

## *Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports*

### **IIIT Intellectual Panels at the ISNA 50th Annual Convention**

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) organized a two-day series of intellectual panels at the Islamic Society of North America's (ISNA) 50th annual convention, held in Washington, DC, over the Labor Day weekend (Aug. 31–Sept. 1, 2103). These events were hosted in the institute's hospitality suite on the main floor of the Washington Convention Center. Recently published IIIT books and other selected publications were prominently displayed. A documentary on IIIT and its goals was shown before each session.

**Panel 1.** *Striving in the Path of God: Jihad and Martyrdom in Islamic Thought.* **Author:** Asma Afsaruddin. **Moderator:** Abubaker al-Shingaiti. **Discussants:** Daoud Nassimi, Anwar Haddam, Sulayman Nyang.

Asma Afsaruddin (Indiana University) related that she wrote *Striving in the Path of God* (Oxford University Press: 2013) to counter sensationalized media and academic accounts that increasingly link Islam and Muslim militancy with jihad. She deals with three widespread misconceptions: Muslims are engaged in an eternal and relentless bloody campaign for world domination, anyone can declare jihad if the unbelievers do not submit, and those who say that a legitimate jihad has to meet certain criteria are liars.

She seeks to refute such assertions by analyzing the relevant Qur'anic verses, the early commentaries, and hadith collections. Also provided is an historical account of jihad's development. In Makkah, Muslims were told to practice patience, non-violence, and quietist/activist resistance, which God would reward handsomely (Q. 16:110). This internal approach became known as the *jihād al-nafs*. After the hijrah, Muslims were allowed to defend their lives and property (Q. 22:39-40) – but not Islam.

During the late-seventh and eighth centuries, the beginning of what turned out to be a long-term process of empire building, commentators saw such verses as obstacles. In order to accommodate political reality, they turned their attention toward jihad's external (viz., political and military) aspects and re-

duced the internal jihad to *akhlāq* (a person's virtue, morality, and manners). Interestingly, the important concepts of *dār al-ḥarb* and *dār al-Islām* appear nowhere in the Qur'anic text; they were created by al-Shafi'i (d. 820).

She closed by mentioning that there has never been a monolithic understanding of jihad, that some commentators said it could be non-military in nature (e.g., death arising from an illness, traveling to acquire knowledge, or childbirth), and that its original self-defensive role gradually gave way to a religiously justified and legitimized form of aggressive imperialism.

Daoud Nassimi (Northern Virginia Community College) remarked that jihad's military dimensions should not be overlooked and that the author appears to have concentrated on *jihād al-nafs*. Anwar Haddam (Movement for Liberty & Social Justice) mentioned that *jihād* and *qitāl* (killing) are complementary, as opposed to competing, terms; that jihad's military component should be recognized, given contemporary realities; and that its prerequisites need to be explained. Sulayman Nyang (Howard University) stated that the author has presented the term's Qur'anic foundation and that certain meanings arise due to specific circumstances, for the Qur'an itself is tempo-centric.

**Panel 2. Parent-Child Relations: A Guide to Raising Children. Author:** Hisham Altalib. **Moderator:** Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad. **Discussants:** Mohamed R. Beshir, Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad.

Hisham Altalib (IIIT) opened by saying that teachers have traditionally seen ignorance, poverty, and disease as the three evils of this world and held that they can be overcome by acquiring and then using knowledge in the appropriate manner. Muslim reformers have based their movements upon this view. However, according to Altalib, all movements have missed one critical dimension, that of parenting, because "we only think of adults." Citing the hadith that "people are like minerals," he stated that a person's qualities and personality are formed during childhood. This is why the Qur'an stresses the importance of the extended family for raising Muslim leaders.

Employing the analogy of a computer, he said that the hardware consists of character building during childhood (0-5 years) and that the software is the knowledge, wisdom, faith, and skills that ensure future success. Each chapter ends with activities designed to instill the attitudes and skills discussed therein. He asked parents to establish relationships of mutual understanding, expectations, and trust with their children, as well as family rituals, reliability, and (especially for fathers) involvement with their children. After all, "the child is a good observer but not an analyst. What you do or do not do influences them."

Mohamed R. Beshir, author of several parenting books along with his wife Ekram, listed five components of successful parenting: envision how you want

your child to be as an adult, learn Islamic parenting skills, provide a positive and healthy home atmosphere, be willing to change yourself, and acquire wisdom. He suggested that more references from authors who have lived in the West, as well as a section on how immigrant parents can modify their own parenting styles, would be helpful. Imad ad-Dean Ahmad (Minaret of Freedom) praised the author for taking the middle path between writing a “how to” and a “research” book, and between employing an “authoritarian” and a “permissive” style of parenting. Given that the parents have the strongest impact on a child’s life, they alone are responsible for how their children turn out.

**Panel 3. *Apostasy in Islam: A Historical and Scriptural Analysis*. Author:** Shaykh Taha Jabir Alalwani. **Presenter:** Jamal Badawi. **Moderator:** Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad. **Discussants:** Zulqifar Ali Shah and Anwar Haddam. Jamal Badawi (Islamic Information Foundation), after stating his agreement with Alalwani’s arguments as presented in *Apostasy in Islam: A Historical and Scriptural Analysis* (IIIT: 2011), said that the book covers two major areas: (1) the historical aspect of *ḥadd* punishments and how some rulers used them as political tools to rid themselves of critics or opponents and (2) a scriptural analysis of how the Qur’an and the Hadith literature views apostates.

The issue of methodology is critical. Alalwani makes the case that the Qur’an and *some* of the Sunnah must be given primacy. For example, *qiyās* should not be considered because the Qur’anic text is clear: Since God will punish apostates in the hereafter, they cannot be executed in this world. Moreover, those hadiths that report such executions by the Prophet are considered weak in both content and, in some instances, their *isnāds*.

Zulqifar Ali Shah (Fiqh Council of North America) remarked that earlier scholars frequently employed selective methodologies and harbored subjective attitudes because they did not distinguish between Islam as religion and Islam as state. In addition, Islam and the hadiths were used to bring stability to, and actually strengthen, the state. Thus the oral tradition “fixed” the Qur’anic text. But as this is no longer the case, contemporary scholars should be guided by what is “constant” in the Qur’an, read the oral tradition in light of the Qur’an, and let it decide the matter.

Haddam made several points: the *ijmā’* of the first three Islamic centuries is only “supposed,” is apostasy an expression of a personal opinion or an act of aggression against the community, “There is no compulsion in religion” (Q. 2:256) cannot be ignored, and while the death penalty might be justified for reasons of “national security,” it cannot be applied by a dictator and before ascertaining the public’s opinion.

**IIIT Distinguished Scholar Award. Moderator:** Abubaker Al-Shingieti.  
**Presenter:** Hisham Altalib.

On Saturday evening, Sulayman Nyang (Howard University) was presented the “IIIT Distinguished Scholar Award,” which seeks to bridge the scholarly community with the broader community. After a short film highlighting his career, Nyang remarked that he received the award with “great joy and pleasure” and that “we start with what we know and build on what we have.” In response to a question, he stated the he encouraged young people to cultivate “persistence, perseverance, and patience.” Several friends and colleagues reminisced about their experiences with him, how his scholarship had influenced them, and his interaction with the community.

**Panel 4. *Islam and the Arab Awakening.* Speakers:** Tariq Ramadan and Ebrahim Rasool. **Moderator:** Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad. **Discussants:** Abdallah AlShaikh Sidahmed, Zahid Bukhari, and Emad-ad-Dean Ahmad.

Tariq Ramadan (Oxford University), after praising IIIT’s work and saying that its intellectual critical thinking is crucial, discussed his latest publication: *Islam and the Arab Awakening* (Oxford University Press: 2012 ). He made a strong case that great caution is required when trying to understand current events, not all of the facts are known (e.g., what networks of people and interests are involved, what is going on in Europe, what are the relevant [and more important] economic and geostrategic considerations), and that the process is more important than the facts. He asserted that Muslims are not paying enough attention to Tunisia’s internal dynamics, that the United States and various European nations have been involved from the outset, and that the real coup was the one that overthrew Morsi. Demonstrators can be pushed in a certain direction, he remarked, for everything has an underlying context.

According to him, the desired end result in Egypt is polarization so that the external actors’ interests will not be endangered. This fits a well-known pattern: get rid of the dictator and engender political instability (e.g., polarization, sectarianism); control security via military forces, as in Afghanistan, under American or another authority; and open markets and protect the external actors’ geostrategic interests. As he noted, the Middle East (especially the Arab Spring countries) is unstable and yet the markets remain open.

He called for Arabs to launch an intellectual revolution, realize that winning might actually be a trap (as happened with the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas), and see the larger picture. What is needed now is deeper thinking, less emotionalism, new alliances, and a non-victim mentality. In short, he is “very worried about the future ... but let us have a principled reaction at least.”

Ebrahim Rasool (Ambassador of South Africa to the United States), who is “rereading [the book] with insight,” elaborated on previous applications of this pattern, among them how Congo’s popular leader Patrice Lumumba was assassinated within two months of his rise to power and replaced by the pro-western dictator Mobutu Sese Seko (r. 1965-97). He reminded the audience that popular support pales in comparison to the West’s support. After relating how Google, Twitter, Facebook, and other actors trained the opposition, he called for Muslims to balance their fervor for change and their intellectual approach, and also “to reconstruct our optimism.”

He recounted some of the Muslim Brotherhood’s mistakes: the failure to find a balance between Islam and meeting the people’s needs, understand and manage internal Egyptian forces, erect a cordon sanitaire around itself (as Nelson Mandela did) so that it would not be the target for everyone, prioritize ideology over running a society, setting up a broad-based coalition to guide the transition, and avoid “false debates.” Since Muslims “live in a world where the paradigm is against us,” they need to formulate a new vision based on social justice, make alliances with progressive forces, and advance their cause through shared strategies and tactics.

After Abdallah Sidahmed’s general remarks, Zahid Bukhari (Islamic Circle of North America) said that Muslims are witnessing “a new colonial prism.” The Turkish/Iranian models were part of the process, as were the military junta’s hanging of Turkey’s prime minister Menderes in 1961 and the overthrow of Iran’s democratically elected prime minister Mosaddegh in 1953. Moreover, one can hardly expect the Muslim Brotherhood to behave like democrats given their long history with repressive governments. He brought up the “West vs. the West” factor, for the West, just like Islam, is not a monolith. He concluded by asking if an Islamist-ruled state has to be a “civil” state, or could it be a faith-based democracy or something entirely new? Emad ad-Dean Ahmad made several points: Islamic movements can be at odds with each other (a fact that is often overlooked); secularism, which is a wedge used to divide people, also is not monolithic (Islamists can accept American-style secularism, in his opinion); and a distinction needs to be made between neoliberal and free market economics.

In response, Ramadan noted that the challenge is not just political, but also educational, economic, and cultural. All of this is part of a process. Strategy is very important, as are the facts that there are different trends in secularism (especially Tunisia) and that every vision/political movement requires a strategy that is not based on emotions. He called for Muslims to pay closer attention to what is going on around them, to identify who is behind the various players, and to be constructively self-critical.

**Panel 5.** *The Astronomical Calculations and Ramadan: A Fiqhi Discourse.*

**Author:** Zulfiqar Ali Shah. **Moderator:** Wael al-Khairo. **Discussants:** Mohammad Adam al-Shaykh, Emad-ad-Dean Ahmad, Wael al-Khairo.

Zulfiqar Ali Shah's *The Astronomical Calculations and Ramadan: A Fiqhi Discourse* (IIIT: 2009) discusses the ongoing controversy over whether actual sighting of the crescent moon (*hilāl*) is necessary or if calculation can be used to determine its appearance. He made the case that since the objective is to determine with certainty when Ramadan begins and ends, physical sighting is neither mandated nor necessary. According to a prophetic hadith, "Certainty is obtained by means of actual sighting," which means that the latter is not an act of worship. According to him, the beginning and ending of Ramadan can be determined through three methods: naked eye-sighting, calculation, and estimation (employed by Umar ibn al-Khattab during his caliphate [634-44]). He concluded by saying that calculation is the most accurate method.

Mohammad Adam al-Shaykh (Fiqh Council of North America) said that eye-sight was the only method available at the Prophet's time; today, however, we have other and more accurate methods. Ahmad remarked that the problem is not *fiqhī* or astronomical issues, but whether "we have to rely on reports." When the Prophet was confronted with two villages that had started fasting on different days, he said that both were correct. Thus, "how large an area is bound by a legitimate sighting?" For instance, if the *hilāl* were sighted on an island in the Indian Ocean, would the people in Makkah have to fast? He concluded by saying that Muslims have to pick a convention that by definition is arbitrary and then stick with it. Al-Khairo said that we assume our *fuqahā'* are extremely objective. But in reality, they are products of their time and culture. Earlier *fuqahā'* resisted calculation due to the presence of astrologers.

**Panel 6.** *Al-Shura: The Qur'anic Principle of Consultation.*

**Author:** Ahmad al-Raysuni. **Presenter:** Emad-ad-Dean Ahmad. **Moderator:** Abubaker al-Shingieti. **Discussants:** Mohammad Adam al-Shaykh, Zahid Bukhari, Daoud Nassimi.

Ahmad began by saying that Ahmad al-Raysuni wrote *Al-Shura: The Qur'anic Principle of Consultation* (IIIT, 2011) to remind Muslims of this largely ignored approach mentioned in Q. 42:38 and Q. 3:159. He then asked several questions, such as: Why are stakeholders not mentioned, for this would have strengthened the author's case? Is consultation obligatory (e.g., stakeholders or the general public) or advisory (e.g., experts)? Is it always necessary regardless of the issue involved? Is there more than one type of *shūrā'*?

The author, according to Ahmad, insinuates that this was not a problem during the Rashidun period, because “the ummah was smaller, so it could be informal.” Ahmad stated that this was not exactly true. At this point in time, however, Muslims need to develop a workable, realistic system of consultation that respects the minority view, for the majority is not always right. Moreover, certain basic questions need to be raised and answered: Does the leader or the majority make the final decision? If this role belongs to the majority (Ahmad opines that al-Raysuni does not seem to appreciate the fact that the minority is often right), what size should the majority be? In closing, Ahmad stated that *shūrā* should seek to accommodate as many groups’ interests as possible.

Shaykh said that not many people are familiar with *shūrā* and then cited the Qur’anic account of humanity’s creation (Q. 2:30) as an example of a leader consulting his subjects. Bukhari disagreed on the grounds that this was a case of providing information to others. He went on to say that *shūrā* needs to become part of the political realm, as it is closely related to the concept of running a state, and thus Muslim scholars have to understand liberalism, capitalism, and democracy. Nassimi remarked that non-binding *shūrā* would be little more than a joke. He then asked whether a leader who was also a *mujtahid* would have to listen to anyone else, and how much credence the majority’s opinion should be given since the Qur’an sometimes condemns this group for leading others astray.

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