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ISIM Opening Day

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ISIM

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ISIM Opening Day

On Tuesday, 20 October 1998, the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM) celebrated its official opening day. Well over 300 people attended the gathering in the renovated Concert Hall of Leiden. It was to become a memorable day, attracting extensive media coverage following protests by Iranian asylum seekers. The morning programme consisted in the more official aspects of the day, featuring an opening speech by State Secretary of Justice and – what sparked off an angry response of the demonstrators – an address by Faezeh Hashemi, member of Parliament of Iran and editor-owner of the oppositional *Zan* periodical. The address did not take place. After a short musical intermezzo, the afternoon programme had a more academic tone: a lecture by anthropologist Professor Dale Eickelman and a forum discussion on the format and plans of the ISIM.



The Guest

The coming of Faezeh Hashemi attracted much attention, although few were to have the opportunity to actually see her. In the week before the opening, news of her participation spread quickly. She had been invited on the basis of her special position in Iran, where she gives voice to certain opposition currents and strives to increase the participation of women in public life. Aimed at softening the restrictive character of the present Islamic regime, Hashemi's activities arouse the suspicion of the more conservative guardians of the Islamic Revolution. Inside Iran, she has gained popularity by her attempts to alter the Islamic regime from within, although she often has to 'walk a thin line'. The fact that she is the daughter of former president Ali Akbar Rafsanjani helps to explain her remarkable performance in the turbulent political environment of present-day Iran. She operates, not without risk, in particular when it comes to the views expressed in the periodical *Zan*, which sometimes are perceived as 'anti-state' by conservative forces, as reflected in the recent trials.

Her presence at the opening was met with curiosity by some, anxiety by others. The Dutch academia and media were curious about this unexpected female guest from a country normally perceived as being hostile to most of our values. During the last year, in particular after

the election of Khatami as president of Iran, it had become apparent to many that the 'situation in Iran was more complex. The invitation and her acceptance reflected a growing openness in mutual policies. Others were far less welcoming, particularly the community of Iranian refugees in the Netherlands (about 30,000). Word of her participation was received with astonishment and anger. Certain groups strongly opposed to her presence at the opening requested and gained permission of the local police to demonstrate against her and the Islamic Republic. In their eyes, being a Member of Parliament meant that she represented the Iranian regime and, moreover, being the daughter of former president Rafsanjani, some held her accountable for their sufferings during his presidency.

The Demonstration

The morning of the opening, scores of demonstrators assembled at the entrance of the Concert Hall in the main street of the inner city. The supporters of the Mujahidin-i Khalq were clearly the most vocal group. Their slogans were supported by beating drums. They waved banners containing the picture of their leader Rajavi. The other demonstrators belonged to various leftist groups who carefully kept some distance from the Mujahidin. The demonstrations were not limited to the exterior of the building; a number of opponents of the Iranian regime entered the Concert Hall – the opening day was indeed a public affair – and some supporters of the Mujahidin succeeded in approaching Faezeh Hashemi just after she had arrived. In the commotion, Mrs Hashemi decided to leave.

This decision proved to be a wise one, for later, when Dr Martin van Bruinessen attempted to read out the text of Hashemi's speech, many demonstrators in the audience prevented him from doing so, mostly by shouting slogans – including 'Death to Rafsanjani' and 'Death to Khatami'. Some male demonstrators jumped on the stage in an attempt to capture the microphone. The demonstrators could not be quieted down. During lunchtime the organization – with the great help of some Iranians living in the Netherlands – succeeded in convincing the demonstrators that Mrs Hashemi had left. The demonstration was disbanded, allowing the programme to continue as scheduled.

The Opening

The programme started as scheduled with a short word of welcome by the ISIM director-in-charge, Prof. W.A.L. Stokhof, on behalf of the ISIM Board. The Netherlands' State Secretary of Justice, Mr. J. Cohen, then addressed the audience on behalf of the Dutch government. In both speeches, the autonomy of the new research institute was emphasized, as was the importance of national and international cooperation. In the words of Stokhof, '... the ISIM is independent even from the government that made its existence possible. By this autonomy, however, the ISIM depends on the networking of scholars to guide its plans and activities, lighting our way into the future.' Cohen agreed: '... let me reiterate that the ISIM is an autonomous institution and is to determine its own programmes and activities, but not without the participation of other academic institutions both here in the Netherlands and abroad.'

Stokhof stressed that modern Islam and Muslim societies should be understood within an historical context and that more classical approaches in the field of Islamic Studies are by no means incompatible to the needs of research on modern phenomena. He added that the activities of ISIM are embedded in the

duplex ordo, dividing science and religion. This does not imply that the activities of ISIM will be left to isolation within the academic community. On the contrary, ISIM should prove its relevance to society at large by rendering the academic research accessible to a broader audience. Cohen situated the founding of ISIM within the Netherlands' government policy to support initiatives aimed at increasing knowledge and research on societies and cultures that are important to the Netherlands and Europe. 'This includes, of course, and increasingly so, the Muslim world – a world which is more and more part of our own. Today, millions of Muslims live in Western Europe, 800,000 of which live here in the Netherlands. In order for the Netherlands to develop a truly coherent multi-cultural society, knowledge of its contributing cultures and societies is essential.'

In contrast to the eventful morning session, the afternoon programme ran smoothly. The Moroccan singer Amina Alaoui and her acoustic ensemble performed four Arabo-Andalusian songs.

Opening Lecture

The opening lecture, 'Islam in the Global Public Sphere', was delivered by Prof. Dr Dale Eickelman, Professor of Anthropology and Human Relations, Dartmouth College (USA). The text in the sidebar is taken from the conclusion of his speech. (The lecture will be published by ISIM shortly.)

Forum

The Opening Day was concluded by a forum discussion on the plans and policies of the ISIM. The forum included the following members:

Prof. Dr Nasr Abu Zayd (Visiting Professor of Islamic Studies, Leiden University), Prof. Dr Dale F. Eickelman (see above), Prof. Dr Nilüfer Göle (Professor of Sociology, Bosphorus University), Prof. Dr P.S. van Koningsveld (Professor of Religious History of Islam in Western Europe, Leiden University), Prof. Dr Peter van der Veer (Professor of Comparative Religion and Dean of the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research, University of Amsterdam). Dr N.H. Biegan, author of *Egypt: Moulids, Saints and Sufis* (London 1990) and currently Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to NATO and WEU, chaired the forum. The presentations given by the members of the forum in general, wholeheartedly welcomed the ISIM as an important initiative in the field of the study of modern Islam and Muslim societies. Prof. Nilüfer Göle highlighted the complex aspects of modernity in the study of Islam, whereas Prof. van der Veer pointed at the possible danger of perceiving and describing developments in the Muslim world as being tantamount to Islam. As representatives of the theological and philological traditions, Prof. Nasr Abu Zayd and Prof. P.S. van Koningsveld stressed the importance of the integration of these traditions into the Institute, in particular the inclusion of scholarly reference to the normative and other texts of the Islamic tradition. Prof. Dale Eickelman agreed to the latter remarks, pointing to the growing number of projects in which scholars of various disciplinary traditions cooperate, thus combining their specializations. ◆

The Emerging Public Sphere

'Without fanfare, the notion of Islam as dialogue and civil debate is gaining ground. Like the "Copernican revolution", the current break in religious authority in the Muslim world is likely to be seen as significant only in retrospect. A new sense of public is emerging throughout Muslim-majority states and Muslim communities elsewhere. It is shaped by increasingly open contests over the use of the symbolic language of Islam. Increasingly, discussions in newspapers, on the Internet, on smuggled cassettes, and on television cross-cut and overlap, contributing to a common public space.

New and accessible modes of communication have made these contests increasingly global, so that even local issues take on transnational dimensions. Muslims, of course, act not just as Muslims but according to class interests, out of a sense of nationalism, on behalf of tribal or family networks, and from all the diverse motives which characterize human endeavour. Increasingly, however, large numbers of Muslims explain their goals in terms of the normative language of Islam. Muslim identity issues are not unitary or identical, but such issues have become a significant force in both Muslim-majority states and those in which Muslims form only a minority of the population. It is in this sense that one can speak of an emerging Muslim public sphere.

This distinctly public sphere exists at the intersections of religious, political, and social life and contributes to the creation of civil society. With access to contemporary forms of communication that range from the press and broadcast media to fax machines, audio and video cassettes, from the telephone to the Internet, Muslims, like Christians, Hindus, Jews, Sikhs, and protagonists of Asian and African values, have more rapid and flexible ways of building and sustaining contact with constituencies than was available in earlier decades. The asymmetries of the earlier mass media revolution are being reversed by new media in new hands. This combination of new media and new contributors to religious and political debates fosters an awareness on the part of all actors of the diverse ways in which Islam and Islamic values can be created. It feeds into new senses of a public space that is discursive, performative, and participative, and not confined to formal institutions recognized by state authorities.

Just as there is general scholarly recognition that there are multiple paths to modernity,¹ there is a practical awareness of multiple claims to the task of staging virtue,² including a public engagement in the name of religion.

Publicly shared ideas of community, identity, and leadership take new shapes in such engagements, even as many communities and authorities claim an unchanged continuity with the past. Mass education, so important in the development of nationalism in an earlier era,³ and a proliferation of media and means of communication have multiplied the possibilities for creating communities and networks among them, dissolving prior barriers of space and distance and opening new grounds for interaction and mutual recognition.'

Notes

1. S.N. Eisenstadt (1996), *Japanese Civilization: A Comparative View*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 396-426.
2. Armando Salvatore (1998), 'Staging Virtue: The Disembodiment of Self-Correctness and the Making of Islam as a Public Norm', *Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam* 1, pp. 87-119.
3. Ernest Gellner (1983), *Nations and Nationalism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 28-9.