



Ayaan Hirsi Ali, 37, faced terrible adversity from a young age in her native Somalia and now aims to reveal the "truth" about Islam and its treatment of women.

ENEMY OF ISLAM

Her strident views on Islam have earned the Somali-born author, film-maker, politician and human rights campaigner Ayaan Hirsi Ali fame, controversy, a Nobel Peace Prize nomination – and countless death threats, writes **David Leser**.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI doesn't look or sound dangerous, but if her enemies had their way, she would be dead. A public stoning, perhaps, or a bomb detonated in the middle of the night, or even an attack in broad daylight, such as the one that ended the life of her friend, Theo van Gogh. That's the degree of hatred she inspires.

Never was this made more apparent than on that chilling Amsterdam morning two-and-a-half years ago when van Gogh, the maverick Dutch film-maker, was cycling to work during rush hour and a Muslim extremist named Mohammed Bouyeri stepped out from the shadows to shoot him eight times.

Van Gogh staggered on for a few metres and then, according to witnesses, twice begged his assailant for mercy. "Can't we can talk about this?" he pleaded.

Bouyeri, a Dutch-born citizen of Moroccan descent, was not interested in talking. He drew two butcher's knives from under his *jellaba* (a loose-fitting Moroccan robe) and with one of them slit the film-maker's throat. With the other, he impaled a letter on his victim's chest, addressed to Ayaan Hirsi Ali. It read, in part, "You will break yourself to pieces on Islam. You, oh America, will go down. You, oh Netherlands, will go down ... You, oh Hirsi Ali, will go down."

The crime of the two film-makers had been to produce an inflammatory short work called *Submission Part One*, in which lines from the Muslim holy book, the Koran, were painted onto semi-naked actresses portraying various aspects of Woman's submission to Man.

The murder plunged the Netherlands, one of the most progressive societies on earth, into crisis. Here was the dark side of the multicultural experiment laid bare. At least a dozen mosques were attacked and an Islamic primary school twice set alight. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, by then not just a scriptwriter, but a member of the Dutch parliament, was forced into hiding, re-appearing two-and-a-half months later with her security redoubled.

When she returned to parliament in January 2005, politicians and journalists alike gave the Somali-born granddaughter of a warlord and daughter of a Muslim rebel leader a standing ovation. To many, she had become the symbol of moral courage in a country suddenly confronted with a potential clash of civilisations.

A year later, *Time* magazine hailed her as one of the 100 most influential people in the world and, in 2006, she was voted European of the Year by the editors of *Reader's Digest* magazine, as well as nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. >>>

That was just months before a Dutch court order evicted her from her home and stripped her, briefly, of her citizenship. Within days, she had also caused the collapse of the Dutch government.

Ever since the attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, Ayaan Hirsi Ali has been speaking out against the faith she had been raised to believe in and uphold. She has portrayed the hijackers' actions as the logical outcome of Islam's rigid belief system and moral framework. She has described the religion as a totalitarian system and the Koran not as a holy book, but as a historical document responsible for spreading brutality and bigotry. She has condemned loudly the subjugation of women and, perhaps most inflammatory of all, she has even attacked the founder of the Islamic faith, Mohammed himself.

The 37-year-old writer, who was in Australia for the Sydney Writers' Festival in May and to promote her explosive international best-seller, *Infidel*, believes Islam is a threat to everything the Western world holds dear. "It is a threat to liberalism," she says. "It is contrary to the Enlightenment. It subjugates women. It limits the imagination. It is bad for all of us, regardless of where you are from."

And for these strident views, Ayaan has been cast out by her family, subjected to five years of death threats, forced into hiding in both the Netherlands and the US, evicted from her home and placed under a 24-hour security watch.

In Washington DC, where she now lives, she is driven around in armoured cars and given round-the-clock protection. She is also reported to have bodyguards posted outside her bedroom while she sleeps, a claim she will neither confirm nor deny.

"I can't tell you that," she says now. "I'm really sorry. Those kinds of details I am not allowed to talk about." What she will confirm is that she has received death threats while in Australia, as well as prior to arriving in the country. "[Certain people]

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have made it very clear that I am not welcome," she says.

This might explain then why there is no record of her staying at her hotel, why our rendezvous point has been changed at the 11th hour and why her security detail has been suddenly doubled.

It might also explain why Australian Muslims regard her views as ignorant at best and, outrageously provocative at worst. "I think she is entitled to her views," says Maha Abdo, spokesperson for the Muslim Women's Association, "but I



Above: Police investigate the murder of Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh (right) in Amsterdam in November 2004.

think she is very misinformed about the spiritual aspects of Islam.

"I have declined to talk about her in the past because I don't want to give her more air time than she deserves. I think she is very oppressed herself and she should seek help. She is putting all Muslim women in the same basket ... and blaming Islam for the bad cultural practices she had to live under."

Most of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's life has been a grim study of war, exile, famine, civil unrest, rebellion and institutionalised violence against women.

When she was five years old growing up in Somalia, in East Africa, she had her genitals removed on the floor of her family home. (Her older brother, Mahad, six, and younger sister Haweya, four, were also circumcised that day.)

"The scissors went down between my legs," she recalled in harrowing detail in her book, *Infidel*, "and the man cut off my inner labia and clitoris. I heard it, like a butcher snipping the fat off a piece of meat. A piercing pain shot up between my legs, indescribable, and I howled. Then came the sewing: the long, blunt

needle clumsily pushed into my bleeding outer labia, my loud and anguished protests, my Grandma's words of comfort and encouragement. 'It's just this once in your life, Ayaan. Be brave, he's almost finished'. When the sewing was finished, the man cut the thread off with his teeth."

Ayaan lost consciousness and then woke to discover her legs tied together. This was to help facilitate the formation of a scar. Her bladder was bursting, but it hurt too much to urinate. Her legs were covered in blood and she was shivering



and sweating. It took two weeks for her and her siblings to recover, although Haweya never quite did. "She became ill with a fever for several weeks and lost a lot of weight," Ayaan was to recount. "She had horrible nightmares ... My once cheerful, playful little sister changed."

Today, sitting on a sun-kissed deck above the white sails of Sydney Harbour, Ayaan is quick to point out that this didn't just happen to the women of her family, it happened to 140 million women around the world. And that's not counting the many millions of girls who died from their infections following surgery. "It's not an accident," she tells me. "It's not a disease. It's an activity carried out in the name of love and protection."

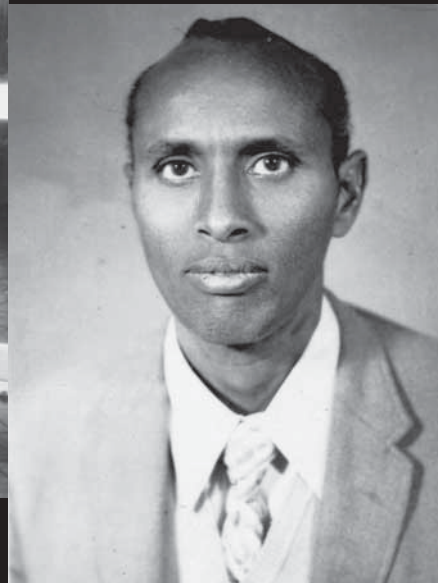
And, yes, while circumcision is more a tribal, pre-Islamic practice than an Islamic practice, Ayaan maintains it has always been justified in Somalia in the name of Islam. As a little girl – before her circumcision – she was teased for having a clitoris. "Kinterleey", they would call her, which meant, literally, "she with clitoris".

Ayaan grew up a good Muslim. She learnt the Koran line by line. She studied in Islamic schools. She prayed five times a day and wore the protective veil.

Her father, Hirsi Magan Isse, was a devout Muslim, but also a graduate of >>>



Above: Ayaan (centre) with the man she was betrothed to, Osman Moussa (right), and a chaperone. Right: Ayaan's father, Hirsi Magan Isse, in a picture she carries in her wallet.



New York's Columbia University and a famed literacy campaigner throughout Somalia. Son of a famous warlord, he was to spend the early years of Ayaan's life in jail for leading a rebellion against Communist rule.

Ayaan's mother, Asha, was born under a tree in the Somali desert, and although married off to her first husband – a man she instantly disliked – she did something rare for a woman in those days. She sought – and obtained – a divorce. “She told this man, ‘I will remain married to you now and when my father dies I will divorce you.’ ”

In 1966, Asha married Ayaan's father, but the Somali civil war and Hirsi Magan's long absences from home meant their relationship was often strained.

When Ayaan was eight, the family moved to Saudi Arabia and it was there she had her first taste of a country under Sharia or Islamic law. On arrival at Jeddah airport, her mother was prevented, she claims, from travelling into the city with her children because she was unaccompanied by a man.

Ayaan's father had failed to show and no amount of protest or argument would shift the authorities, who forced the family to wait in the arrival lounge until a male could be found to escort them out. Only hours later, when a Somali man, a complete stranger, agreed to go with them, could they leave the airport.

Ayaan hated Saudi Arabia. To her, the country was a giant prison. “People had their heads cut off in public squares,” she observed. “Hands were cut off. Men were flogged. Women were stoned.” And women were hissed at if they ventured out alone.

“It's a terrible sound,” she says, “and [my mother] couldn't go out of the house without taking my brother with her, or without taking a whole horde of children with her.”

In 1979, the family was deported from Saudi Arabia because of Ayaan's father's rebel activities. They went first to Ethiopia and then onto Kenya, where Ayaan remained

for the next 13 years. It was in Kenya that the world of ideas began to open up to her.

Although attending a Muslim girls' school, Ayaan was lucky enough to have a teacher who encouraged her to read books such as *1984*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *Wuthering Heights*. Ayaan learnt through these fictional worlds that men and women could be equal. It was a confounding notion, but one that left a lasting impression.

By the mid-1980s, a stricter, more radical creed of Islam had also started to find its way into the Islamic schools and mosques of East Africa. The Muslim Brotherhood, a precursor to the Al Qaeda movement, wanted its followers to return to the fundamental teachings of Islam.

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Much of this revolved around the control of women.

Ayaan says she was taught that a woman could be beaten by her husband if she disobeyed him; that she would be required to be sexually available to him at all times – except when menstruating; and that she was responsible at all times for his sexual arousal. For this reason, she needed to be covered up.

“I couldn't sit here with you [like this] dressed as I please,” she tells me now, a glorious study of beauty and casual elegance in her grey linen top, black pants, pearl earrings and heeled sandals.

You couldn't be wearing perfume either, I venture. “No. Nor could I have my nails polished or filed. It's not only that you can't put on nail polish and that you can't put on perfume, and that you can't put on high heels because tapping of the high heels is going to seduce men, but also that you'll never be a major, you'll always be a minor.”

While a part of Ayaan accepted these strictures, another part of her began to rebel internally.

“How could a just God desire that women be treated so unfairly?,” she asked herself. “If God was merciful, why did He demand that His creatures be hanged in public? If He was compassionate, why did unbelievers have to go to Hell?” And how was it, she wondered, that men such as her father could simply abandon their wives and children, and go and take a second wife, then a third?

In 1981, when Ayaan was 11, her father had left the family home and, shortly afterwards, taken up with a second wife. Ayaan's mother refused to show her jealousy publicly, but instead turned

all her humiliation and heartbreak onto her daughters at home, inflicting on them many savage beatings.

This strengthened Ayaan's resolve never to become dependent on anyone. In 1992, when her father announced he had chosen a Somali man based in Canada to be her husband, Ayaan refused. It didn't matter that, according to her father, the prospective husband was tall, had strong bones and white teeth, and came from a suitable clan. Ayaan had met him and thought the man an idiot. She begged her father to allow her to choose her own husband, but her father insisted.

And so the daughter of this rebel fighter did what was only natural to her – she rebelled. On her way to the wedding in Canada, she stopped over in Germany and then, after two days, fled to the Netherlands, where she had heard they were welcoming towards migrants and refugees.

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Above: Ayaan pictured during the Sydney Writers' Festival in May. After six years campaigning against Islam, she says she would like to hand over to someone else.

In the space of 10 years, Ayaan Hirsi Ali went from being a refugee to the most famous woman in the Netherlands. She arrived in the country expecting to be confronted by chaos and sin. Instead, she found the blond infidels kind, hospitable and their society well-ordered.

Already speaking five languages, she set about learning a sixth, Dutch. Within three years, she was an official Somali-Dutch interpreter, visiting police stations, prisons, abortion clinics and women's shelters regularly.

What she saw in these desperate places was a failure of the multicultural experiment. Many Muslims had never learnt Dutch and had rejected the values of tolerance and liberty of which the Dutch were so proud. Moreover, Dutch efforts to accommodate minority cultures, particularly

rights movement and European history, especially the spread of fascism and communism. She began to acquaint herself with psychology and how this offered another moral framework for humanity besides religion.

Then, on entering the Netherlands' most prestigious university, the University of Leiden, she began immersing herself in comparative political systems and the history of ideas. Her career trajectory was spectacular. After graduating with a masters degree in political science, she became a junior researcher with the left-of-centre Labour Party. Her brief: to look at immigration. Her starting date: September 3, 2001.

With the terrorist attacks on America, Ayaan's position towards Islam hardened. "War had been declared in the name of

"WAR HAD BEEN DECLARED IN THE NAME OF ISLAM ... NOW I HAD TO MAKE A CHOICE. WHICH SIDE WAS I ON?"

Muslim ones, had, in Ayaan's opinion, actually perpetuated cruelty to females.

"Thousands of Muslim women and children in Holland were being systematically abused," Ayaan said. "Little children were excised [circumcised] on kitchen tables – I knew this from Somalis for whom I translated. Girls who chose their own boyfriends and lovers were beaten half to death or even killed. The suffering of all these women was unspeakable.

"And while the Dutch were generously contributing money to international aid organisations, they were also ignoring the silent suffering of Muslim women and children in their own backyard."

Ayaan's deep unease was reinforced by her college studies, where she began to absorb the lessons of the American civil

rights movement and European history, especially the spread of fascism and communism. She began to acquaint herself with psychology and how this offered another moral framework for humanity besides religion.

Islam, my religion," she said. "And now I had to make a choice. Which side was I on?" She was squarely on the side of individual freedom. By May 2002, she declared herself an atheist and began calling for the kind of self-examination in Islam that Europe had put itself through during the 17th and 18th centuries.

In a series of articles and television appearances, she branded Islam as backward. The death threats poured in and her critics took aim. They called her a fanatic, a secular fundamentalist, an Islamophobe who had chosen to project her own life's traumas onto the faith of one billion people.

"Is it because I'm traumatised that the 11th of September happened?" she retorts now with what I see as a quiet, but unnerving, certainty. "And is it because

I'm traumatised that four London train stations were blown up? No, what I'm saying is that people are being indoctrinated into acting this way and I know exactly the circumstances under which this happens.

"Through immigration, you expand Islam. As a woman, I have absolutely no advantage whatsoever in having Islam spread. So I object to it – as an individual human being who loves liberty and not only my own, but everybody else's.

In 2003, Ayaan Hirsi Ali entered the Dutch parliament as a member of the right-of-centre People's Party for Freedom and Democracy. (She believed the Labour Party had become too muddled in its thinking on immigration issues.) She was already in fear of her life and living in a secret location at the time she was sworn in.

In the middle of last year, she was evicted from her home under court order because her neighbours feared for their safety. A month later, her citizenship was revoked – albeit briefly – because she had given a false name and date of birth when she had applied for her citizenship. (Ayaan had given her grandfather's name because she feared being tracked down by her father and handed over to her husband-to-be.)

The decision caused an uproar and, in the following month, indirectly caused the collapse of the ruling Dutch coalition. As Ayaan says rather sheepishly now, "I think I'm the first Third Worlder – not only Somali – to bring down a government like that."

Today, she is no longer a member of the Dutch parliament. She lives in Washington DC, where she works for the conservative think-tank, the American Enterprise Institute. The threats have not gone away.

Ayaan reveals to *The Weekly* that she would like someone else to champion the cause instead of her. After six years, she has had enough. She would love nothing more than for her family to embrace her again, to find happiness with a partner of her own choosing and to revel in the freedom that others in the West take for granted.

"To take advantage of this," she says with a sweep of her arm, taking in the entire shimmering spectacle of Sydney Harbour.

Yet failing this, she will continue to speak out and to work on her new book, one based on an imaginary conversation in New York between the Prophet Mohammed and the great 18th century liberal thinker, John Stuart Mill.

Oh, dear. It feels like more trouble ahead. ■