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American Encounter with Islam

A Report of FPRI's History Institute for Teachers

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On May 3-4, 2003, the Foreign Policy Research Institute held its tenth **History Institute for Teachers**, a program chaired by Walter A. McDougall, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian. Forty-two teachers from fourteen states participated in a weekend of lectures and seminars, featuring seven outstanding scholars. The papers from the conference will be published in the Winter 2004 issue of *Orbis*, due out in December; condensed versions of selected papers have appeared as FPRI bulletins.

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Most analyses of terrorism and Islam following the September 11 attacks have stressed the thousand-year conflict with Christianity and the West. Although Muslims define themselves and the Christian West in terms of religion, Western countries view relations among themselves and with Islam in national terms as British, French, Germans, or Americans. Understanding America's distinctive encounter with Islam is thus crucial to appreciating both the American and Islamic perspectives on the war on terrorism.

September 11 focused American attention on terrorism as never before. What factors motivated Al-Qaeda campaigns against the United States? Despite Osama bin Laden's rhetorical invocations of the Crusades and the late-medieval Spanish expulsion of Muslims from Andalusia, resentment toward America derived from more recent events. What makes America's relationship with the Islamic world different from Europe's? Where does America's encounter with Islam fit in the clash of civilizations? These were the questions that this year's History Institute was designed to address.

Islam and the West

Islamic leaders use the word "Crusade" to describe a particular set of historical grievances. **Edward Peters**, who teaches medieval history at the University of Pennsylvania, examined this meaning's origins. The Crusades were devotional military pilgrimages from Western Europe designed to regain and control the Holy Land. They occurred sporadically along the periphery of the Islamic world, and Arabs only identified them as a single enterprise after they ended and were largely forgotten. Mongol invasions that included the sack of Baghdad in 1258 and successful Muslim resistance to it were more significant to Muslim rulers and people of that era.

Current images of the Crusades date from the nineteenth century, when Arab societies absorbed an expanded Western historiography that shifted from triumphalism to ambivalence to criticism. Skeptical interpretations from the Enlightenment gave way to a different view shaped by critical scholarship and romantic interest in the Middle East. France appropriated the Crusades to its heritage, and French intervention in Algeria in 1830 provided a prism for interpreting them. Popular images disseminated in literature and the arts defined understanding of the Crusades. Christian Zionism also had an influence, particularly in Britain. New Western interpretations of the Crusades spread to the Middle East first through Christian Arabs and others there who could read Western languages. The Crusades became a theme in Turkish political debate by the late nineteenth century, and the Ottoman Empire's collapse fed Muslim fears of the West. The rise of political Islam and the establishment of a Jewish state in the twentieth century

encouraged historical parallels and a formerly marginal event, the Crusades, became the foundation of Western conflict with Islam. Western historiographical changes absorbed by Arab thinkers and politicians thus enabled the polemical invocation of the Crusades as an assault on the Islamic world.

Jeremy Black, a scholar of international relations at the University of Exeter and a Senior Fellow of FPRI, developed further the themes that Peters raised. Viewing the past in its own terms shows a very different scene from what is often depicted as a clash of civilizations. Cultural relations occur along a continuum of conflict or cooperation usually defined by syncretism. The fault-line between Islam and Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth century ran from Spain to Kazakstan and later expanded through oceanic commerce to include Sumatra, India, and the Horn of Africa. Internal divisions, however, outweighed conflict between Islam and the West. Muslim Khanates often allied with Russia, while France cooperated with the Ottoman sultans as part of their struggle against the Habsburgs. Britain later adopted the same divide-and-conquer approach in India. Wars among Islamic polities killed more Muslims than fighting with Western powers during the early modern era, and no sense of mutual antipathy united the West and Islam against each other. Local rivalries eclipsed outside threats until the later nineteenth century. Thus, the old story of the West against the Rest must be revised.

Western powers did not pose the main threat to Islamic polities until the nineteenth century, and Western dominance cannot be assumed for earlier periods. European powers often fought at a disadvantage with non-European adversaries. Black cited the wars in North Africa that followed the Reconquista of Spain, in which neither Spain nor Portugal successfully imposed their will on Morocco. After defeating Portugal's King Sebastian in 1578, the Morrocans led by Abd al Malik declined to counterattack Portuguese coastal enclaves and turned instead to what they considered the more important regions around Timbuktu. Not until 1844 did Europeans operate successfully in Morocco. Similarly, a narrative that emphasizes the Ottoman wars with Europe overlooks conflicts with Safavid Persia, which imposed a major drain on Turkish resources and limited their effectiveness on other fronts. Europeans and other Christians were not the only non-Muslim groups ruled by Islamic polities; the Mughal invasion of India provided a greater extension of Muslim rule over non-Muslims than the Turkish occupation of the Balkans. Early Western encounters with Muslim polities, especially in South Asia, involved trade rather than war and remained peripheral to those regions. Only later did Western powers become predominant globally, and even into the twentieth century local conditions defined relations with European powers. Decolonization after 1940 set the context for Pan-Arab and Pan-Islamic movements against the West. Only since then did the view emerge of the West and Islam as cohesive entities locked in conflict. This interpretation does not accurately reflect historical experience.

Black stressed the role of contingency and choice in understanding international politics. Geopolitics thus holds particular importance as the context for decisions. Teaching about encounters between Islam and the West should convey the complexity of relationships. Christian and Muslim states were not always at war with one another, their commercial and cultural exchanges frequently brought mutual advantage, and conflicts among Christian states or Muslim states affected their destinies more than any clash of civilizations. Historical study involves the application of intelligence to developing a critical understanding of the past, and developing effective foreign policy requires a similar approach to current events.

Islam in America

Philip Jenkins of Penn State University argued that teaching about Islam's development within the United States requires an appreciation of that faith's diverse traditions. Despite some recent studies on Muslim slaves from West Africa and Moriscos who joined the Spanish conquistadors, colonial North America did not provide a conducive environment for practicing Islam. Immigration during the nineteenth century brought Islam to the United States. Arabs worked with the U.S. Army during attempts in the 1850s to establish camel-mounted cavalry in desert regions. Muslim traders left traces in such unexpected places as Ross, North Dakota and Cedar Rapids, Iowa. These immigrants mostly came from Lebanon and Syria, and their presence introduced Shiite Islam, along with Alawite and Druze sects, that shaped the practice of Islam in America. The United States had a widespread Muslim presence by the 1940s, with 52 registered mosques and a governing organization established in 1952.

African-American varieties of Islam developed separately from those brought by immigrants. Noble Drew Ali created the New Jersey-based Moorish Science Temple in 1913 based on a combination of mysticism and heterodox beliefs on the fringes of Islam, but he later vanished in 1929. Wallace Ford, who may have been of Syrian or Lebanese descent, drew on Alawite and Druze traditions in establishing the Nation of Islam in Detroit in 1930, which found wide support.

Like the Moorish Science Temple, the Nation of Islam adopted doctrines at variance with orthodox Islam that included secret scriptures, black racial supremacy, and incarnationism or the idea that man could be god. Ford later disappeared as well and was succeeded by Elijah Muhammad. After Muhammad's death in 1975, his son brought the movement in line with mainstream Islam and gradually abandoned heterodox ideas, leaving Louis Farrakhan with a minority of followers from the original Nation of Islam. These divisions make it important to distinguish between self-identified Black Muslims and those African-Americans who practice Islam. Heterodox groups like the Nation of Islam served primarily to introduce Islam widely among African-Americans and popularize it as an religion not considered wholly foreign.

Immigration since 1965 changed the demographics of Islam in America while increasing the number of mosques. South Asia and different parts of the Arab world now provide more Muslim immigrants than earlier sources in Syria. Jenkins noted that many Arab Americans are Christian. This change heightened diversity among American Muslims and their tensions with the wider society. Education, charities, and proselytizing are the main issues Muslims face today. Wahabi-oriented foundations supported by Saudi Arabia dominate education and the training of clergy, creating tensions with Shiite and other Muslim traditions. Charity, one of the five pillars of Islam, raises other problems as Muslim organizations face accusations of providing conduits to finance terrorist groups. Prisons are another point of contact with the wider society where proselytizing brings conflicts, especially where militant clerics become involved. Jenkins described Islam as an established part of American life with the potential to assimilate further despite its being seen as foreign. He compared it with attitudes toward the Roman Catholic Church in the late nineteenth century that gradually changed. Americans need to see American Islam as a more complex and evolving phenomenon than portrayed by the media.

Religion and the Arab-Israeli Conflict

Is the Arab-Israeli conflict a religious war? If so, what does that mean for the United States? **Adam Garfinkle**, editor of *The National Interest*, stated that religious conflicts involve metaphysical issues that cannot be compromised. He defined the current Arab-Israeli situation as a nationalist conflict between two comparatively recent nations.

Conflict differs from open war, and contacts are often sustained in the midst of conflicts. Garfinkle noted periods of relative quiescence between Arabs and Israel (for example, 1957-67), which involved some violence without major fighting. Reconciliation between Arabs and Israelis is a different issue from containing violence, and peace cannot be defined solely in terms of reconciliation. A "peace of the generals" is easier to negotiate than reconciliation between rival communities.

The meaning of religion in this context must also be clarified. Religion can be many things from a cosmology or a normative code to a social contract, and a sacred narrative is often connected with those other meanings. Discussing religion in such terms leads to culture, the physical artifice of which is a civilization. Arab Muslims describe Islam as a religious civilization, and Christian Arabs concur with them on the identity of Arab civilization. Interpreting a conflict in religious terms means that political and other decisions will be described in those terms. Thus, the distinction between religious and national conflicts fades, and the Arab-Israeli conflict engages many countries that would not otherwise be involved. Regimes, often secular ones, that lack democratic legitimacy use this struggle to bolster their own standing. Non-Muslim states such as India that might otherwise have common interests with Israel adopt a different view to avoid antagonizing Islamic groups. Garfinkle noted that the United States has no choice whether others define the conflict through a religious prism, and the revival of identity politics accentuates religion's role.

What does this mean for U.S. policy? American mediation should avoid exacerbating religious aspects of the conflict and strive for a peace of the generals that makes reconciliation possible. Jerusalem's status is one issue that draws religion directly into the conflict because it brings together religious and secular questions. Diplomats must first solve less contentious matters that ease tensions and avoid setting goals too high. A gradual effort to secure a modus vivendi will allow the protagonists to tackle the most difficult issues later.

American Foreign Policy and Islam

Religion can envenom disputes to the point where they are impossible to resolve, and FPRI President **Harvey Sicherman** argued that diplomats consequently try to distance themselves from it. How has this affected American

relations with Islamic polities? Sicherman, who formerly worked with the State Depoartment, said that diplomats typically focused on what their interlocutors did rather than what they said. In dealing with Muslim states, the United States tried to avoid Islam, ignore it, and harness it before returning to a more sophisticated effort at containing its impact on relations. He discussed these changes in American policy through four case studies: Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, and the current war on terrorism.

Americans realized that Saudi Arabia had a very different culture rooted in a distinctive brand of Islam that had the potential to create tensions. Geopolitics established common interests, however, that led to a special relationship based on cooperation. Differences were thus respected and kept off the agenda. This approach worked well into the 1970s, but a challenge to the Saudis from Shia militants that decade and a 1979 siege of the great Mosque in Mecca led Saudi authorities to defer increasingly to Wahhabi clerics, and to support an expanded competition with Iranian Shiism for the allegiance of Muslims overseas. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 forced Saudi Arabia to accept a foreign military presence that alienated many of its subjects who saw it as a defilement of the holy places. Those critics became supporters of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Following the Iraq war, the Saudis, in cooperation with the United States, have tried to return to the earlier model of an "over the horizon" presence rather than a resident garrison. America now pays closer attention to Saudi-sponsored clerics who preach against the West and Saudi financial aid that reaches terrorists.

The United States paid little attention to Islam's role in Iran under the Shah, and the Islamic Revolution in 1979 that overthrew him came as a surprise. Muslims resented the Shah's combination of radical modernization and appeals for legitimacy to a pre-Islamic Persian history. Ayatollah Khomeini saw Shia Islam as a vehicle for purifying the faith from outside influences, and his regime defined itself in terms of jihad. The hostage crisis in 1979 blocked any rapprochment with the United States, and religion could not be ignored in dealings with Iran. Khomeini's anti-American rhetoric expressed the regime's policy and Iran became the leading state sponsor of terrorism. Thus far, attempts to put the relationship on a more pragmatic basis have failed.

Afghanistan involved an American effort to harness jihad against the Soviet Union in the 1980s. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan profoundly shocked the Muslim world, and Washington provided money and weapons for the Mujahideen who drew foreign recruits. The war combined Shia resistance to outside attacks on Muslim ways, Wahhabi rigorism, and Sayyid Qtub's view that impious rulers must be overthrown in order for true Islam to be achieved. (Bin Laden had been a student of Qtub's brother.) These points underpinned the concept of jihad conducted by a vanguard elite, a doctrine that resembled Lenin's organizational theory. The Soviet withdrawal in 1989 created a victory myth to the effect that the mujahideen had overthrown the Communist Bloc, and veterans from the Afghan jihad then turned their attention to the West and secular regimes within the Islamic world.

In waging the war on terrorism after September 11, Americans understood that Al Qaeda had a religious motive. The Bush administration took care, however, not to declare Islam the enemy. While some argue that Washington should target "extremist Islam," secular governments outside the Muslim world make such distinctions at their peril. It remains wiser to target behavior (terrorism by groups or governments) regardless of religion. This formulation avoids a confrontation with Islam per se while facing the threat from non-Muslim terror groups. American policy focuses on deeds, but now also recognizes that rhetoric can incite deeds and must also be reckoned as an act. The United States will no longer ignore religious rhetoric that has political consequences.

Political Islam

John Calvert, a political scientist at Creighton University, examined political Islam and its view of America. Along with non-political manifestations of the faith that focus on devotional activities, Islam can also be interpreted as an ideology to sustain social and political activities. "Islamism" developed in response to Western imperialism: Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) founded the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Abu Ala Mawdudi (1903-1979) developed an Islamist program in South Asia. The imperialism to which they reacted involved more than direct military and economic control over Muslim societies. Elites within the Muslim world who aligned with the West, adopted its ways, and advanced its interests provide another aspect of Western influence typified by Anwar al-Sadat. Western culture, particularly consumerism and business culture, is another. Islamists believe that their weakness and vulnerability derive from the lapse of their societies from original authentic Islam.

Islamist thought is either gradualist or radical. Al Banna and Mawdudi represent the gradualist approach that aims to

win popular support by persuasion and filling needs unmet by the state; hence, the extensive charitable efforts by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. Radical Islam follows the model of "revolution from above" articulated by Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), a philosopher executed by the Egyptian government for subversion.

The Iranian Revolution is a Shiite example of radical Islam, and insurgencies in Syria and Algeria provide Sunni examples. Al Qaeda is the most famous case, but it differs from other radical Islamic movements in three ways. Firstly, it targets Americans rather than focusing on local collaborators before engaging outsiders. Secondly, Al Qaeda targets civilians instead of governments or officials; September 11 was a symbolic declaration of contempt for America and the West. Finally, the transnational character of Al Qaeda indicates alienation from Muslim countries as well as from modern Western cultures.

Qutb played a key role as the source of these ideas behind political Islam and particularly Al Qaeda. A teacher and writer in Egypt who drifted from nationalist opposition to the British into political Islam, Qtub left an extensive set of writings that set the agenda for Islamism. He argued that man had compromised the sovereignty of God, and Muslims accordingly must form a vanguard to conduct jihad. The greater jihad is the struggle against one's own impurity and base desires, while the lesser jihad is for the expansion of Islam. Qutb stressed both of these in justifying rebellion against Muslim and foreign governments. He had studied in the United States, and his view of the West amounts to a form of Occidentalism that relentlessly criticizes America as a polar opposite of Islam.

Calvert described radical Islam as a middle-class phenomenon with educated adherents who often adopt Western dress. It reflects the frustrations of young men lacking upward mobility or the financial standing to marry. Many facets of Western culture, particularly consumerism and the role of women, touch directly on their frustrations, giving Qutb's critique personal meaning. Radical Islam must be understood in context, and not confused with Arab nationalism or other movements.

Mapping America's Middle East

Eric Davis, director of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Rutgers University, addressed the question of how teachers can present the American Encounter with Islam. Teaching comparative politics introduced Davis to the rigid views and stereotypes about the Middle East that many students hold. Given the large amount of information available to students, the real challenges lies in finding the right interpretive perspective. What questions should teachers ask and what methodological prisms help answer them? Viewing Islam as a single phenomenon that does not vary according to time or circumstance and associating it with traditional societies defined as "less developed" than the contemporary West offers stereotypes teachers must avoid. Davis urged teachers to use an historical approach and comparative analysis to show different facets of Islam and how its relation with America has changed over time. As an example of this approach, Davis described the evolution of American views of the Middle East. That changing mental picture reflects developments in American history as much as in the region itself. Puritan views of scripture and America as a new holy land defined early attitudes, and missionary efforts brought the first direct encounters. Trade was another contact point. Aesthetics dominated nineteenth-century views through design and literature such as Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra*. Mark Twain described how tourism combined the recreation of biblical journeys with study of the exotic. Museums disseminated this perspective to a wider audience. Only after World War II did Americans associate the Middle East with violence and terrorism. Nationalist opposition to the West and Arab-Israeli wars reshaped attitudes, and the debate surrounding Samuel Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* illustrates how this influenced scholarship. Davis reiterated the need for critical analysis that engages information by asking the right questions and offering different perspectives in the classroom.

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