

Contemporary Islamic Movements

Ideology, Aesthetics, Politics

The Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, South Asia Institute, the Centre for Russian, East European, and Eurasian Studies, and the Centre for European Studies, the Religious Studies and College of Liberal Arts at the University of Texas at Austin collaborated with ISIM to organize an international conference on *Contemporary Islamic Movements: Ideology, Aesthetics, Politics* (16-17 February 2006).

The conference sought to explore Islamic thought, politics, and social life through an interdisciplinary approach. The representation of Muslim life and Islam in public and private forums leaves much to be desired in terms of its depiction of the complexity of Muslim experiences and practices across the globe. By assembling scholars who have first hand knowledge of Muslim societies and of Islam, the conference addressed and engaged with these representational themes. The presenters had conducted scholarly investigations in the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, Europe, and Africa and spoke on Islamist movements, theological debates, Muslim aesthetics, gender categories and politics, and on Muslims living as demographic minorities, all of which are extremely pertinent issues in the contemporary moment. The endeavour was to bring forward a comprehensive and broad understanding of the variety of ways Muslims lead and experience social life and practise their religion over a range of geographical spaces and political circumstances.

The conference got off to a rousing and somewhat controversial start with the presentation by keynote speaker Reza Aslan, discussing his celebrated book *No god but God*. He began by speculating that the rumours of Bin Laden's death were greatly exaggerated, but it would not be too early to speculate how he will be remembered 100 years from now: as a murderous criminal or character in the "Islamic Reformation" like Thomas Muenster and Martin Luther, Christian Reformation radicals. Aslan used the term Reformation deliberately to emphasize that the current bloodshed and violence are 1) not an expression of a "clash of civilizations" but rather an "internal civil war in Islam"; and that 2) these current conflicts are questions all religions grapple with while confronting modernity. Thus, the Christian reformation itself was a "bloody" argument, Aslan argued, that extended for over a century about who defines faith: the institution or individual. Aslan's thesis was that the current friction in Islam is a more complicated version of the same process. The audience did not seem to totally agree with Aslan's postulations as they put forward many historically based challenging questions, forcing him to reconsider some of his more generalized arguments.

The subsequent day and half were taken up by a series of panels. The first, Pushing Boundaries: Gendered Lives in Muslim Context, sought to explore the multiple ways gender and religious practice intersect in diverse Muslim societies. In his paper Scott Kugle showed how groups of believing Muslim homosexual and transgender populations in South Africa struggle to balance their faith with their participation in the politics of rights and sexual freedoms. Another panellist, Lara Deeb, presented ethnography of women activists in the Shia politics of Lebanon, while Schirin Moazami read a critical piece on Muslim feminist intellectuals in Europe. The panel on Muslim Aesthetics, Popular Politics included papers by Moustafa Bayoumi, who spoke on Iraqi immigrants and their everyday life in Lebanon. This was followed by Iftikhar Dadi's exposition on the modern usage of the forms of Mogul Miniature in the art of contemporary Pakistan and concluded by Asef Bayat's sociological investigation of the question whether Islam allows for fun or not.

The first panel on the next day was Jihadis in Action: Social Movement Actors, Anarchists or anti-Globalization Activists. The three speakers on this provocative panel explored the multiple ways in which contemporary Jihadis need to be understood in relation to their particular histo-

ries and social milieu. One panellist (Devji), borrowing from his recent book, argued that Jihadis should be looked at in terms of global social movements, such as the environmental movement. The next panel on Islam: "Traditional" or "Modern" included papers by Abdulkader Tayob and Laura Adams that explored the role of Shariah and Muslim identity in different geographies. The final panel on State and Civil Actors: Islam in Diverse Spaces, discussed secular Muslim cultures that are trying to reclaim Islam, especially in Central Asia and Turkey.

The conference drew to a close with the remarks by Barbara Metcalf, Professor of South Asian history at the University of Michigan, who asked the question "what other Islamic movements got missed?" in the discussions that ensued. She also observed how the two days of deliberation seemed to coalesce around the nation-state and its boundaries, and this was in direct contrast to the constant discussion one hears in academia of trans-boundary issues linked to Islam. In her opinion, all papers sought to de-'exoticize' Islam and contextualize their research by placing their arguments within the modern nation-state and, in particular, geographies and histories. The conference was adjourned after a vote of thanks.

HILLARY HUTCHINSON

Hillary Hutchinson is Special Events Coordinator at the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies of the University of Texas (Austin). Her main research interest is around issues concerning academic freedom in US post 9/11.

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LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

- **Reza Aslan**, University of California, Santa Barbara, Author of *No god but God*, Keynote Speaker
- **Laura Adams**, Princeton University *Ideology and Elites in Post-Soviet Central Asia*
- **Irfan Ahmad**, University of Amsterdam *Erosion of Secularism, Explosion of Jihad: Explaining Islamist Radicalization in India*
- **Schirin Amir-Moazami**, University of Frankfurt-Oder *Feminism, Islam, and Liberal Public Spheres in Europe: A Case Study on Secular-Feminist Intellectuals in France and Germany*
- **Asef Bayat**, ISIM / Leiden University *Does Islam Have No Fun?*
- **Moustafa Bayoumi**, City University of New York *A Grammar of Motives, or How to Read Flags, Keffiyas, and Hijabs in Brooklyn New York*
- **Iftikhar Dadi**, Cornell University *Historicizing the Mughal Miniature in Contemporary Pakistani Art*
- **Lara Deeb**, University of California, Irvine *Pious Modern: Lebanese Shii Women and Transformations in Religiosity*
- **Georgi Derluguian**, Northwestern University, Chicago *The Young Anarchists with Qurans in the Northern Caucasus*
- **Faisal Devji**, New School University *Landscapes of Jihad*
- **Najeeb Jan**, University of Michigan *Having a Party Ulama Style: The Deoband and the Politics of Blasphemy*
- **Scott Kugle**, ISIM *Queer Jihad: Gay and Lesbian Muslim Activists Between Virtual and Actual Communities*
- **Barbara Metcalf**, University of Michigan *Concluding Remarks*
- **Nazif M. Shahrani**, Central Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, Indiana University *Reclaiming Islam in Uzbekistan: Soviet Legacies and Post-Soviet Realities*
- **Abdulkader Tayob**, ISIM / Radboud University Nijmegen *Shariah Between Law, Religion, and Identity*
- **Jenny B. White**, Boston University *The Sacred and the Profane: Turkish Islam in Transition*