

Looking Beyond September 11: Islam in the West – and Democratic Trends in the Middle East and North Africa

Saeed A. Khan

The Fortieth Annual AMSS (Association of Muslim Social Scientists of North America) Conference, held at John Jay College at the City University of New York in New York City, marked a decade since September 11 by reviewing the past ten years of the Muslim narrative, with particular focus on the past year and the considerable social and political changes in the Middle East and North Africa. Welcomed by John Jay College Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dr. Jane Bowers, and by outgoing AMSS President Dr. Ali Mazrui – the conference’s one-day format ensured an intensive and stimulating session, which captured the energy of the participants and attendees that filled the symposium. While a four-panel conference featuring only twelve presenters may appear small in comparison to some academic meetings, AMSS again proved that quality eclipsed quantity in offering a diverse, yet deep analysis of contemporary issues – ranging from the Arab Spring to domestic discourses highlighting and targeting Muslims.

A panel entitled, “The Arab Spring: Paths to Democracy in the Middle East and North Africa,” opened the day’s proceedings by assessing the very fluid and evolving situation in the heart of the Arab world. Khalid Madhi (Adjunct Professor at St. Xavier University and PhD Student Research and Teaching Assistant at the University of Illinois at Chicago) focused on how the transformative movements in Tunisia and Egypt would be felt in Morocco by offering a study of the country’s Islamist efforts. Umar Oseni (Visiting Fellow at the Islamic Legal Studies Program at the Harvard Law School and Post-doctoral Scholar and Lecturer at the International Islamic University Malaysia) shifted the discussion from a specific country to a more regional approach when he proposed a model for conflict management that is inherent within Islam itself. Finally, Mohamed Nimer (Assistant Professor of International Relations at the School of International Ser-

vice at the American University) forecast the potential for the Arab Spring to gain both currency and sustainability beyond the current areas of change to become a populist, democratic wave across the region.

Over the past decade, public discourse concerning Muslims and Islam has been dominated by the issue of security – often reducing the Muslim community to little more than a caricature of being a threat to society. The second morning panel, “Moving Beyond Global Terror,” explored the effects of this phenomenon as well as efforts to change the paradigm. Jasmine Zine (Associate Professor of Sociology at Wilfred Laurier University) discussed the role of academics in perpetuating, inadvertently or intentionally, the image of Muslim youth being a security issue. Beyond the obvious impact on creating generalizations and stereotypes for the public, another danger was the internalization of these representations by the youth themselves. Khanum Shaikh (University of California President’s Postdoctoral Fellow in the Women’s Studies Program at UCLA) examined the intersection of gender, sovereignty, and the purported global war on terror as it relates to the Lal Masjid Movement in Pakistan.

Continuing in the AMSS tradition of a sterling luncheon keynote address, Dr. Ali Mazrui delivered the Ismail Raji al-Faruqi Memorial Lecture, “From the Tragedy of 9/11 to the Triumph of Tahrir Square.” Dr. Mazrui expounded upon the changes to the Muslim world that have occurred in a span of ten years, with these two events constituting and reconstituting the ever-changing narrative of Muslims and Islam. Rich in texture and history, Dr. Mazrui’s remarks located the contemporary within a broader chronological context – giving due attention to forces both within and outside the Muslim world that have played significant roles in shaping this period.

Gender continues to be a critical lens through which the Muslim experience has been examined in the post-9/11 era. The afternoon sessions began with an examination of “New Women, New Realities.” Shabana Mir (Assistant Professor in Social Foundations and Qualitative Inquiry at the Oklahoma State University’s College of Education) explored identity construction of Muslim American women on college campuses and the manner by which they negotiate both intra-faith and interfaith spaces. With a focus on the role of Muslim women in leadership capacities, Fauzia Erfan Ahmed (Assistant Professor of Sociology and Assistant Professor of Women’s Studies in the Department of Sociology and Gerontology at the Miami University of Ohio) discussed how two such individuals typified the struggles between leadership and subordination. Lastly, Celene Aayat Lizzio (Harvard University) presented on how Islamic feminist discourses are discussed and debated from an academic perspective and on campus generally.

With a rise of anti-Muslim sentiment assuming various forms, the post-9/11 era has created new challenges for Muslims. On the panel, “Islamophobia after 9/11,” Saeed Khan (Wayne State University) placed current efforts to impugn Shari‘ah law at the state and national levels within a broader discourse on the moral panic in the United States. Katherine Meriman (Graduate Student in Harvard Divinity School) explored the impact of September 2011 on Muslim communities in New York City – especially with regard to the controversy surrounding the Park 51 Project. Finally, Hilal Elver (Research Professor of Global Studies at the University of California Santa Barbara) provided a comparative survey of Islamophobia in North America and Europe by means of legal and judicial categories.

Once again, AMSS maintained its reputation of hosting a conference that brought together scholars and students who shared perspectives and insight on cutting-edge topics. Continuing with the expected climate of congeniality and informality, the interactive nature of the Fortieth Annual Conference left attendees and audience members alike with a heightened awareness and knowledge about pertinent issues. As always, along with the presenters, AMSS staff, the Conference Co-Chairs, panel chairs, discussants, and John Jay College worked tirelessly to create yet another excellent symposium, demonstrating that the AMSS Annual Conference is a highly anticipated date on the calendar of many scholars.

Saeed A. Khan
PhD Candidate
Wayne State University, MI