

Islam and Politics

Renewal and Resistance in the Muslim World

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ISBN: 978-0-9821935-1-8

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Cover design by Free Range Studios
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Introduction

In the past two years, Stimson's *Regional Voices: Transnational Challenges* project has reached out to a wide variety of thinkers in the Muslim world: Islamic religious scholars, Muslim political theorists, and others, such as journalists and academics, who concern themselves with the pressing public issues of their societies. We have engaged in protracted discussions and in intellectual collaborations of various kinds, including the papers collected here, focus groups, and monitoring of the periodical press, in an effort to understand how public issues are understood and approached from within the Muslim world. In this, we are fortunate to have enjoyed the partnership of the Institute of Policy Studies in Islamabad, Pakistan, with which we organized an international meeting in Islamabad in July 2008; and the Institute of Islamic Studies in Mumbai, India; as well as institutions throughout the Muslim world (see annex 3 for a complete list and description of our partner institutions).

Such a conversation is of course one of many dialogues or encounters taking place between the West and the Muslim world. We have tried to concentrate our efforts on elucidating how certain key ideas are approached. The ideas that we have focused on have been those that go to the heart of the difficulty between the West and the Muslim world. These include mutual concerns about violence perpetrated by the other, and a mutual perception of a fundamental divergence in approaches to the proper relationship between religion and the governance of society. These differences are located in a larger context of a generalized sense of mutual grievance and ill will.

Our work on the relationship between religion and public life has in turn been one area of work in a broader inquiry. In the past year, we have also engaged in extensive and substantial dialogue and collaboration on other themes with individuals and experts in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, and are beginning to work with partners in East Africa. This work has included inquiries into the political economy of natural resources, climate change and river systems, and maritime resources and security in the Indian Ocean. We have striven to integrate these varied inquiries, by asking, for example, how evolving contemporary public discourse in Muslim societies is addressing the technical, governance, and cultural challenges of these specialized subject areas.

In all our conversations, conferences, meetings, roundtables, and focus groups, we have sought to elicit the most candid possible discussion, and we have done so by explicitly placing all conversations off the record and not for attribution. At times, our interlocutors have informed us that they would not conceive of saying publicly what they are willing to say under such safeguards in a small group of their peers.

It will be readily apparent that the geographical range of our work, while it encompasses the preponderant part of the world's Muslims, also includes nations of substantial size where Muslims are in the minority and where the tacit or explicit foundational norms behind public discourse are Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, or explicitly secular. Thus, an essential part of our work is also to ask the following: How more generally are religious identity, religious conviction and values, and ideologies of social and political governance related to one another in today's world? What distinctions and commonalities are found in the ways that different religious or ideological traditions have addressed common challenges of social, economic, and political life?

That said, Muslims constitute the majority in one of our regions of interest (the Middle East), and, in the others, majorities of major nations (Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Sudan) or substantial and important minorities in non-Muslim nations (India, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Tanzania). Because US policy shows a high degree of interest in the Muslim world, our inquiry into the role of ideology has also substantially focused on the intellectual life of this world.

Among the themes that have emerged in the course of our work are the following:

- Identity and ideology are highly variegated across the Muslim world. The Muslim world and the world of Islamic thought are not monolithic, any more than is Christendom.
- Issues of identity, authority, and who speaks for Islam are hotly contested within particular Muslim societies and among Muslim societies.
- Inordinate interest in the cultural and theological dimensions of contemporary developments in the Muslim world has obscured the political character of most mobilization under way there: political mobilization more similar than dissimilar to that in non-Muslim societies.
- The wide range of opinion on key political and cultural questions in the Muslim world is not much appreciated in the West. This is particularly so in the case of views of violence in Islamic thought and in the Muslim world.
- The perspectives of Muslims living as minorities in non-Muslim majority countries (India, the Philippines Sri Lanka, and Thailand) are quite distinct from those of Muslims living in predominantly Muslim countries. Minority communities are slow to

radicalize, preferring alliances with non-Muslim political movements. Radicalization is rare, though increasing in certain quarters.

- Among these Muslim minorities, there is a high degree of animosity toward the United States. They believe that the global war on terror has legitimized repression against Muslims in countries such as India and the Philippines whose governments are US allies in the “war.” The pressure on Muslim communities and their civil rights is seen as a direct consequence of US demands on those governments for intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation.
- Anti-Western sentiment is also found among secular liberals. For example, Pakistan’s Westernized elites have turned against the West, not out of a sense of religiosity, but as a result of nationalist resentment.
- The West is often perceived as hostile to the renewal of Muslim societies. Among the perceived casualties of recent security policies of the West (and of the Muslim political elites allied to it) are worldwide Islamic charity and Islamic education. Charity is inhibited by measures against terrorist financing, and Islamic education is perceived as being under attack owing to concerns about the role of *madrassas* as incubators of extremism. Because both charity and education are central to the Islamic way of life and are constructive on their face, their inhibition as a matter of policy has become a symbol of Western destructiveness toward Islam.
- Identity is complex. A Muslim may simultaneously be a Pathan, of a particular tribe, a denizen of “Pushtoonistan” (a Pushtoon ethnic homeland straddling the Pakistan-Afghanistan border), an Afghan or Pakistani citizen, a member of a social class, either an Islamist or a religiously devout traditionalist, a member of the worldwide Muslim *ummah* (community), and a member of the international community through his or her country’s membership in international organizations either Islamic (the Organization of the Islamic Conference) or universalist (the United Nations).
- An important debate is taking place over whether adherence to “true” or “pure” Islam requires rejection of syncretic cultures comprising elements of preexistent cultural traditions. Some argue that the latter pose a distraction from proper Islamic practice and precept, while their opponents rejoin that the features of Arab culture in the time of the Prophet, or indeed today, are irrelevant to the definition of Islamic values and obligation.
- Pride in Muslim civilization draws on both inward-looking loyalty and cosmopolitanism. The latter in turn draws on the global vision of Islam and on the global community built by Muslims through imperial expansion, trade, and the travels of the famous Muslim travelers, chroniclers, and scientists.
- Such pride also draws on the acceptance and synthesis into Muslim thought and culture of non-Muslim traditions. For example, the Greco-Arab medical tradition

is described as the golden age of “Muslim” medicine. Other such elements include Persian and Urdu poetic traditions, and the philosophical and chivalric traditions of Islamic Spain.

- The complexity of Muslim identity is also found in Pan-Islamism. While this appeals to a sense of shared identity throughout the *ummah*, it also inevitably requires an appreciation of the wide varieties of national culture in the varied communities that constitute the *ummah*.

The papers collected here seek to offer an overview of salient aspects of the relationship between politics and Islam. We hope hereby to provide the non-expert Western reader an accurate glimpse into contemporary Muslim thinking about issues at the forefront of Western concern and to bring to light some important aspects of the discussion within the Muslim world that have been ignored by Western opinion. These are not discussions of religious philosophy, but rather of the significance of religion in the practice of statecraft.