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Islamic Reform Relating to Conflict and Peace

During 21-23 August 2006, sixteen Muslim scholars attended a three-day United States Institute of Peace (USIP) conference to discuss approaches to understanding conflict and peace in the Muslim world. Qamar-ul Huda (senior program officer, Religion and Peacemaking program) organized the conference, entitled "Islamic Reform Relating to Conflict and Peace." Participants explored how scholars of Islamic studies can critically participate in Islamic peacebuilding and conflict resolution through an interdisciplinary analysis.

The group discussed the challenges of peacebuilding in respect to asymmetric power, military institutions, non-democratic states, co-opted clergy, independent religious movements, authoritarian regimes, educational systems, media, the imbalance between classes, ethnic divides, post-colonialism, sectarianism, and other issues. Participants focused on how to advance nonviolent strategies for conflict mediation and peacebuilding within an Islamic cultural context.

Asma Afsaruddin's presentation on jihad, peace, martyrdom, patience, and the original Qur'anic context of these terms demonstrated the diversity of legal opinions in the Islamic tradition. According to her, not only did these different interpretations of violence, peace, and conflict resolution flourish, but there was also a culture of tolerating and fostering this pluralism. Only in the mid-tenth century did interpretations of peace, conflict, and just-war theories become driven by political expediency. With the emergence of competing dynasties and the rise of military expeditions, concepts of peace and conflict resolution became intertwined with the regime elites' aspirations. The terms of the debate were appropriated by a political and military class that refused to countenance any challenge.

Participants discussed the multiplicity of these interpretations and how violence is (and is not) legitimized. Mohammed Abu-Nimer discussed the theoretical and practical obstacles involved in changing views on conflict.

To inculcate new Muslim attitudes, such as non-violent resistance, he noted that it is important to move beyond the clergy's abstract theological language and adopt holistic approaches to peacebuilding. For many in the Muslim world, nonviolent resistance is associated with Christianity. Some view it as a passive and ineffective method in contesting oppression. However, Abu-Nimer, Huda, and Afsaruddin elaborated on numerous canonical texts on nonviolence that are often overlooked.

Ibrahim Kalin initiated a conversation on how peace and conflict in Islam should be viewed within a spiritual, philosophical and theological, juridical, and cultural context. Each context contains insights into preventing conflict. He stressed how, historically, Muslim scholars have viewed peace as a process of cultivating positive relationships with other human beings and with the divine. In responding to Kalin, Marcia Hermansen discussed how Islamic metaphysics may represent an overly theoretical approach to peacemaking and argued that we need to focus more on practical dimensions and develop the field of Islamic peacebuilding.

For some scholars, one critical issue is identifying a core of independent-minded Sunni and Shi'ite clerical scholars who have not been co-opted by government officials. Waleed el-Ansary and Joseph Lombard stressed how some muftis in Egypt, Syria, Qatar, and Jordan have millions of supporters because of their insistence on justice, peacebuilding, and seeking ways to create peaceful societies. Others added that politics in the Middle East further undermine Muslims advocating peaceful alternatives. Karim Crow, Ibrahim Kalin, Rahim Nobahar, and others said that Muslim peacemakers face many challenges when western powers do not uphold the same ideals. Since there appear to be no effective responses to the suffering in Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, and Afghanistan, Muslims are easily convinced that violence is the only solution. Those who suggest otherwise, unfortunately, lose public legitimacy. Asna Husin argued that this cycle of senseless violence demands a new way of thinking and institutional changes that will foster a culture of peace.

In his "Blood Sacrifice & Peace: Re-Imagining Peacemaking: A Muslim Perspective," Crow explained how human violence stems from human instincts and the way we are socialized to act violently. Another problem is that traditional moral and ethical education is missing from most public schools. He stressed the need for primary and secondary schools in the Muslim world to incorporate peace studies programs based on Islamic models of peacemaking.

In light of current Islamist extremism, the group wrestled with how to promote nonviolent strategies and Islamic peacebuilding. Scholars examined how extremists exploit Islam for their own political purposes. "Politics, unfo-

tunately, cannot be divorced from the conversation of peacebuilding and conflict resolution,” said Anas Malik. Crow added: “One cannot effectively think about real change in Muslim communities without discussing the pressing structural inequalities that exist: that is to say, criticizing repressive regimes, tyrannical forces, [the] lack of democratic institutions to express oneself, and other international forces that work together with the regimes.”

Reza Eslami Somea spoke on applying the international code of human rights in Islamic peacebuilding, instead of thinking within the traditional lines of Islamic law. Asserting that the Shari’ah is one of the problems in Iran, he believes using religious paradigms for peacebuilding and conflict resolution purposes complicates key issues and does injustice to the religious tradition. For him, the problem is that religious principles are thought to be the answer for each area of knowledge.

Rahim Nobahar, a Shi’i cleric trained in Iran, affirmed that religion cannot be separated from resolving conflict or promoting peace. However, some participants felt that viewing Muslims in religious terms is both a misreading of history and culture and a continuation of the “imagined other” (Orientalism). Somea said: “Religion is a personal conviction and not all Muslims feel that religion has the answer to every question.” Nobahar and Kalin argued that that Islamic civilization originated in Islamic theology, philosophy, and law and that, therefore, divorcing religion from any analysis of the current social and political situation would be a mistake.

Zeki Saritoprak presented a remarkable analysis of Said Nursi, the Turkish nonviolent activist and scholar. Moving from his theological, philosophical, and historical understanding of Islamic peacebuilding, Saritoprak showed vividly how nonviolent activism was grounded in Islamic tradition and how Nursi’s nonviolent strategies of “positive action” remain influential around the world. The discussion revolved around how Nursi’s model can be implemented in the Muslim world and how to expose his thought to a larger audience. Huda added several examples from Islamic history, in particular within the Sufi tradition, demonstrating that nonviolent strategies and interfaith dialogue are central to Islam.

The entire report is available online at http://www.usip.org/pubs/usi-peace_briefings/2006/1011_islamic_reform.html.

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