

To change the political and social landscape of the Middle East and keep the Western world from equating Islam with terrorism, Ibrahim says, Muslims and non-Muslims need to see each other as equals. The struggle within Islam is a bare-knuckles street fight that has been dragging on for more than 50 years, and it's not one to be solved anytime soon. Ibrahim says America needs to participate in this struggle but should want real transformation, not just temporary safety.

"If you look at it as a security issue, (the problem) is going to be there forever," he says. "You can fix it today, but you don't know when it's going to erupt again. The Americans are impatient. They want the Muslim world pacified fast, because that will make them feel secure."

Muslims themselves are working hard for political and religious reforms.

"People need to give Muslims a credit for debating — that is not being given to us," Ibrahim says. The Western world has made some Muslims embarrassed about their legacy, he adds, making them turn

their back on their heritage — going as far as to denigrate it.

"If you want to remain sane, you have to work within the tradition and bring it into modernity," he tells his Islam and the West class. "But don't leave your people behind."

This modern struggle of Islam, Esposito says, has to be viewed on two levels. There is a broader challenge all religions face that involves adjusting the religion to match the realities of the 21st-century global village. On the second and more sensitive level, the struggle for the soul of Islam involves elements of extremism, promoted by "a very deadly and dangerous minority," Esposito says. Muslims around the world have begun to understand that extremists have to be taken on and discredited. The process — more important today than ever, Esposito says — is one of military, political and religious reform.

The Middle East, in the aftermath of what many called "The Arab spring," is the core of American foreign policy. The U.S. government is pressuring Iran to abandon nuclear weapons aspirations,

monitoring the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and helping Afghans and Iraqis build democracies after free elections. The U.S. government was recently successful in persuading Syria to withdraw its troops from Lebanon. At the same time, American soldiers are dying in Iraq, where the insurgency doesn't show signs of letting up. At home, American Muslims continue to be viewed with skepticism.

A recent U.S. News and World Report article based on secret documents says the American government has decided it cannot sit on the sidelines as radicals and moderates fight over the future of a politicized region. The magazine reported that Washington has secretly poured billions of dollars into the Middle East in an effort to restore America's image by funding Islamic radio and television, mosques, schools, think-tanks and scores of other programs.

"It has that attention because the Middle East has oil," says Paul Wallace, who teaches a class on terrorism at MU. "It presents a strategic problem to the modern industrialized state. And ▶▶▶



LIPO CHING/Missourian

Abdullahi Ibrahim teaches a class on Islam and the West at MU. He is an African Muslim from Sudan who matured as an intellectual as the religion fundamentalist movement was taking hold in his country.

ISLAM THROUGH THE AGES

