Youssef Chebli, the Al-Rashid mosque and CSIS during the Gulf War (1990-1991)

The Gulf Within

Canadian Arabs, Racism, and the Gulf War

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Imam Youssef Chebli photographed after a Friday sermon in Edmonton's Al-Rashid mosque. Behind him is the *mimbar*, or altar, on which Muslim imams, or religious leaders, deliver the Friday sermon. His family was subjected to harassment and death threats because he applauded Saddam Hussein for standing up to America and supporting the Palestinian quest for a homeland.

CHAPTER ONE

The Media Imam

"An untamed tongue can be as full of deadly consequences as any warhead."

Bonnie Gustafson, in a letter to the Edmonton *Sun*

As the first American bombs dropped on Baghdad with laser guided precision on the evening of January 16, 1991, the same scene swept through hundreds of newsrooms across Canada. Front pages were ripped apart to accommodate the beginning of the Gulf War, headlines were bloated to huge type sizes, and thousands of computer terminals were plugged into the incoming news services to follow the action. But by the next day there was a new question for journalists to answer: How do we bring this war home to Canadians? That local angle must exist somewhere in this vast land. Sure, there were the families of the armed forces personnel in the Gulf, but they had been milked dry even before the war started. And, of course, there were the evening television shots of Canada's CF-18 jets taking off on escort missions and then returning to their bases, the pilots saying how they felt left out while their American, British, and French counterparts were levelling Iraq. Then there was whispered talk of Islamic and Arab terrorism in Canada — good copy, but ambiguous. Weren't there any local villains?

It was in this mood that an enterprising reporter in Edmonton decided to call up a good-natured and garrulous Muslim leader. The idea was to provide local copy by soliciting the views of Imam Youssef Chebli. What Chebli told the reporter proved beyond his wildest hopes. Not only did the imam not agree with

Canada's involvement in the war, but he also appeared actively to support Saddam Hussein. The local angle was getting better — a villain at home is worth two in the faraway killing fields.

Chebli's story became a war within a war. He was like a child suddenly put under the glare of spotlights; he loved it — after all, it was his chance to expound the contrary Islamic viewpoint. As he responded to the media, they would quote the portions of his statements that fit their agenda. Chebli stirred up a controversy that put Canadian Arabs and Muslims on the defensive, turned Canada's foreign policy on its head, and sent the security forces scrambling to determine whether Alberta's Muslims were about to stage a Rielesque rebellion on the Prairies. The repercussions were deadly for everyone around Chebli. But Chebli's tale, like any good one, has a beginning and a middle, a human face absent from the headlines he attracted.

Youssef Chebli was one of eight children of a Lebanese landowner-farmer in the fertile Bekaa Valley. The family could afford a comfortable lifestyle and education for the children. Chebli himself wanted to enter the medical profession and had his career mapped out when, in keeping with the volatile and sudden twists that continue to shape the destiny of the Middle East, his life was changed. A cousin he greatly admired, a rich businessman in Brazil, called on the family one day and told Chebli that he must become an imam, a religious scholar and prayer leader, and spread the word of Prophet Mohammed — the messenger of Allah. Chebli dropped his plans to become a doctor and headed to Cairo's ancient, world-famous Al-Azhar University. When he graduated in religious studies from the faculty of languages in 1968, he was assigned to the most fertile oil patch in Saudi Arabia — Dammam.

Canada's own oil patch was far from his mind in Saudi Arabia, where he met the likes of Sheikh Bin Baz, the Khomeini of that Calvinistic Muslim land. Reportedly, Baz still believes that the world is square and that a human who walks to its edge will fall off. But Chebli believed Allah had mapped out a bigger job for him than minding the flock in the Prophet's birthplace. He had to carry the word to a non-Muslim country.

He followed the path trod by the first Arab immigrants to Canada, those who came here in the late 1880s and early 1900s.

Edmonton seemed a good location. Hadn't the Chebli clan started settling there before the First World War? He remembers the day he left Dammam in 1970 — it was stifling; the temperature reaching 100 degrees F during the day. Less than twenty-four hours later, at three in the morning, he landed at Edmonton International Airport. It was the middle of winter, and the temperature was 35 below.

It was blistering cold, he said, remembering how he shivered as he disembarked from the aircraft. Outside, his family waited to receive their newest member. He recalled gazing outside the airport at the blanket of snow and uttering his first words in Canada: "I'm not going out there on that white stuff. Are you crazy?"

Less than two years later he was the imam, or religious leader, of Edmonton's Grand Mosque, the Al-Rashid. The original Al-Rashid was Canada's first mosque. The state of affairs that Chebli first encountered in Edmonton's Muslim Ummah, or community, reminded him of the mosque's early history when there were only about twenty Muslim families in Edmonton. One day in 1938, they decided that they needed a place of worship where their children could be taught the faith. Using contributions from Christian Arabs and other locals who were enthusiastic about the idea of a mosque in that largely British city, they obtained a building permit and erected a one-storey structure.

"When I came here, maybe twenty or thirty people would come and pray, sometimes two or three," he said. "Not like today." A week earlier, more than two thousand believers crammed the new Al-Rashid Mosque for the mandatory Friday prayers. That was on a Good Friday, a statutory Christian holiday when Muslims can fulfil the Koranic injunction without having to appeal to the sense of fairness of their bosses to get the afternoon off. The usual Friday attendance, though, is still about one thousand.

Surrounded by a modern subdivision, the new Al-Rashid Mosque displays the traditional dome and minaret. The old structure was replaced in the early 1980s with the help of a generous $1-million grant from Libya. The older mosque, meanwhile, was removed to a site at Fort Edmonton Park, purportedly as a historic monument among other artefacts of the city's early days. Although local Muslims proudly point to this gesture, city authorities appear to have paid little attention to it — the mosque's presence

in the park remains unmentioned in a colourful brochure Edmonton publishes to attract tourists.

Both Canada and the mosque were good to Chebli. He and his wife Maria — a half-Lebanese, half-Spanish woman with large, black eyes — settled into a condominium rowhouse in Castle Downs, a neighbourhood with a large ethnic population in the city's north end. Their family grew as two Canadian-born daughters were added to the two sons who had come with them. They acquired cars and televisions and video recorders and kitchen gadgets, and soon Chebli was certified by the Alberta School of Theology as a registered minister.

None of the $1-million-dollar grant from Libya found its way into Chebli's basement office, which lacks the trappings of most church offices with their ornate wooden desks and chairs. Its simplicity, however, is in keeping with the thirteen-hundred-year-old faith that now embraces almost a quarter of humanity in its fold, about one billion people. A large metal desk is the major piece of furniture. On the wall next to it is a calendar from Mecca. It features the holy Kaaba, a cube-shaped building surrounded by a sea of humanity — Muslims on pilgrimage, fulfilling one of the five pillars of Islam. Glued to the wall on the other side of the room is the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Outside the office it is another story. Screaming little girls and boys run helter-skelter along corridors that are decorated with the pictures that children draw in primary schools — portraits of their mothers with big eyes and hair-raising hairdos, scenes from the playing field with an oversized sun. They are the students of Edmonton's only Islamic school, which teaches the required provincial curriculum in a Muslim setting.

Chebli's workload at the mosque is a far cry from the quiet life led by imams in his old country. In his own words, a Canadian imam is also "a counsellor, teacher, soldier, hospital man, court man, and immigration man." In one day, he might deal with cases as diverse as those of a Kenyan woman who is beside herself because she has lost the receipt for a graveyard plot next to her husband and of a Palestinian refugee seeking to transfer his claim from Ottawa to Edmonton. Stroking his grey beard and straightening his flowing long black robe, Chebli said that a Canadian imam was the equal of a thousand imams in the Middle East. They

pray five times a day, lead the Friday prayers, give their sermons, and go home.

But Chebli took all this additional work in his stride, much as he had accepted the snow and the blistering cold. What continues to bother him, though, is the acute crisis that he believes North American society has slipped into. Twenty-one years after his arrival, his mission was not yet accomplished. On the one hand, there were the offspring of believers, trapped like one of his sons by material temptations. They needed a lot of guidance. On the other hand, there were non-believers, who also needed to be told about the message of Islam, the faith that had swept the globe from Asia to Europe within the first hundred years of its founding.

"Islam is a universal message, and we don't have to hide it for ourselves; we have to deliver it to the whole world, and if we don't, there is severe punishment," he said. "If my neighbours are Christians, Jewish, or whatever, if they don't hear my message, on the day of judgement, they will defeat me. They will say: 'God, he was sitting beside me, we were smelling the same air, drinking the same water, under the same sky, and he never opened his mouth to give me the message. O Allah, don't blame me, blame him.' And I will get the blame, and He will object to my going to heaven."

The one constant in the life of Chebli has remained Islam. It was Islam that led him to support Muslim Iran during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war that ended in 1988. His rationale was that Iraq, a predominantly Muslim country, had violated religious edict by invading another Muslim country that was in the midst of setting up the first Islamic nation in centuries. And his Friday sermons then attacked the policy of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

It was Islam that inspired him to continue galvanizing support for the Palestinians as they were pushed off their land and scattered all over the world into a diaspora, much like what the Jews had experienced for centuries. He supported Libya's strongman, Muammar Gadaffi, as a Muslim revolutionary, even as the West billed him as a terrorist. And it was Islam that instantly caused him to stand up and support Iraq against the U.S.-led coalition.

As the clock ticked towards the American-inspired United Nations' deadline of January 15 for Iraq to remove its troops from Kuwait, the neighbouring country it had invaded on August 2, 1990, Chebli decided to pay his first visit to Baghdad, to attend a

world Islamic conference. It was January 7, and the mood was tense in the Iraqi capital as President Saddam Hussein continued to defy "the forces of imperialism led by the United States." Chebli was in the company of two other Canadian imams from Ottawa and Montreal.

Chebli's visit was not appreciated by the few diplomats Ottawa had left behind in Baghdad as it lined up its meagre forces behind the U.S.-led coalition. According to intelligence sources close to External Affairs, one of the diplomats even attempted to find out the contents of Chebli's remarks at the gathering by trying to coax an Iraqi into co-operating with him. The Iraqi instead informed the country's Mukhabarat, or secret service, of the overture.

Chebli's position at the conference, he said, was very clear. He opposed Ottawa's decision to join the coalition and wage war against Iraq. The coalition, he told those attending the conference to thundering applause, was "the work of Satan, a satanic coalition." He believes that Canada's trademark the world over is its peacekeeping forces. "That upset me to see our image demolished [by] the position of our government. I was caring as a Canadian, and I love to see people calling us ... peaceful people; that is why I was fighting and opposing the position of our federal government. ... I felt we were not an independent country. ... I felt we became an [alter] ego to the United States. ... We [Muslims and Arabs] did not expect Canada to send jet fighters to kill our mothers and fathers."

He embraced the coalition's arch-enemy, Saddam Hussein, and kissed him on both cheeks, a traditional Arab greeting that is as common as shaking hands in the West. He endorsed a resolution stating that Hussein was indeed the new Caliph of Islam because he had brought the plight of the Palestinians in the diaspora centre-stage with his brave acts. And he endorsed Hussein's Jihad, an Arabic word that simply means struggle but that is persistently and very loosely translated by the Western media as a Holy War. The struggle that Chebli was endorsing, however, was the cause of the Palestinians and the right of Hussein to stand up to Washington rather than bow down and acknowledge its supremacy. He never endorsed the invasion or takeover of Kuwait. On January 15, the day before hundreds of U.S. planes rained bombs on Baghdad with more power than the nuclear weapons unleashed on Hiroshima, Chebli left for neighbouring Jordan.

Back in Edmonton, the *Journal*, the tabloid *Sun*, and the broadcast media were scrambling to get reactions from local Arabs, especially Iraqis. One of the reporters called Chebli's home, and twenty-six-year-old Mohammed Chebli answered the call. "Call my father. He's in Jordan, and he'll tell you what is really happening," the eldest son said. He gave the reporter his father's telephone number in Amman.

When the media called, Chebli reiterated his warm meeting with Saddam, his endorsement of the Jihad against a satanic coalition murdering Muslims and Chaldean Christians in Iraq, and his total opposition to Ottawa's policies. When the Edmonton *Journal* spoke to him in Amman, the imam gave the reporter what he felt were the facts and stated what he believed in. The *Journal* ran a story headlined: "Local Muslim Cleric Sees Saddam as God's Agent."

"What I spoke was the truth, [but] the media flamed the statement and showed their true colours. They said, 'You are supporting Saddam.' And I said: 'Yes, I am supporting his cause, his cause is not Kuwait, [it is] the Palestinian problem. This is the mother of all problems. If you don't solve it, the war between Iraq and the allies is the beginning, not the end.' ... I told them, in Islam if any Muslim country is attacked, Muslims must stand up and defend it as one; otherwise, you don't belong to the Ummah, the nation of Islam. ... I said it [the coalition] is a satanic movement; it is madness. The big sacrifice to the world is truth, and the big win, hypocrisy."

What he was saying was not very different from what a lot of scholars and other commentators worldwide had been saying without using the Koranic or Biblical idioms. Stephen Lewis, former Canadian ambassador to the United Nations, accused the United States of hijacking the U.N. Security Council to get its stamp of approval for an unjust war. Archbishop Michael Peers, primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, declared that the coalition's reasons for starting the bombing did not meet the Christian tests for a just war. Noam Chomsky of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology said the U.S. army had become the world's "rent-a-thugs," renting itself out to the Kuwaitis for billions of dollars in subsequent rebuilding contracts. Why then highlight Chebli? Every mosque has an imam who leads the prayers and offers advice on religious matters. Unlike the Chris-

tian church, Islam has no hierarchy. A Muslim is directly responsible to his maker. An imam cannot claim to represent the views of the entire community, and Chebli never did. Spotlighting him was like questioning any Muslim on any downtown city street and running with a story that said, "Muslims Back Iraq."

For the reporter and his editors, Chebli was a wonderful figure on whom to peg a story. Focusing on him, they could dramatize the war by quoting an Edmonton imam who backed a government that was being compared to Germany's and a leader who was being compared by the authorities to Hitler. With Stephen Lewis or Michael Peers, criticism of the war effort raised questions about the Canadian government's policies. With Youssef Chebli, they had a source who could be presented not as a respected Canadian religious leader, but as a local advocate of the war policies of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. And that was exactly how the Edmonton *Sun* and many other media outlets played the story.

January 18 is etched in the memory of Maria Chebli. It was about 9 A.M. when the telephone rang. "Can I speak to Mr. Shelli," said a voice at the other end. She replied that no such person lived there, that this was the Chebli residence, and that Mr. Chebli was away. She politely asked the caller to leave a message. The response was a volley of obscenities, and she hung up the phone. Every second minute, it seemed, the phone rang. Other callers cursed everything from Islam to her Arab heritage. One caller said: "You bloody Muslim, go back to your bloody country." She replied: "My bloody country is Spain, my bloody country is Lebanon, and my bloody country is Canada." She said she felt embarrassed saying this because she feels Canada is her true home, since she has spent most of her life here. Eventually she told the caller that she was probably a better Canadian than he was.

Maria finally called the police. She said that on the first day after her husband's interview was published, she received more than a hundred hate calls. They continued for the next three days as the police tried to trace the callers. Involving the authorities, though, had its own drawbacks. Maria was forced to listen for at least a few minutes so that the calls could be traced. But she always found it impossible to do so and would end up slamming down the receiver.

On January 21, the source of her anguish returned to Edmonton secretly — Chebli had instructed his family not to tell the media

or any of their friends about his arrival. But, in Maria's words, her husband could not zip his lip and stay away from politics. And each time she ended up "in the middle." Having started the ball rolling, the media were hungry for more. The Edmonton *Sun* interviewed Chebli on January 22, and on page five the next day, the tabloid ran a short interview with a headline that read: "Muslim Backs 'Hero' Saddam." The story repeated his earlier remarks. And the telephone began ringing off the hook again.

The first caller that morning began his conversation by swearing. Maria recounts their exchange: "I said, 'Excuse me, can I help you?' He said, 'You and your family will be dead in ten minutes.' I said, 'Oh my God, I am lucky, I have at least ten minutes.' " The man began to swear again and she hung up too soon for the call to be traced.

After the fifth caller had threatened to blow up the Chebli home and machine-gun the children, Maria panicked and kept both doors locked. Anybody who showed up was asked from the inside what his business was. She angrily told her husband that he was a sheikh — another word for imam — and as such should not make political statements. When he protested that the media were distorting his words, she asked him to avoid reporters. But Chebli's zeal to tell the world about Islam increased with each caller.

Meanwhile, Maria's patience had begun to wear thin. She is a freelance Spanish and Arabic translator in the local court. Although she wears the hejab, a scarf, at all times in keeping with her husband's religious feelings, her desire for peace of mind was gaining the upper hand over her oath of loyalty to Chebli. Hence, when a man approached her in court one day and asked her whether she knew the controversial Chebli, since she bore the same last name, she decided she had had enough. "There are more than a hundred families who are Chebli; that means I have to be like Chebli?" she replied, disclaiming any connection with the controversial imam. She told Chebli later that she was not ashamed of him but did not need any more headaches.

As Maria described the ordeal that forced her to deny their relationship, Chebli stared at his briefcase. He did not want to get involved again in a discussion that had already occurred numerous times in that tumultuous period. Later, in the absence of Maria, he would once again be a lion — his name comes from the Arabic *chebl* or lion's cub — and say with a flourish, "There is no place

in this world for cowards." But within earshot of Maria, he was silent.

January 24 brought a new dimension to the Chebli saga. Mohammed received a call from his twenty-one-year-old brother, who was at the coliseum watching a hockey game. Nazir was with an older friend, who suddenly asked him whether he would fight for Canada "over where you come from." Nazir replied that if Canada was attacked, he would fight for Canada. "But what about what your father said," the friend asked. The son said his father had the right to say what he wanted and, besides, "they rearranged his words in the paper." Unconvinced and angry at Nazir's support of his father's statements, the man suddenly punched him and threatened more. Nazir called Mohammed, and soon five Arabs armed with hockey sticks faced ten whites armed with pool cues across the coliseum. The whites were hurling insults like "You crazy Arabs, you crazy fuckin' Iraqis, we'll teach you how to be Canadian." In the melée, Nazir was hit and broke a bone above his left wrist. Finally, Maria and Chebli intervened and called the police, who charged the man who had initiated the incident.

The next day, a reporter showed up at the mosque at prayer time and wanted to talk about the war and politics. Three believers had to restrain Mohammed Chebli from physically ejecting the reporter. He screamed: "Get out or pray, politics outside, now we pray for peace. Leave the mosque." Mohammed was convinced that the torture his family was living through was the handiwork of a biased media. A few hours earlier, when there were just a handful of elderly Muslims at the mosque, a former soldier had shown up on the front steps and screamed: "Where is that Chebli? I am going to kill him. I was in the army, and I am going to teach him a lesson."

The harassment continued. Every day at the mosque, Chebli freely discussed the hate calls he was receiving, but he hid the mail from his parishioners. He ignored the hate mail, he said, because he did not want to unleash a torrent of retaliation from local Muslims. It was hate mail at its worst. One letter read: "You Fuckin 2-faced Moslim Traitor see what will happen to you and your family soon. There will be a bloodbath of you'll cowardly, hypocritical, ungrateful Moslim Pigs, Bastards and Mother-Fuckers in this country — ISLAM the corrupt, hypocrits, cowards, thieves and ungrateful PIGS religion — you will be dead soon."

Another writer had clipped photographs to create a collage. At the bottom was a picture of Saddam Hussein with a big smile on his face. Saddam's face was turned slightly to the left, almost touching the exposed penis of a white man whose picture had been clipped and pasted to tower over that of Saddam. A label next to the white man's picture read, "GOD." "This, my dear brother, is Western civilization," said Chebli, holding the letter in one hand and the collage in the other.

But Chebli's troubles did not end with hate calls and hate mail. The media attention raised questions in Ottawa, in the war cabinet. And the agencies who were put on the spot over his outburst were the Canadian Security Intelligence Service and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Ottawa wanted to know whether this one-man rebellion in Alberta was the beginning of a Muslim revolt.

Unlike several other Arabs, who were asked to report to CSIS offices, in Chebli's case operatives met him in his basement office at the Al-Rashid Mosque and sat across from him on his own sanctified turf. Two officers showed up on Monday, January 27. Chebli was dressed in his full regalia, the black robe and long white imam's turban, with his beard combed neatly. They wanted to determine whether his call to Muslims to support their brethren could mean that the believers would rise up in rebellion in Canada.

Chebli said he had had enough of his words being "rearranged" by the media. And so he decided to tape the two-hour interview. He would not be outdone by the Canadian Mukhabarat. During the interview the exasperated Chebli said he threatened to throw his Canadian citizenship card at the officers, asking them to rip it up along with the Charter of Rights that was pasted on his office wall. He told the agents that Canadian Arabs were peace-loving people but that the government did not differentiate between right and wrong, that it copied President Bush and his demands. He attacked the government for targeting Arabs simply because they were recent immigrants and pointedly asked the two about their heritage: one was Irish and the other Ukrainian.

Chebli recounts: "They said, 'We don't want to see violence in Canada,' and I said, 'Who invites violence? You, yourself. We [Arabs] have a clean history here in Canada, but you [incite] us to make violence. ... I tell you, if you want violence, we are prepared, we have courage, we are not cowards. How many pro-

fessors, doctors, psychiatrists [have you consulted] and still you have not been able to understand the mentality of Muslims. When you understand, you will make peace. ...' "

Chebli also told the officers that he could "turn Canada upside down" if he liked by encouraging Muslims to rise up against Canada's involvement in the war, but he would not because he was an imam, a leader, and meant to provide a good example to others to guide them on the right path and encourage tolerance, patience, respect, and understanding.

Chebli's boasting, coupled with his idiosyncratic pattern of speech, was a gift to a villain-hungry media. But the essence of his message to CSIS was that instead of questioning his loyalty, they should team up with the RCMP and find the people who had terrorized his family and scores of others in the community. His remarks came after almost two weeks of harassment. Undoubtedly, the agents kept in mind his other activities in the community, such as his involvement with Christians and Jews in the interfaith council. They were more straightforward and understanding in their reporting than the media. The vivid Arabic images that Chebli translated into English, a hyperbole not uncommon under stress for people whose mother tongue is not English, had to be discounted by about 80 per cent. The report they filed said the possibility of any terrorism emanating from the Al-Rashid Mosque was zero.

Later, CSIS Director Reid Morden told the editorial board of the Edmonton *Journal* that he would have preferred that Chebli not express his views when tensions were running high in Canada, but that his men reported that Chebli "was not a fulcrum that was going to lead to downtown Edmonton being in flames." Given the mood of Edmontonians after the news reports, CSIS might have had the good sense to issue such a statement through the solicitor general to cool off the tension. It never did.

Instead, CSIS reports, in those wartime days, were circulated to other agencies, such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Customs. And not everyone believed the assessments. Chebli began noticing a black van parked outside his house every day. He believed that it was an RCMP surveillance vehicle. He was under the gun, and he knew that his mail was being opened. A magazine he had been sent from a friend in Amman, with write-ups of his Baghdad trip, was seized by Canada Customs and held

for four days until Customs determined that the articles in it were unlikely to incite Canadian Arabs to terrorism. He was notified about the seizure.

As the Chebli controversy grew to national stature — he was soon featured on shows such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's national radio show "As It Happens" — voices of dissent were heard among the Muslims. The RCMP and CSIS had questioned other Muslims about Chebli — subtly forcing them to distance themselves from their religious leader. The media lent the security forces a hand here by helping to split the community. After first building up their straw imam, reporters began questioning other prominent Muslims about Chebli's statements as reported by them. Their questions were usually rhetorical. Largely out of fear for their families and their children, individual Muslims began dissociating themselves publicly from Chebli's support for Saddam Hussein and the Islamic cause. "His job is just to pray and teach religion. He doesn't carry any influence," one local Arab told the *Journal*, adding that Chebli had no influence that would encourage the community to rise up in violence.

The committee that runs the mosque itself decided that it was time to muzzle Chebli, since the media continued to besiege the mosque. Mohammed (Mickey) Jomha, president of the Canadian Islamic Centre, which runs the Al-Rashid Mosque, had earlier issued a statement saying that Chebli was speaking for himself. Jomha and Larry Shaben, a former minister of housing and industries in the Tory government of Peter Lougheed, now decided on even more proactive measures. The two decided that Chebli should refer all media requests for interviews to Shaben, and Chebli gave in. The media were not enthusiastic about having to deal with Shaben; he was too much like them. Yes, they could say that he was a Muslim, an Arab, but he was part of the establishment in Alberta and hardly likely to stir up a heated controversy.

Shaben laughed as he described the disappointment of the media over the Islamic Centre's decision to move Chebli off centre-stage. "So when the reporters came later, and they were trying to get Chebli to say something, they would be told: 'You have to talk to Larry Shaben.' And they did not want to talk to me. It was really fascinating in the last month or so because it's

no fun talking to Larry Shaben. They wanted to talk to somebody who'd say: 'Hey, Saddam is okay!' "

Not only did the media avoid Shaben at this juncture, but they also refused to give him the same profile as Chebli during the war, despite his prominence. Shaben traces his ancestry to Lebanon. He had expressed his views in a number of public meetings; he said that Canada's Gulf posture was all wrong and that Ottawa should never have joined the war. "Look at the way the West functioned with the Soviet Union," he told one audience. "Seventy-three years we waited to deal with the Russian bear and five months with a tiny Middle East country." He said it was clear Canada's foreign policy was driven by the United States. Canada neither needed Arab oil nor was it motivated by a high moral conduct; otherwise, it would have taken similar steps when Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982 and killed thirty thousand people, when it annexed Syria's Golan Heights, and when U.N. resolutions asked Israel to withdraw from occupied Palestinian territory. None of Shaben's comments drew much press. But then Shaben was dressed in a suit and tie, he had never projected himself as a Muslim in his political career, and his speech used imagery that fitted the mould of the establishment. Besides, he was not a garrulous imam, the former minister's loyalty could not be questioned, and he could not be caricatured.

There also was another dimension, which Chebli's son hit upon in his down-to-earth manner. By seeking out dissenters who could be typified as Arabs and Muslims and not simply as dissenting Canadians, the media had set up the community for a fall.

The journalists' motives in spotlighting Chebli were to find controversy and drama, not to provide balanced coverage. They depicted him as an archetypal villain and left the impression that he had tried to incite Canadian Arabs and Muslims to commit acts of terrorism, which he had not. Had the reporters asked Chebli whether he had endorsed Saddam Hussein's human rights abuses in Iraq or the war with Iran, he would have said no. He was simply commending Hussein for challenging an imperialist power and bringing the Palestinian problem to the world's attention. He did not even support the invasion of Kuwait; he simply felt that the two Muslim countries could have resolved their problems without interference from a Western armada.

No one disputes that it is the responsibility of the media to reproduce the spoken words of a person accurately, but reporters need to exercise common sense when their subjects are not fluent in English. Reporters who are determined to emphasize an angle have an advantage over interview subjects struggling with words. They can ask leading questions or quote selectively, giving the interview a slant the subject never intended.

But the most important duty of a journalist is to provide context and balance in any story. Chebli's stand on the Gulf War was only a few notches stronger than that of Canada's mainstream Christian churches. Most churches believed that the Gulf War was not just. Had the reporters wanted to cover Chebli fairly, they could have included the views of the other three imams in Edmonton and of well-known Muslim leaders in the community.

But how exciting and sensational would a story be if it said: "Muslim and Christian Leaders Oppose Gulf War?" And how exciting would a story be if the other imams and Muslim leaders opposed the American-inspired war but did not support Saddam Hussein as Chebli did, which would imply that most Muslims were no different than Canada's pacifists? Balance and context don't always produce dramatic and saleable journalism.

And Chebli was a yarn that could be respun a hundred times and still produce headlines to sell papers.

The Chebli family poses for author Zuhair Kashmeri. From left: Mohammed Chebli, his mother Maria, and father Imam Youssef.