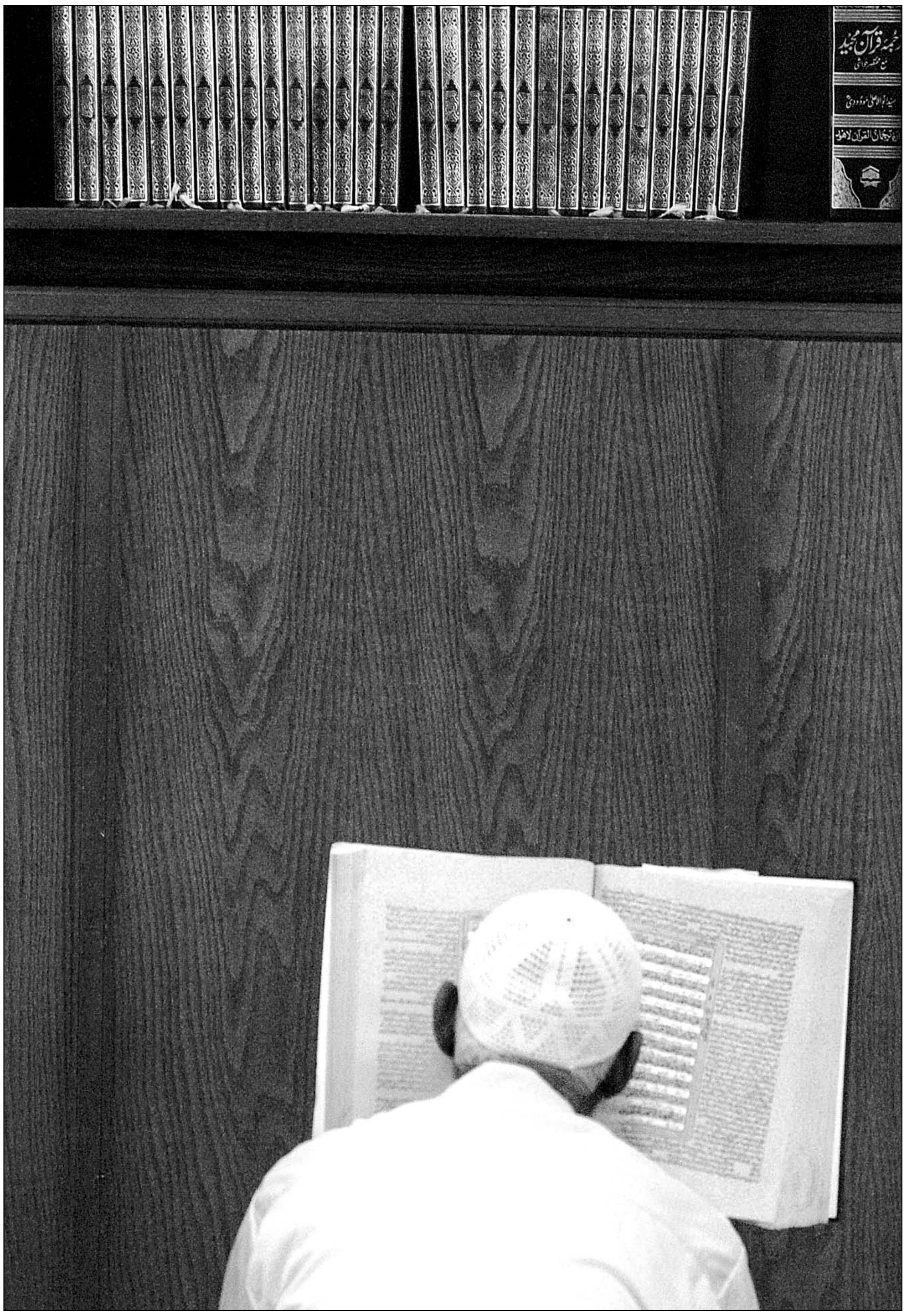
STRUGGLE AND SURRENDER

Ordinary Muslims and scholars seek a political interpretation of violence committed for Islam



JASON JOHNS/Missourian

A man studies in the prayer room of the Columbia mosque beneath a bookshelf lined with copies of the Quran. The room fills to capacity every Friday before Jumaah, or afternoon prayer.

Maaz Maqbool, an MU student, started high school in downtown Manhattan, a few blocks away from the World Trade Center plaza. "My friends and I would frequently go there to the underground mall and to the Plaza between the towers," says Maqbool, who has lived in Columbia since 1999. "I remember distinctly lying on a bench in the plaza and staring up at the towers, which gave me a sensation of vertigo."

When the first plane hit the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, Maqbool was in his car, driving to class. Later — on the large television screen in Brady Commons — he watched the Twin Towers collapse. He spent the rest of the day in shock, watching the news and sending online messages to friends in New York. His old high school was used as a triage unit.

"It's impossible to understand the enormity of what occurred until you have seen it in person," says Maqbool, who visited the site the following summer. "I guess it would be hard for someone who had never seen the towers to really know the sense of loss from thinking that they no longer exist, and that thousands of people died in those attacks."

The attacks of Sept. 11 sparked many questions. Why do Muslims hate America? Is Islam an inherently violent religion? If it isn't, what happened? And whom do we turn to for answers? Muslims countered, saying the hijackings were not a manifestation of Islam, which, like all religions, doesn't condone suicide, killing of civilians or destruction of property. Trying to drive this point home, Maqbool became involved in outreach efforts — speaking to students and community members as a Muslim and a New Yorker.

The day of the attack, Rashed Nizam, president of the Islamic Center of Central Missouri, closed his ophthalmology practice and rushed to the mosque. He wrote the school superintendent and the MU chancellor and got the police chief and the mayor on the phone.

"We made it very clear that (the attack) is wrong, we don't accept it," Nizam said.

He says Columbia was supportive because Muslims weren't strangers; the mosque had hosted numerous open houses and discussions.

"I felt it was my duty to be involved in educating people about Islam, since it was such a sensitive time and we were afraid of any backlash from people who couldn't separate the lunatic fringe from the 1.2 billion ordinary Muslims around the world," Maqbool says.

Still, nationwide, the "violent Muslim" image was taking hold, and today many Americans equate Muslims with terrorism. In October, the Council on American-Islamic Relations found one in four Americans surveyed held negative views of Muslims. A December poll by Cornell University shows 44 percent of Americans surveyed favored some curtailment of civil liberties for American Muslims, while 42 percent who described themselves as not highly religious saw Islam as an advocate of violence.

Ahmet Karamustafa, who teaches Middle Eastern Studies at Washington University in St. Louis, says being asked whether Islam is more violent than other religions is a frightening question because other faiths don't have to fend off such questions. John Esposito, a scholar on Islam at Georgetown University, says news reports tend to associate violence in the Middle East with Islam itself without providing the necessary historical and political context.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, commentator Daniel Pipes, director of the Middle East Forum, does not equate Islam with violence, but says "no cause relies on it so often, so lethally, or so ambitiously as the Islamist one." ▶▶▶