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Islamic Reform Relating to Conflict and Peace

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Sixteen Muslim scholars attended a three-day United States Institute of Peace conference to discuss various approaches to understanding conflict and peace in the Muslim world. [Qamar-ul Huda](#), senior program officer in the [Religion and Peacemaking](#) program, organized the conference entitled "[Islamic Reform Relating to Conflict and Peace](#)." Participants explored how scholars of Islamic studies can critically engage in Islamic peacebuilding and conflict resolution through an interdisciplinary analysis. The participants had expertise in numerous fields including history, theology, philosophy, Islamic law, human rights, ethics, literature, political science, economics, education, and peacebuilding.

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

A presentation by Asma Afsaruddin on jihad, peace, martyrdom, patience, and the original Qur'anic context of these terms demonstrated the diversity of legal opinions to be found in Islamic tradition. By the late ninth century, Muslim jurists held divergent views and sophisticated interpretations of violence, peace, and conflict resolution. According to Afsaruddin, not only did different interpretations flourish but there was also a culture of tolerating and fostering this pluralism. It was not until the mid-tenth century that interpretations of peace, conflict, and just-war theories became driven by political expediencies. With the emergence of several competing dynasties in the Middle East and the rise of military expeditions to expand their borders, concepts of peace and conflict resolution became intertwined with the aspirations of the regime elites. The terms of the debate became appropriated by a political and military class that refused to countenance any challenge to their legitimacy.



Mohammed Abu-Nimer presents his non-violent peacebuilding efforts to participants.

The participants discussed the multiplicity of interpretations of violence, nonviolence, peacebuilding, and conflict resolution that obtain in Muslim texts and how violence is legitimized or not. Mohammed Abu-Nimer discussed the theoretical and practical obstacles involved in changing views on conflict. To inculcate new Muslim attitudes, such as interest in non-violent resistance, Abu-Nimer noted that it is important to move beyond the abstract theological language of the clergy and adopt holistic approaches to peacebuilding. For many in the Muslim world, nonviolent resistance is associated with the Christian tradition. Some view it as a passive and ineffective method in contesting oppression. Abu-Nimer, Huda, and Afsaruddin elaborated on the numerous canonical texts that are available in Islam on the use of nonviolent practices, texts which are often overlooked. Huda emphasized that Muslims should not think of themselves as any "less Muslim" because they support nonviolent strategies against conflict. In addition,

Huda argued that Muslim scholars who argue that nonviolence is somehow not Islamic tend to intellectually isolate themselves within certain scriptural traditions. The group discussed how to promote nonviolent strategies as an active approach of engagement to reduce conflict and promote peace.

Ibrahim Kalin initiated a conversation on how peace and conflict in Islam should be viewed within four contexts: spiritual, philosophical and theological, juridical, and cultural. Each of these contexts contains insights into preventing conflict in order to maintain a harmonious peaceful society. Kalin stressed how historically Muslim scholars have viewed peace not as an absence of conflict but rather 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. Kalin said that there is a real need to understand the broader conception of peace in Islam, especially theologically where violence is viewed as contradictory to the human-divine relationship. Hermansen responded that the challenge is to move beyond the Islamic sciences and Islamic philosophy to develop the field of Islamic peacebuilding.



USIP Executive Vice President Trish Thomson speaks to participants.

Other participants pointed out that practical models are needed on the ground in conflict zones. Ensuring that activists have proper analytical tools for peacebuilding is just one step toward building peaceful communities. Since there is no single standard interpretation of Islam by Muslims and Muslims have numerous ways of expressing their religion, the group raised the idea of multiple Islamic approaches to peacebuilding. However, participants questioned why scholars of Islam and experts in the west place such an overwhelming emphasis on legal texts and Islamic law towards war, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding.

For some scholars a critical issue is identifying a core of independent-minded clergy scholars in the Sunni and Shi'ite communities who are

not co-opted by government officials. Waleed el-Ansary and Joseph Lumbard 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. They added that these religious leaders were on record for criticizing their respective governments for not acting responsibly toward their own citizens. Others added that the politics in the Middle East, in particular the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Israeli-Hezbollah war further undermined Muslims advocating peaceful alternatives to war. Karim Crow, Ibrahim Kalin, Rahim Nobahar, and others said that Muslim peace makers in the Middle East face many challenges in advocating nonviolent strategies when Western powers do not uphold the same ideals. Because there appear to be no effective responses to the suffering of the people in Iraq, Palestine, Lebanon, and Afghanistan, Muslim publics are easily convinced that violent strategies are 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 paper, "Blood Sacrifice & Peace: Re-Imagining Peacemaking - A Muslim Perspective" Karim Crow suggested another innovative way in viewing how violence is constructed outside of religious, national, and tribal identities. Drawing on psychological studies, Crow explained how human violence stems from human instincts and the way we are socialized to act violently. Crow vividly described how sectarianism has gradually destroyed the ways Muslims can cooperate with each other in order to find solutions to their problems. Another problem, according to Crow, is that traditional moral and ethical education is missing from the majority of public schools. Crow stressed the need for primary and secondary schools in the Muslim world to incorporate peace studies programs based on Islamic models of peace making. This prompted a discussion about how to retrieve and amplify the sources that will create an atmosphere of peaceful action by peaceful means.

In light of the extremism that is part of the current wave of Islamism, the group wrestled with the way

one can promote nonviolent strategies and Islamic peacebuilding. Scholars examined how extremists exploit the religion to impose a singular interpretation of the tradition. The way extremists reinterpret Islam anachronistically, for their own political purposes, was a serious concern for this group. "Politics, unfortunately, cannot be divorced from the conversation of peacebuilding and conflict resolution," said Anas Malik. Karim 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, lack of democratic institutions to express oneself, and other international forces that work together with the regimes."

Intense debate revolved around interdisciplinary approaches versus theological and religious methodologies for Islamic peacebuilding. Reza Eslami Somea raised the issue of applying the international code of human rights in Islamic peacebuilding instead of thinking within the traditional lines of Islamic law. Asserting that shari'a is one of the problems in Iran, Somea believes using religious paradigms to peacebuilding and conflict resolution complicates the key issues and does injustice to the religious tradition. Somea said that legal, social, political, and economic reform is occurring every day in Iran. For him reform is not the issue; rather the problem is that religious principles are thought to be the answer for each area of knowledge. Somea observed that originally religious principles were meant to help human beings lead spiritual and ethical lives. Religion does not need to be the source for human rights and peacebuilding.

The participants debated whether religion is the only lens to use in understanding the Muslim world and whether the roots of approaching Islam and Muslims in "religious terms" was an incorrect way of thinking about Muslims. Rahim Nobahar, a Shi'ite cleric trained in Iran, affirmed that religion cannot be separated from resolving conflict or promoting peace. "Religion is central to being a Muslim," said Nobahar. However, some participants felt that viewing Muslims in religious terms is a misreading of history and culture, and is a continuation of the "imagined other" or 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--divorcing religion from any analysis of the current social and political situation would be a mistake.



Conference participants.

However, in discussing how Muslim scholars could contribute to the field of peacebuilding and conflict resolution, there were differing opinions on how to include cultural and religious dimensions. According to some scholars, in order to develop Islamic approaches to peacebuilding that are pluralistic, one needed to move beyond western models of peacebuilding. Participants argued for building upon contemporary models of peace makers in the Muslim world and examine how they use resources within the Islamic tradition to cultivate peace. Others argued that individual Muslim peace makers, while pure in their intentions, may not know the textual sources of Islam for peacebuilding and this could cause problems. Some argued that since Muslim societies have diverse ethnic, religious, cultural histories, Islamic peacebuilding may be a hybrid of all groups involved and perhaps not rooted in any single religious tradition.

Zeki Saritoprak presented a remarkable analysis of Said Nursi, the Turkish nonviolent activist and scholar who died in 1960. Moving from Nursi's theological, philosophical, and historical understanding of Islamic peacebuilding, Saritoprak showed vividly the way nonviolent activism was grounded in Islamic tradition and how Nursi's nonviolent strategies of "positive action" is influential around the world. The discussion revolved around the practical ways in which 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.

This conference of Muslim scholars on Islamic Reform Relating to Conflict and Peace highlighted major contemporary issues in the field of peacebuilding, as well as the obstacles scholars face in creating a new paradigm of thought and practice. The proceedings of the conference will be published in the near future. The conference participants were: Asma Afsaruddin; Karim Crow; Ibrahim Kalin; Anas Malik; Marcia Hermansen; Asna Husin; Reza Eslami Somea; Waleed el-Ansary; Joseph Lumbard; Zeki Saritoprak; Mohammed Abu-Nimer; Muqtedar Khan; Qamar-ul Huda; Rahim Nobahar.

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This USIPeace Briefing was written by [Qamar-ul Huda](#), senior program officer in the [Religion and Peacemaking](#) program at the United States Institute of Peace. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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