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“Crossing Boundaries: Mobilizing Faith, Diversity and Dialogue”

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Abstract Only – Luncheon Keynote Address

“Taming Political Islam:
Promoting Dissent, Democracy and Dialogue”

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Empirical evidence from predominantly Muslim societies demonstrates that open political systems that promote inclusion rather than exclusion tend to tame Islamist movements by providing them political space while inculcating a habit of discussion and dialogue both with other parties and within the movements themselves. The experience of political cooperation and coalition building, which are integral to democratic political systems, reduces ideological rigidity, encourages political pragmatism, and promotes dissenting voices within Islamist movements themselves, thus, fracturing their political base. The outcome of this complex process of socializing Islamist movements into democratic norms usually transforms them into *normal* players of the political game while cutting them down to size. It also helps to shift their preoccupation with imposing the *Shari'ah*, itself a contested concept, to issues directly linked to the needs of their constituencies and to infusing the polity with norms of moral behavior derived from commonly acknowledged Islamic precepts within individual societies, while not challenging the secular basis on which modern polities are constructed. The experience also makes them realize that Islam has to be saved from the state rather than becoming unduly intertwined with the latter, which often leads to the state controlling and using Islam for its own purposes, thus bringing religion into disrepute.