My secretary informed me that there were two gentlemen to see me, one from the FBI and the other from the CIA. As she ushered them into my office, I noticed that the FBI agent carried a bulky briefcase. The two men explained who they were and the reason for their visit: there were some "concerns" related to my speech that week.

"Fact is, Congressman," said the FBI agent, "we were hoping you'd reconsider."

Reconsider? I wasn't sure what he meant.

"Reconsider your participation in the event." He glanced at the CIA man, who clarified: "We'd like you not to give the speech."

The CIA agent explained that his agency had received word that Yasser Arafat was less than pleased with the position I was taking on Soviet emigration policies.

Actually, elaborated the FBI guy, Arafat had put out a contract on me.

I was flabbergasted. Why would Yasser Arafat want me dead? Why would he even care about some insignificant young freshman representative from Michigan?

The FBI guy said, "We don't think it's about the length of your tenure, Congressman."

"It's the passion of your words," continued the CIA guy, "that has caught the attention of certain people."

"Well, I'm not canceling my speech," I replied, "contract or no contract. I'm not letting some thug dictator hold me hostage!"

They must have expected that would be my response, because they didn't seem at all surprised. The FBI agent opened his briefcase, reached in, took out a bundle of fabric, and held it out to me. It took me a moment to realize what it was: a bulletproof vest. They wanted me to wear it when I gave my speech. "Wanted" is probably the wrong word. It wasn't a suggestion.

They handed me the vest, got to their feet, advised me that they were assigning me a twenty-four-hour armed security detail until the rally was over, and left my office without another word.

After they left, I sat fuming. When the CIA agent had said, "It's the passion of your words," I knew exactly what he was talking about, and knowing that Arafat was somewhere out there trying to silence me only intensified that passion.

Earlier that year I had sponsored a joint resolution "expressing the sense of Congress regarding the reduction of emigration from the Soviet Union" (H.J. Res. 279). The "evil empire," as Ronald Reagan had dubbed the Soviet Union, was clamping down on Jews wanting to emigrate to Israel, and I was angry about it. That "sense of Congress" was, in a word, *outrage*.

During these early years in Congress, my worldview was decidedly one-dimensional. Despite holding advanced degrees in political science, my interest in world affairs boiled down to one simple ideological goal: we had to defeat the Soviet Union. My Republican congressional colleagues and I saw the world as fall-

ing into two neatly defined groups: those aligned with us and those aligned with them. Based on the philosophy “the enemy of my enemy is my friend,” we regarded anyone who was against the Soviet Union as “freedom fighters,” and we did everything we could to help their cause around the world. Anyone who was aligned with the Soviet Union we called “terrorists.” Back then, we had no clue what a genuine terrorist was.

My simplistic view of world affairs extended to my position on the Mideast. The dictates of both my party and my religion said that we should be 100 percent pro-Israel—I had my rationale, but never mind the reasons—and that was pretty much where I stood. During my tenure in the House of Representatives, in multiple speeches, in committee meetings, on the floor of Congress, on television, in every venue and at every opportunity, I denounced the Soviet Empire and warned of the threat to America. These diatribes typically included a list of people we saw as being linked with the Soviet Union—the immoral and brutal tyrants of the world. Along with Castro, Qaddafi, and a host of others, Yasser Arafat was one of the chief names on that list. In our view, Arafat was an assassin, a revolutionary, and a criminal.

Interestingly, we didn’t mention Saddam much in those days. He was obviously a pretty bad character, but we were content to quietly support him as long as he was making trouble for the Iranians. We didn’t quite know what to make of the Iranians; they perplexed and unnerved us.

MY ENTRY INTO Congress happened to coincide with the aftermath of the first Islamic revolution in modern times. In 1979, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had overthrown Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the autocratic and modernistic (also corrupt, brutal, and American-backed) shah of Iran, and established an Islamic state—which expressed its fury at the West when a

group of militant students stormed the American embassy, taking dozens of American hostages, and holding them captive for 444 days.

The events in Iran had shocked America to its core. Hearing this religious leader in the Mideast call *us* “the Great Satan” was disturbing and confusing. The fact that we seemed powerless to do anything about it was even stranger and scarier.

In his nationally televised debate with incumbent Jimmy Carter, candidate Ronald Reagan asked the American people, “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” This was ostensibly a question about our national financial condition—but domestic policy and household economics were only the surface issue. It was the numbing nightly news reports on the fifty-two American hostages in Iran that offered the most eloquent reply to that question. The hostage situation cast a pall over our everyday affairs, serving as a constant reminder that our primacy in the world was not as secure as we had assumed. The Iranian hostage crisis was on everyone’s mind, yet few of us comprehended its implications for the future.

Still, when I arrived at Capitol Hill in the beginning of 1981, I had given little serious thought to the situation in Iran or to Arafat. I had no intention of becoming involved in the affairs of the Mideast, or anywhere else outside the United States, for that matter. As a young first-term congressman, my interests lay in serving my Michigan constituency and helping my Republican colleagues gain the upper hand on Capitol Hill. After defeating Jimmy Carter the previous fall, Ronald Reagan had tapped Michigan representative David Stockman to join his new cabinet as director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). A special election was held to fill the vacancy, and in January 1981, I found myself moving from Three Rivers, Michigan, to the suburbs of Washington, D.C.

In the early months of 1981, the hostage crisis was over and done with, resolving almost magically during the new presi-

dent's first moments in office, and as I began settling into my new Washington post it was a thrill to participate in some small way in the new administration's triumph.² Shortly after arriving in D.C., I attended a reception for several of the hostages who had just been returned to America.

The hostage reception was at a posh suburban home in northern Virginia. I took a seat on a couch next to Malcolm Kalp, one of the former hostages, and listened as he described his captivity. To my surprise, he spoke less about his own ordeal and more about his struggle to grasp the thinking of his Muslim captors.

"We still think the Soviet Union is our enemy," he said, "that worldwide communism is still the principal threat to our way of life. But the real challenge isn't the Soviet Union—it's militant Islam." He glanced over at me with a haunted look and added, "We have no idea what we're up against."

I left the party feeling shaken.

FOR THE NEXT few years I didn't have much time to think about Malcolm Kalp. I was too busy trying to help Reagan's new conservatives, the first generation of Washington neocons,³ take back control of the Hill from the Democrats, who had controlled both houses of Congress for years.

As the new kid on the block, I was fortunate to make friends quickly with a number of congressmen who would go on to deeply influence American politics for the next two decades. The press called us the "Young Turks"—Newt Gingrich, Tom DeLay, Duncan Hunter, Jack Kemp, Vin Weber, and a handful of others. We were on fire with our vision for a renewed Republican party, a vision that focused domestically on tax reform and an economic program later called Reaganomics, and internationally on strengthening and deploying our military, with a goal of defeating the Soviet Union. We were prepared to further these goals as aggressively as necessary.

In 1982, I was approached by a cadre of high-profile Evangelical Christian leaders who wanted me to accompany them on a fact-finding mission to Israel and Lebanon. When I politely declined their invitation, they asked me to reconsider. "We need a congressman to help us get in to see the Israeli prime minister and the Lebanese president. Frankly, we need a politician to give us cover."

"International relations is not really something my constituency is all that concerned about," I explained to them. "I represent a white, rural community in Michigan. My interests are in middle America, not the Mideast. There are no Middle Eastern people in my district. I think a Palestinian person owns our local Big Boy—and he didn't even support me!—but that would be about it."

But they persisted. Eventually I relented and agreed to accompany them that summer to the Middle East, having no idea that this was only the first of dozens of trips to the world's many hot spots. Soon, despite my insistence that I had no aspirations to be a traveling diplomat, my international portfolio began to grow. A few months after that first Mideast trip I was sitting on the Foreign Affairs Committee, then on the Mideast Subcommittee. Soon I was appointed Republican chairman of the Africa Subcommittee, under whose auspices I traveled to South Africa—where civil unrest and active resistance to apartheid were reaching a fever pitch—and later made a documentary on the situation there.

Part of the reason for this growing involvement in foreign affairs was a knack I seem to have for languages. I'm not a linguist and have never set out to learn foreign languages for their own sake, but I've always liked connecting with people. In addition to English and Spanish, I can find my way at a basic level in Hebrew, Korean, and Mandarin Chinese, and given a few days in-country, can manage in French, Italian, and Portuguese. Arabic and Aramaic would later be added to this list.

Before I knew what was happening, this conservative Christian white Republican representative from a rural agricultural district in western Michigan was embroiled in international relations to the point of being noticed by my nemesis, that communist-sympathizing, rabble-rousing trouble-maker Arafat.

THE REFUSENIK EVENT at Lafayette Park came and went. I delivered the speech safely, my bulletproof vest discreetly hidden under my suit jacket. Whether Arafat's hit had been lifted or simply went awry (or was bogus intelligence in the first place), I'll never know. But if the hit had lifted, my sense of outrage had not, and the incident only deepened my enmity for the man and everything he stood for.

Arafat lived another two decades, and our paths would cross again many years later—face-to-face, and in an altogether unexpected way. But just a few weeks after the Refusenik rally, my attention was brought back to the situation in Lebanon, not because of Arafat but because of a sobering new turn in world events.

On October 23, 1983, shortly after six in the morning, a yellow Mercedes delivery truck entered the grounds of the Beirut International Airport, where U.S. Marines were temporarily housed, then abruptly accelerated, crashing through the barbed wire perimeter and barreling into the lobby of the marine headquarters. The explosion reduced the four-story cinderblock building to rubble, killing more than two hundred inhabitants. The simmering threat that Malcolm Kalp had warned of had now erupted, and I was soon on my way back to the Mideast.

The suicide attack on the marine barracks in Beirut was devastating. The blast was followed twenty seconds later by an identical attack on the French barracks. The death toll included 241 American servicemen, fifty-eight French paratroopers, and six Lebanese civilians. It was the deadliest single day for the U.S. Marines since the battle of Iwo Jima, and remains to this

day the deadliest overseas attack on Americans since World War II.

But it was more than an awful, isolated tragedy; it was also a critical turning point in the global tension between East and West. It was not the first suicide bombing of a U.S. encampment in the Mideast; six months earlier, on April 18, a suicide attack at the U.S. embassy in West Beirut had killed sixty-three. And it certainly was not the Pearl Harbor of this conflict; that place is held by the September 11, 2001, attacks eighteen years later. But the Beirut marine barracks bombing was the watershed event through which our modern era of suicide bombers and militant Muslim terrorism announced itself. It destabilized our sense of security (some would say complacency), and it reinforced to a seismic degree a set of cultural and religious prejudices that were already well entrenched in Western society. From that point on, there was a clear and concerted effort in Congress to promulgate a view that equated "Arabs" with "terrorists." The Soviet Union's star was in decline; we had a new enemy.

Having already been to the Mideast several times, I was recruited to join some of my colleagues in an effort to help buoy up the troops' morale in Beirut during Thanksgiving. When we arrived, we found the American forces utterly demoralized. The depth of the horror we encountered there in the midst of the wreckage, with the stench of death still in the air, made an indelible mark on my emotions. It was both horrifying and heart-wrenching. This was no act of war; this was a senseless, ruthless mass murder. The Iranian hostage crisis had been nationally humiliating, but this was worse. They weren't just kidnapping us—now they were killing us.

ONCE A YEAR, in February, a series of special events takes place in Washington, D.C., called the National Prayer Breakfast. The president and vice president are normally in attendance,

along with hundreds of senators and congressmen and as many as four thousand friends and colleagues.

The National Prayer Breakfast dates back to the 1940s, during World War II, when a handful of senators and congressmen began meeting informally to give each other personal and spiritual support. Over the years, loosely defined ground rules evolved: Though the members meet in the name of peace and in the spirit of Jesus Christ, they need not be Christians to participate; all members are welcome, regardless of political or religious affiliation. The meetings are off the record, without political context and for purely personal purposes. The group met quietly, without press or public notice, for a decade.

One day in 1953, soon after he was sworn in as the country's thirty-fourth president, Dwight "Ike" Eisenhower was speaking privately with a friend, Senator Frank Carlson. He confessed that he found the White House the loneliest place he had ever experienced. Carlson invited him to come join their prayer group. That year, Ike attended the first combined House and Senate Prayer Breakfast, and the event has continued ever since.

There is a whole range of associated events during the week of the Prayer Breakfasts, including special lunches on that Wednesday and Thursday, each typically attended by several thousand people. One of these, the Diplomatic Luncheon, emphasizes guests from the diplomatic corps; the other is an International Luncheon, with a focus on foreign affairs and visiting dignitaries and heads of state. These are not specifically religious events. They are meant to provide a forum where men and women of common dedication can come together in unity and help foster the cause of peace in the world. Usually a congressman or senator reads a passage from the Bible—typically a general inspirational message that would not offend the non-Christians in attendance—and one or more outside speakers gives a talk. Billy Graham spoke there every year until the age of eighty-two, when illness prevented him from attending.

The annual event is a source of great inspiration for many, and it has served as something of a model for the kinds of international reconciliation processes that some of us would later explore. But at one particular National Prayer Breakfast event in February 1984, just months after my visit to the marine barracks in Beirut, I was not inspired but outraged. The speaker was not Billy Graham but a visiting Muslim dignitary from the Mideast who addressed the assembled guests with a reading from the Qur'an.

The Qur'an! I couldn't believe it. It felt like a betrayal, and I was genuinely alarmed at what I saw as its sinister implications. Walking out of the International Luncheon, I stepped out of the D.C. Hilton and into the freezing Washington weather to pace the streets in a mix of anger and confusion.

Of course, I had never actually *read* any of the Qur'an. In those days, I wouldn't have even considered picking up a copy to browse—it would have felt like heresy. Besides, I didn't need to: I already had ample evidence that Islam was a religion of violence and that the book from which it drew its inspiration was the devil's work. My Evangelical Christian friends had been warning of Islam, the "sleeping giant," for years. I'd never paid much attention to the details, but I got the general picture. After all, I had sat on a couch with Malcolm Kalp. And stood in the wreckage of the marine barracks in Beirut. And worn a bullet-proof vest, in case Arafat's reach *did* extend all the way to Lafayette Park. What more evidence does a person need?

What had begun as a simmering sense of mistrust and unease now boiled over as white-hot righteous indignation. It was bad enough that Americans had been held hostage in Iran and blown to bits in Beirut. Now we were willingly submitting ourselves to the rabid rantings of militant Muslims—willingly submitting ourselves to being held hostage at our own National Prayer Breakfast in our own capital! It was just too much.

From my office I dashed off a stinging letter of protest to the leadership of the National Prayer Breakfast. What did they think

they were doing, I wrote, allowing a Muslim leader to read the Qur'an at an event supposedly dedicated to peace and brotherhood? Were they crazy?

MANY YEARS LATER, after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, when Christian leaders began denouncing Islam and the Qur'an from pulpits and radio stations across America, their litany of vitriol and hysteria was both frightening and yet oddly familiar.

When a well-known American preacher went on *60 Minutes* and denounced the prophet Muhammad, the founder of Islam, as "a terrorist,"⁴ when another prominent American clergyman told thousands of Christians at a convention in Dallas, "We are on God's side: this is not a war between Arabs and Jews, this is a war between God and the devil,"⁵ when a high-profile Evangelical Christian leader appeared on the *NBC Nightly News* and declared that "the God of Islam is not our God . . . I believe it is a very evil and wicked religion,"⁶ I remembered my letter of protest to the National Prayer Breakfast leadership. It was *my own voice* I recognized.

Back in 1984, what I didn't realize was that I was also a hostage, held captive by my own ignorance and fear—much like the fear that has held so much of the world hostage since the events of 9/11. And while I could not have remotely suspected it at the time, that same letter of protest would trigger a series of encounters that would eventually shake me loose from the beliefs that held me there.