

CONFERENCE NOTES  
THE ISLAMIC WORLD TODAY CONFERENCE  
18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> October 2021

<https://islamconf.byu.edu/conference-sessions>

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**Conference opening and Session 1– “Islam and Muslims in the Global West: Challenges and opportunities”**

Due to the acceleration of globalizing forces, many forms of Islam have come into contact with secular democracies and cultures resulting in complicated and dynamic social ecologies. Recently, ideological controversies and on-the-ground stresses related to refugees and immigration, retrenchment from globalization, the COVID-19 pandemic, and renewed calls for racial justice have impacted Muslims in particular ways. Participants in this session will reflect on these and other challenges and opportunities facing Muslims living in (or aspiring to live in) “the West”.

**Speakers**

Asma Afsaruddin: Professor in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures - Indiana University in Bloomington.

She began by stating that the Muslim community in the contemporary west face enormous challenges in every sphere of their lives posed by the pervasiveness and anti-Islamic sentiments since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This escalated the current hatred and discrimination against the Muslims that is known as islamophobia– referring to dread and hatred of Islam and therefore to fear or dislike of all or most Muslims. Data showed that 25% of the American population agree that most Muslims are inherently violent while 50% of them disagree. After 2011, the data shifted dramatically: 40% of Americans now believed that Islam promotes violence while 42% disagree after the most horrific event happened on September 11, 2011. The contemporary challenges posed to the Muslim community have played a role in America due to the rise of prejudice, ignorance, stereotype among the American community, and exclusion within the society from the first amendment. In addition, the induce of Islamophobia does not only exist in America alone, but also in France, Austria, Finland, and Germany where religious freedom has been restricted and oppressed: the hijab is banned in school, persecution against Muslims, and immigrants restricted. However, the United States currently advocate and pushes back against Islamophobia while allowing Muslims to represent themselves in all their diversities among various active organizations and grassroots entities. She hoped that Islamophobia should be continuing to be addressed and called for action to eliminate such issues in the global West.

Sherman Jackson: King Faisal Chair of Islamic Thought and Culture and Professor of Religion and American Studies and Ethnicity - University of Southern California.

Professor Jackson claimed that the Muslim and Islam and the West – presumably the Americans have a different set of understanding and ideologies toward each other. The Muslims who are viewed as immigrants, while the America value liberalism, secularism, and democracy come together at this conference to understand one another on the current issues concerned by the

Muslim community. He spent the first 20 minutes of his speech educating the audience on how and why America is not the West or the European, and how everyone can be American as long as they accept the American value and the constitution they hold because this society is vague and diverse. He stated three important dates as the beginning of the diverse Muslim community in America: 1619 (when black came to America), 1965 (National Origin Formula that allow all nationality conversions from over the whole), and 2001 (After the 9/11). He claimed that there is no authenticity value to being American. He also added that race is not a salient societal fault line and that distinction belongs primarily to religion and social-economic class, they would seek to do of E-Pluribus Duo— one of the many. He argued that as the current concern in the American society, people are not dealing with America, they are dealing with a caricature of America.

## **SESSION 2 – Women and Gender in the Islamic World: Continuities and Transformations**

The role of women in Islam has been a controversial topic over the centuries. Women's lives in Islamic societies have varied greatly over time and place as they have been impacted by religious and cultural traditions, local laws, social status, and specific societal norms. Speakers in this session discussed how various groups over the centuries have attempted to regulate women's lives, how women have navigated these rules, and how they have incorporated religion into their daily lives with regard to family, work, and the larger community.

Sherine Hafez – Professor and Department Chair of Gender and Sexuality Studies - University of California, Riverside.

She began by stating that most of the Muslim majority states are hostile to women; however, most of them reject the feminism label but they are in favor of God's power or covet it for themselves and do not challenge patriarchal power. Women in Egypt on the other hand, are both religious and social activists who engage in education, religious sphere, and social events such as fundraising for their organization and congregations, which attracted media not positively. Most women considered themselves to be trying to perfect their relationship with God; therefore, they do not seek gender equality. The challenges that she found while working with these activist women is the far more reaching conflict on traditions, tensions, and intersection with the belief in God that challenge as well to male authority. However, within the center, she has been working with local Egyptian women, whose intention is to empower women believed that it is her job which is sent from God to help other women in need and she thinks that it is a reward linked to her faith. These women are seeking neither fame nor the ability to promote themselves within their social group. They accept their work as directors of the center (women activists created to support other women), but this is because they believe that it helps sharpen their faith and perfect their relationships with God if they help others not because they want to challenge patriarchal power. What she is doing is a hope for future development projects for women where they see themselves according to the connection between their religious view and societal problem that both can play a role in cooperating their work on the project for empowering women and the society she is living in.

Jamillah Karim– Author, Former Professor of Religion - Spelman College

Jamillah stated that the liberation of feminism did not happen when slavery was abolished but when the white Christian women demanded equal rights to work and receive wages as men. She emphasized that it was when equality started to emerge within the American society but that was not relevant to black women because they always go to work during the day and support their families and communities at night. She showed concern about Muslim African men in America as being perceived as dangerous and guilty because of the common stereotype they posed against this group. She further addressed how Muslim women are dressing differently around the world depending on their tradition and sense of fashion within their Muslim community. She showed that it was unlikely for her Muslim community to include men and women in the congregation compared to other Muslims around the world, yet she was in a male-dominated group that did not discriminate against women but at the same time express love and understanding of one another when they pray. The speaker compares and contrasts the differences between males and females within Christian, Muslim, and the Black community regarding how they dress, living standards, and their religiosity.

### **SESSION 3 – The Qur'an, Hadith, and Historical Origins**

Contemporary Islamic beliefs and practices are inseparably bound to understandings of the Qur'an and Hadith literature, as well as to the historical origins of the faith in the era of Muhammad and his immediate successors. So also, to a significant degree, are Western views of Islam. This session's speakers will discuss different readings of the holy book of Islam and of the precedents established in the religion's formative years. Topics may include early religious and sociocultural contexts, geographical orientation, intellectual currents, the importance of archeological inscriptions and other media, and the reception of the Qur'an and hadiths in later centuries. In addition, speakers may consider what these historical topics entail, or might entail, for contemporary Muslim life.

Hadia Mubarak: Assistant Professor of Religion - Queens University of Charlotte

She addressed the origin of the Islamic books— Qur'an and Hadith, which is the primary source of the Islam belief. Qur'an is the word of God which was translated by the angel Gabriel to the people while the Hadith is the word of the prophet Mohammad to their believers. These two books discuss thoroughly the Islamic law, Islamic Theology, and the Qur'anic exegesis on philosophical approaches, tradition-based, scientific, thematic, mystical, etc. She emphasizes that the interpretation of these books is vague to a different method of interpretation-based institutions. The experiences of Muslims greatly vary on diverse factors such as culture, education, economic, status, family, and their understanding of Islam among others. She thinks that the Muslim practices; therefore, are the product of state policy, culture, social norms, economics, and politics while in some other cases religious interpretation of Islam. Thus, she claimed that there is no singular experience or interpretation of Islam.

Jonathan Brown: Alwaleed bin Talal Chair of Islamic Civilization in the School of Foreign Service - Georgetown University.

He began by discussing the primary book of Islam which is the Quran and the secondary book which is the Sunna. The first scripture is revealed by God; thus, is recorded into book directly.

This is connected to the second book which is the Sunna, which is translated from the first book for people to read through and understand through. It is like the way of the tribe from Mohammad's ideal a life path which explain how and what should Islam do if they believe in God. The interpretation of the Muslim community becomes vague because of the generational interpretation of the Sunna based on the leader's understanding, cultural context, education, etc.

#### **SESSION 4 – Perceptions of Islam in the West**

Muslims and Christians have lived in close proximity to each other ever since the rise of Islam in Arabia, through the medieval period in Spain and Anatolia, the crusades in Palestine, and into the modern period in various locations such as the Ottoman Empire. So, what is Islamophobia and how has it come about historically? How has it varied by time period and geographical locale? What is different about it today? In particular, how have attitudes toward Islam and Muslims changed with the surge of Muslim immigration into western Europe and the United States? To what degree do tensions exist or get exacerbated because of the “West's” Christian heritage, its secular present, or because of trends in Islamic societies, including the rise of political Islam? Finally, how can these tensions be minimized?

John Esposito: Professor of Religion & International Affairs and Islamic Studies - Georgetown University

He first addressed how Islam had been left out of the world view during the 80s to 90s due to the lack of understanding of interreligious community and controversy on the discussion of Islam. It was then that only he got to study the Islamic world and become one of the other specialists who were interested in this study. This is when the perception of Islam has not been understood because many people empirically understood it according to the false media. Islam was perceived as a threat since then, and the clash of civilizations has been imposed and oppressed mainly on Islam on the issues of this religiosity. Another event of 9/11 further strengthened this threat globally. Dr. Esposito continues to address the media leverage on the term used “Islamophobia” in America and claimed that America is Islamophobia and will continue to be due to the coverage of Muslim militants and terrorists on almost a million media and press throughout America and Europe. The rise of persecution on Islam then posed concern on the Islam community as a whole due to the negativity of thought and perceptions on them, while receiving support from hundred million dollars from donors.

Dalia Fahmy: Associate Professor of Political Science at Long Island University

Professor Fahmy began by addressing the rising case of hatred, physical and verbal violence, persecution, and attack on mosques throughout American states. She added that Islamophobia is a disease among the Americans on Islam, it is believed to be marginalized, excluded, and biased in political and social life. Just like another presenter, she stated the problem of Islam being perceived as terrorist and dangerous. Media, TV talk shows and the press have shown significantly negative thoughts toward Islam and attack those who are symbolically seen as Muslim or Islam.

#### **SESSION 5 – Contemporary Islamic Politics**

How do Islamic interests and perspectives influence political actions and outcomes in Muslim majority countries? In what ways have political actors used Islamic institutions, language, and culture to further their political goals? When do actors in Islamic movements choose to participate in elections vs. other forms of political participation? This panel will examine these questions along with recent developments in Islamic politics, including the development of new opportunities for political competition in some countries and the sustained persecution of Islamic political actors in others.

Tarek Masoud: Professor of Public Policy and the Sultan Qaboos bin Said of Oman Professor of International Relations - Harvard University

Professor Masoud began by addressing that among the 48 Muslim-majority countries, only 20 of them are partly free while 27 of them are not free in terms of a ruling democratic state. Why is this the case? He raised two discussion answers, which he thinks are poorly executed and –is the case because most Muslims want an autocratic state, which is led by the Qur’an and the leaders they believe are from God. The other perspective from Huntington, who wrote a book called *The Clash of Civilization* thinks that “Islam rejects any distinction between the religious community and the political community hence there is no equipoise between Caesar and God, and political participation is linked to religious affiliation. Fundamentalist Islam demands that in a Muslim country, the political rulers should be practicing Muslims, Sharia should be the basic law, and the religious scholars should have a decisive vote in articulating or at least reviewing and ratifying all governmental policy to the extent that governmental legitimacy and policy flow from religious doctrine and religious expertise. Islamic concepts of politics differ from contradicting the premises of democratic politics.” Most scholars think that Islam is incompatible with democracy, republican, secularism, and western country.

Contrary to these opinions from western scholars, Dr. Masoud brought proof from many verses in the Qur’an which support the leader and democracy. A survey from the World Values and European values posed an important result of how the Muslim think about a political system that they think is good. The Muslims have the highest rate of the belief that democracy is good (58%) among other religions including Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. They also believe that having a strong leader who does not support the legitimacy of elections and parliament is really bad. He concluded that even though the world perceives democracy as a fundamental political system best represents people and is good for the country, most countries in the world are still struggling with keeping this system relevant not only for the Muslim countries themselves.

Shadi Hamid: Senior Fellow - Brookings Institution Center for Middle East Policy

He talked about the complexity of Islam’s law and the contemporary relations between Islam and politic. He stated that the problem itself does not come from Islam but the problem of the inability to resolve Islam’s role in public life– the relationship between government and Islam and vice versa in the middle-east and middle-eastern countries. He concluded that one policy that might work for a country does not necessarily mean that it works for another. Thus; the Islam majority country has the right to be wrong, and not to accept democracy that might work well in

America. He also addressed the dilemma of the *Brother's Hood* community in the Egypt nation-state that works in parallel with the government that is now in power because of the popularity they got from the Islamists on implementing and preserving the Shariah and other fundamental rights such as basic human right, equality, public good, civic role within the society. He argued that within an Islamist state, people cannot stop them voting for Islamist leaders because the majority of them have a fundamental belief in their own religion; thus, coercion might be a way to help them reach democracy but we need to avoid it by leaving their power. To decide in the most ways possible.

## **SESSION 6 – Probing Islamic Diversity: Sunni, Shia, and Beyond**

“We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another.” This qur’anic vision of a tolerant society can seem far removed from the sectarian struggles that often beset religious communities, including the Islamic umma. With this illustrative tension as a starting point, this session will examine the diversity of Islam, but that diversity in a historical perspective, and think through its contemporary implications. How do historical tendencies toward fragmentation within Islam impact the Muslim world today? How is Islamic religious identity beyond the Sunni-Shia divide to be discussed, without losing sight of that divide’s traditional importance? What does pluralism look like in diaspora communities? In short, what is the nature and significance of Islamic pluralism today?

Tahera Qutbuddin: Professor of Arabic Literature and Islamic Studies - University of Chicago.

She emphasized her speech on the implication of the two denominations– Shia and Sunni. She focused on the early fundamental period with initial differences developed with a few remarks on later periods and our present time. She stated that Islam is not a monolith and that all Muslims are not the same. It is also essential to remember that fundamental beliefs and practices united all Muslims, and it is a necessity to understand both aspects to understand Islam collectively– the aspect they most agree on and the aspect they interpret differently. The interpretation of Muslims changed dramatically in accordance with geography, politics, culture, belief, and tradition. She encouraged people to understand the culture and see the beauty within a broad spectrum of Muslims because it is what makes people coexist within a controversial era.

Abdulaziz Saohedina: Professor, IIIT Chair in Islamic Studies - George Mason University

He addressed the importance of technology and its negative effect on the world today, especially on the Muslim community, where hatred, persecution, a violent image, and so on are being shown to people. He claimed the interpretation of the Muslim doctrine from the sacred book did not implement in a new modern theology due to an absence of universal language– ethic. He argued that the majority of people globally especially those in America are condemning the Muslims for their ignorance of the new perspective that they do not accept, which is otherwise not false to not follow what the American say. On the other hand, each group within the Islam community including those in Ottoman, middle-east, and middle-eastern created their own justification for the things they agree on based on their interests.

## **Concluding Roundtable**

The remark speakers from a different locations in America have different perspectives on the program. All of them are in favor of recreating this conference every year to better educate students and those who would like to engage in a future discussion. It is a great opportunity for people to have a dialogue within an interfaith community to coexist and increase understanding and find common ground between these organizations so that religious groups can have a safe space and advantage over their sense of religious tolerance or pluralism. Most of the speakers are very pleasant the fact that they can educate the audience to understand the problem that Islam has been facing not just in the United States itself but everywhere else around the world. They hope that the people who attended the conference on that day have the opportunity to talk to other people about what they now know is the problem regarding Islamophobia to others so that this world becomes a better place. They encourage universities in the society to include the study of Islamic tradition and culture curriculum to help not just this generation but in a further wide range of academia. The conference has an immensely positive effect on Christian and Islam because people can be in the same room to have discussions and dialogue with each other in a peaceful manner. This is a step further than we all needed to have in pursuing a flourishing world in a polarized west that is why we all have an obligation to help our society and further enrich this same culture anywhere else for hope of the future.