

War and Peace in Islam

The 45th Annual Conference of the North American Association of Islamic and Muslim Studies (NAAIMS), cosponsored by the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Islamic Studies Program at Harvard University, Cambridge, MA (October 8, 2016), focused on “*War and Peace in Islam.*” The Conference Program Chair, Tarek Masoud, Professor of Public Policy and Sultan of Oman Chair in International Relations at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, opened the session by expressing the Department’s excitement in hosting this conference. In her introductory remarks, NAAIMS Board of Director Treasurer, Maria R. Volpe (John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY), welcomed the guests on behalf of NAAIMS President, Jon Mandaville (Portland State University, OR) who was not able to attend.

Four panel sessions analyzed critical aspects of war and peace in Islam. The first panel session, **“Muslims as Religious Minorities: Canada, China and the US,”** was moderated by the chair, Maria R. Volpe (John Jay of Criminal Justice, CUNY), with Kevin Caffrey (Harvard University, Cambridge, MA) serving as the panel discussant.

The first presentation on “*Muslim New Yorkers: Everyday Life in an Era of Counterterrorism and Surveillance,*” by Nazreen S. Bacchus (Queens College, City University of New York, NY), focused on how Muslims, ethnically and racially diverse, are being “categorized [in a post-911 climate] in ways that have transformed their religious identity into a racialized group.” Bacchus applied an ethnographic approach and migration theory in studying how American Muslims in New York City are reacting to Islamophobia, and ultimately, reshaping the cultural environment of the City. She examined how Muslims “are resisting Islamophobia through civic engagement, grassroots organizing and community building.” She explained how Muslims in the City manage “religious identities” to help develop a sense of belonging in American society.

The presentation by Uzma Jamil (McGill University, Montreal, Canada) on “*The Securitization of Muslims in the War on Terror*” examined Canadian legislation on violent extremism and counterterrorism. Jamil explained how the Canadian government’s strategy in fighting radicalization of Muslims contributed to the perception of “being under siege.” She concluded that the government’s initiatives have reinforced Islamophobia and made social activities of Muslims appear “suspicious” and “markers of radicalization.”

The presentation by Alexander B. Stewart (University of California, San Diego, CA) on “*The Inward Jihad: Pious Salafism among China’s Hui Muslims*” was based on his interviews and eleven months of participant observation of the Hui community. Stewart explained that Salafism is considered a methodology in China, rather than a sect, and that Hui Salafis are seen as “bad Muslims.” He concluded that although Salafis joined the Communist party for practical reasons, “transnational educational networks have contributed to the political and economic integration of Hui Muslims and the development of Salafism, which focused on individual piety, rather than radical politics.”

According to the discussant, Kevin Caffrey, these three presentations provided “ethnographic material and phenomena that added significant issues to the study of Muslims in society with arguments that hinge on what ‘identity’ really means.”

The second panel session, “**The Evolution of Religious Authority in Islam,**” which was moderated by the chair, Natana J. DeLong-Bas (Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA) included Aisha Y. Musa (Colgate University, Hamilton, NY) as the panel discussant.

In her presentation, “*Umma (Wasat): A Constant Struggle for Justice,*” Katrin Jomaa (University of Rhode Island, Kingston, RI) examined “justice” as a theological concept in the Qur’an. She argued that “justice” as represented by the “mean” in Aristotelian thought mirrors the concept of *wasat* in the Qur’an, and concluded that “the term *wasat* indicates a balance between people and political authorities that needs to be maintained for justice to be sustained.” She added that “the status of *wasat* can only be achieved through the *umma* as a whole which is less susceptible to error than the sole individual.”

According to the discussant, Aisha Y. Musa, the presentation clearly highlighted that justice in the Qur’an is not confined to a specific privileged or elite group, religious or political, in charge of executing the law. The discussant added that Jomaa’s use of “Aristotle as a framework for understanding the Qur’anic concept of *umma wasat* is particularly useful and demonstrates that the Qur’an and Western philosophy are not necessarily antithetical.”

The next panelist, Irene Kirchner (Eberhard-Karls University, Tuebingen, Germany), gave her presentation on “*Strategies for Pacifying Political Islam: Works of Syrian Author Jawdat Sa’id (born 1931).*” Kirchner examined how this widely unknown scholar in the West views political violence as incompatible with Islamic principles, and repudiates militant interpretations of *jihad*. For example, Jawdat Sa’id referenced the biblical and Qur’anic story of Cain and Abel to illustrate that violence, even in self-defense, is not acceptable, since Abel did not use violence against his brother, Cain, who threatened him. Sa’id substantiated his argument against political violence by outlining “two phases of Islamic society” (1) the construction of society, and the (2) maintenance of an existing society. Political violence is prohibited in the first phase. Force can only be used by proven official authorities in the second phase to enforce agreed upon laws to protect society from unlawful attacks. Based on Sa’id’s two-phased strategy, “modern Islamic society has deviated or even apostatized from ‘true Islam.’”

According to the discussant, Aisha Y. Musa, this presentation “introduced us to a thinker whose arguments from the Qur’an and the examples of prophets offered a way of looking at violence, when it is allowed and when it is not.” She added that the work of this Syrian scholar and pacifist deserved greater attention by those studying Islam and Muslims.

The presentation on “*What Jihad Questions do Muslims Ask their Scholars?,*” by Emad Mohamed (Suez University, Cairo, Egypt), and Bakinaz Abdalla (McGill University, Montreal, Canada), examined *jihad* fatwas from online *fatwa* databases. In today’s digital age, Muslims visit websites to ask questions about Islam rather than contacting *ulematic* (scholarly) authorities for their opinions. According to Mohamed, out of 164,000 online *fatwas*, 1,006 were directly related to *jihad*. The questions, which were medieval in nature, focused on the **Prophet’s wars, concubines and wars**, and targets of ***jihad***. Although the motivation for *jihad* was not specifically studied, some questions touched on “expiation of sin” or “going to a better life.”

During the Q & A session, Mohamed stated that “*IslamWeb*, the most visited website in Egypt and Saudi Arabia (financed by the Qatari government) received 1,089,700 daily visits, and answered

around 170 questions daily about *Fatwa*.” He attributed the popularity of *IslamWeb* to its claim to the *sunna* of the Prophet, and the huge amounts of money spent on the website by Qatar.

The second panel session was followed by the **Luncheon Keynote Address** given by John Kelsay (Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL) on “*War and Peace in the Law of Islam*.” Kelsay stated that historical surveys show how the “work of Muslim jurists in developing judgments pertaining to armed struggle provides one of the most extensive examples of the general attempt by human communities to regulate the use of lethal force.” According to Kelsay, “this aspect of Muslim tradition invites comparison with Christian notions about just wars, as well as with a number of other religious and moral traditions.” He reviewed the relationship of the historical Muslim tradition regulating the use of lethal force in armed struggles, and compared it to the stark differences of assumptions instituted during the 20th and 21st centuries.

The third panel session, “**Islam and Contention: Contemporary Approaches,**” was moderated by Soha Bayoumi (Harvard University, Cambridge, MA), with Malik Mufti (Tufts University, Medford, MA) serving as discussant.

This session began with a presentation by Hyun Jeong Ha (University of Texas at Austin, TX) on “*Islamic Activism, Ethnic Violence, and the Racialization of Coptic Christians, 1970-2015*.” According to the discussant, Malik Mufti, this paper highlighted the fact that “sectarian violence against non-Muslims in Egypt is not driven by inherent aggressiveness of Islam, but by prevailing political conditions, [and that] sectarian violence is generating an ‘ethnicization’ of Egypt’s Coptic Christians.” Mufti noted that clarification of “what constitutes ‘ethnicization’ [and understanding] how Coptic identity is changing as a result of sectarian violence would make a significant contribution to our understanding of communal conflict in the Middle East.”

The next speaker, Shaireen Rasheed (Long Island University, Brookville, NY), presented “Antigone, Irony, and the Nation State: The Case of *Lal Masjid* (Red Mosque) and the Role of Militant Feminism in Pakistan.” Rasheed examined how “militant Muslim feminists realigned themselves with the nation, state and religion to justify their feminist identities.” Rasheed created an epistemic framework to look at conception, categories, and definitions and explained how women used “Islam” as an identity. According to the discussant, Muslim feminists established alliances with Islamist militants, because they wanted to “maintain a degree of legitimacy within the populations they inhabit ... a legitimacy that cannot be provided by unpopular home governments or by Western feminists totally alienated from Muslim identity.”

Mohammad Hassan Khalil (Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI) addressed concerns pertaining to “*Jihad, Radicalism and the New Atheism*” by presenting a comparison of how Usama bin Laden and Sam Harris understand – or misunderstand – Islamic law on the treatment of noncombatants in *jihad*. According to Khalil, “Harris and the New Atheists [have a] unique and significant influence on Western and to some extent non-Western intellectual discourse.” He stated that what the New Atheists say about *jihad* and Islam “has ramifications within academia [and] political and cultural spheres. And for those working to combat the real problem of religious radicalism, it is critical to scrutinize influential discourse on the root causes of this problem.”

The fourth panel session, “**Islam and Contention: Historical Approaches,**” was chaired by Maria M. Dakake (George Mason University, Fairfax, VA), with Melani Cammett (Harvard University, Cambridge, MA) as discussant.

This session began with the presentation “*Assessing the Effect of British Colonialism in Shaping Late 19th and Early 20th-Century Islamic and Catholic Revolutionary Efforts*” by Bradley Alan Patty (University of Georgia, Athens, GA). Patty argued that by examining “diverse movements in Catholic Ireland and Islamic Egypt, many elements of commonality in their modes of resistance [can be identified and] ... disposed of from any search for an ‘Islamic’ essence related to questions of war.” Patty’s argument was that many common elements were not rooted in Islamic or Catholic law or practice, but rather, British colonial rule. He explained that the acts of war carried out by the IRA of Catholic Ireland and the early Muslim brotherhood were similar because they were overcoming the same enemy – British colonialism.

During the Q & A session, the discussant, Melani Cammett, asked Patty whether the two religions could have come to the same conclusion, separately, through completely different means, rather than through the commonality of British imperialism as the driving factor. Patty argued that although it is not impossible, “it would be very surprising, given the significant differences in doctrine and the cultural traditions at work in Ireland and Egypt.”

This was followed by Firasat Jabeen’s (Clemson University, Clemson, SC) presentation “*Tracing the Roots of Terrorism in the Colonial Period of Pakistan.*” Jabeen examined the relationship between British colonialism and the rise in terrorism and violence in Pakistan. She attributed the roots of terrorism to two separate conceptions: the start of the “Two Nation Theory” in British India, and the agrarian economic divisions in Pakistani society (feudalism and landowners) fostered by British colonial powers. She explored how “the ‘Two Nation Theory’ impinged on the formation of Islamic identities in Pakistan that led to a rise in religious violence.” She spoke about how the “Two Nation Theory” ignited identity issues and the role of religion in the state that led to the creation of Pakistan. Jabeen stated that agrarian economic divisions fostered during the colonial period are still prevalent today.

During the Q & A session, the discussant, Melani Cammett, asked Jabeen if the practice of Feudalism was different in the Indian subcontinent before the arrival of the British. Jabeen stated that according to Pakistani scholar Mubarak Ali, “the practice of feudalism before the arrival of the British was handled differently, and that during the Mughal period, land (*jagir*), was never awarded permanently to people, and that ownership of land was exchanged frequently.” Jabeen argued that “during the Colonial period, the British awarded lands to people permanently and their purpose was to oblige people who could help them, to strengthen their imperialist rule.” She noted that those lands granted during the Colonial period “were transferred to landowners and landholders’ descendants ... and the majority of deprived people become easy targets for ‘economic redistribution slogans raised by militant groups.’”

The final presentation by Meryem Belkaïd (Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME) focused on “*Djebar and Bey - Two Algerian Women Writers and the Algerian Civil War: Sources of Revolt against Terrorism: Modernity versus Islam?*” Belkaïd explored how violent events during the Algerian Civil War were analyzed in literary texts. She highlighted how Djebar and Bey [two women writers] used current events in their literary texts to “mobilize Islamic ethical values in order to establish a framework for a denunciation of extremism and terrorism.” During the Q & A session, Belkaïd emphasized how the place of literature, art and culture in Algeria is essential to understanding the impact that the use of language (Arabic or Francophone literature) had on attracting readers. The paper examined the “extent to which Islam can be the source of an ethical revolt against fundamentalism and terrorism.”

She noted that although the manner in which women address issues dealing with Islam, religion and/or the concept of faith is different than how men approach them, women's perceptions and analytical works make a strong impression.

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