

Terrorists betray our values

By H.M. King Abdullah II bin Al-Hussein

This year, Jordanians, like Americans, have been killed and injured in devastating terror bombings in Saudi Arabia and Baghdad. The dead include a 5-year-old boy, Yazan Abassi, and his 10-year-old sister, Zeina. The faces of these victims and their grieving families are in my mind whenever I read terrorists' claims to speak for the Arab and Muslim people. In fact, my people have been among the first to suffer from those who preach the culture of terror and seek power through violence. And their claim that Islam justifies their actions is, pure and simple, a lie.

The evil that occurred Sept. 11 two years ago left scars on the whole world, but none as great as the false idea that Islam encourages violence.

Yet according to a recent poll by the Pew Research Centre for the People and the Press, this is what a growing number of Americans think. That's a misunderstanding that threatens to divide the friends of peace, Arab and American, just when we most need to stand together.

The truth is that from its very earliest days, Islam has called on its believers to lead lives of peace and tolerance. The very name of Islam is rooted in the word for peace, al salaam. Far from sanctioning the killing of innocents, our faith prohibits it. Jihad, so often translated as "holy war," actually means struggle. And the Prophet Mohammad, Peace Be Upon Him, taught that the greater holy war is the war inside ourselves, against our own weaknesses and failings.

When extremists commit atrocities, they are also doing violence to Islamic teachings. Long before the 20th century's Geneva Conventions on war, Muslim soldiers were given strict rules of conduct to protect civilians. Even today, schoolchildren learn a famous speech by the Prophet's first successor, Abu Bakr. He commands integrity, forbids the killing of innocents of any faith and bans wanton destruction: "Do not betray, do not deceive, do not bludgeon and maim, do not kill a child, nor a woman, nor an old man," he instructed. "Do not burn; do not cut down a fruit tree if you come across communities who have consecrated themselves to the (Christian church), leave them."

It is also untrue that Islam forbids its believers from engaging constructively in the modern world. The Koran and Hadith — the sayings and deeds of the Prophet, Peace Be Upon Him — support a dynamic faith of discourse and

interpretation. From the earliest times, believers were called on to discuss, reason and apply the principles of their faith to the real world around them.

The resulting golden age of Islam, beginning in the 9th century, was driven by the work of enlightened Muslim thinkers. They pioneered a rationalist, liberal tradition and a thriving, multiethnic civilisation. Islamic scholars set milestones in medicine, astronomy, science and social justice, ideas that paved the way for the European Renaissance.

Great Arab cities provided refuge and new ideas to travellers from around the world. Muslim, Christian and Jewish scholars, like the great Jewish philosopher Maimonides, worked together in the royal courts.

In the 14th century, a new kind of orthodoxy came to power, which closed the door on debate and discovery. Yet the age-old, positive traditions of Islam provide another path, a path that respects diversity, pioneers new ideas and empowers people throughout society. As an Islamic nation for the 21st century, Jordan is inspired by these values as we shape an open, democratic and free civil society.

In 2003 there are more than one billion Muslims worldwide, and the vast majority are people of peace. Since September 2001, this moderate, silent majority of Muslims has begun to speak up about the true Islam. Jordan is leading the way. For us, this is a historic responsibility. Our soil, the Levant, is after all the ancient home of all three great monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Here at the home of faith, we are determined to spread Islam's promise of tolerance, justice and progress – both within our own country and as a model for peace-making and democratic reform in our region.

It is also important for the true Islam to be understood in the West. Ours is a critical moment in history, a time of genuine possibilities for progress – in the war on terror, in the peace process in the Middle East, in the reconstruction of Iraq. The enemies of peace would like nothing better than to discourage and divide us. We must not let it happen.

This week I will be in Washington, D.C., to talk with President Bush and Congress about our shared goals for peace, and how to achieve them. Jordan and the United States have a significant strategic alliance that is contributing to the success of the global war on terror. In the Middle East, we have worked closely together to bring peace to the homeland of faith – to end the conflict and occupation that have caused so much suffering to Palestinians and Israelis alike. The "roadmap" to peace has been sanctioned by the international community. It offers Israelis collective security guaranteed by all Arabs; a peace treaty and normal relations with Arab states; and an end to the conflict. It offers Palestinians an end to the occupation; a viable, independent state by 2005; and the promise to live as a free and prospering people.

The roadmap can take us to a lasting peace, peace that is an essential requirement for development and reform throughout the Middle East, peace that

will end the festering despair that terrorism and hatred have fed on. But success will require our full commitment, our resources and, most important, our unity. The only people who win when Americans feel divided from their Arab and Muslim friends are the extremists and haters. Let's not allow these enemies of peace to do any more violence than they already have. Now, more than ever, we need to stand together, as allies, partners and friends.

Monday, September 15, 2003