



Women's Foreign Policy Group
The Faces of Contemporary Islam: Practice, Theory, and Foreign Policy
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Panel 1: The Compatibility of Islam and Democracy

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Gail Kitch: I think many of us would agree that the Americans really do have this sort of challenge when we think of Islam and democracy, and how those terms reconcile, and what those words really mean. I think we've got some folks here who can really help us think through what the implications of those are. Our first speaker, Asma Afsaruddin, who's with the University of Notre Dame, is a 2005 Carnegie Scholar. She's been someone who's been part of this for awhile now. Her work is focused on *Striving in the Path of God: Discursive Traditions on Jihad and the Cult of Martyrdom*. She'll be speaking with us first.

Asma Afsaruddin: Thank you very much, and thanks to the entire crew at Women's Foreign Policy Group, to Patricia Ellis and Pat Rosenfield also, at the Carnegie program, to put this panel together, and this whole conference together. I think it's a wonderful idea to bring these various voices and perspectives in one panel.

In January 2008, when the President of Turkey, Abdullah Gul, visited the White House, President George Bush offered these exuberant words of welcome. "Turkey," he said, "sets a fantastic example for nations around the world to see that it's possible to have a democracy co-exist with a great religion like Islam." It was appropriate, after all, for Bush to mention religion in the same breath as democracy when hosting a head of state who had just set an important political precedent in the Islamic world. Abdullah Gul's election provided a glistening example of the compatibility between Islam and democracy.

A number of people have begun terming this democratic phenomenon occurring in Muslim majority societies as Muslim or Islamic democracy, along the lines of Christian

democracy in Europe. While some rather vocal types have labeled Islamic democracy as an oxymoron, others have pointed out that the compatibility of Christianity with democracy was similarly questioned not too long ago, and not deemed to be convincing until perhaps about the middle of the 20th century. There are other similarities. The Islamic religious and political tradition, like the Christian one, can draw on certain internal resources to lay a theoretical ground for the promotion of what constitutes democratic ideals today. Three concepts, which I'm going to call the three C's, are regarded by Muslim thinkers in general as the building blocks of a democratic paradigm within the Islamic milieu. These three C's are consultation, consent, and consensus.

Very quickly, let me indicate why they are regarded as the building blocks of Muslim democratic polities. First, consultation: this corresponds to the Arabic word *shura*. *Shura* is a Quranic concept and thus sanctified by revelation and rooted in the practice of the prophet Muhammad. Two Quranic verses, chapter 3 verses 158-159, and chapter 42 verse 38, advocated consultative decision-making and are frequently quoted in this context. *Shura*, and the principle of accountability it embodies, has in fact been the clarion call of many Muslims railing against despotic government throughout the pre-modern and modern periods. Liberal and modernist Muslims in particular insist that a representative and accountable government which upholds justice and equitable treatment for all its citizens, is the only kind permissible within Islam, regardless of what its actual structure and mold may be.

Secondly, the Arabic word *Bay'ah* corresponds to consent, and also contract, introducing yet another C, and also translated as allegiance. It is well-known that newly converted Muslims, male and female, personally came to the prophet and gave him their *Bay'ah*, their allegiance or their consent, which signified their inclusion in the Islamic community. In the post-prophetic period, this remained a standard practice, which served to recognize the importance of the people's explicit or tacit consent to being governed by specific individuals. The practice of *Bay'ah* or allegiance continued at least nominally even when dynastic rule became the norm.

Thirdly, *ijma* is the Arabic word for consensus. Consensus is, ideally speaking, the logical result of the consultative process and collective decision-making. In addition to consultation and consent, liberal and modernist Muslims underscore the concept of consensus to point to what they believe is the inherently democratic impulse in Islam. *Ijma* is not a Quranic term, but its normativeness is established through the practices of the earliest Muslims. Modernists refer to the process of the selection of the caliphs, the early leaders from the early period, which depended on popular ratification to establish its legitimacy. The manner of election of these early leaders, they affirm, points to the importance of building a broad base of consensus to legitimize key political decision in particular.

Now, to fast forward to the contemporary period: a number of significant polls and surveys conducted recently have categorically established that a majority of Muslim populations want democratic governments and respect for religious values at the same time. This is to affirm something that Professor Esposito already stressed in his talk. The

most comprehensive survey to date, as we've already heard, has been conducted by the Gallup organization in more than 35 nations with majority Muslim populations over a period of 6 years, ending in 2007. This is such a broad-ranging and comprehensive survey that it is safe to derive certain conclusions based on the results of it. And basically, the results of the survey affirm what many of us had been saying all along: that Muslims in a wide cross-section of the Islamic world desire democratic reform in their countries.

The survey also establishes that most Muslims want to be assured that democracy as it is usually defined in no way threatens their religious values and freedoms, again, to reiterate what Professor Esposito said about the views of most Muslims; that the *sharia* and practice of democracy are not incompatible. This is a legitimate concern on the part of Muslims and needs to be addressed head on, especially to pull the rug out from under various anti-democratic elements.

There are two persistent beliefs, perhaps even myths, which sometimes render the selling of liberal democracy that much harder. One belief is that democracy is inevitably predicated on secularism, and secularism, many aver, means evacuating religion from the public sphere and banishing it to the private one. The second belief, or myth if you like, is that in Islam, religion and politics are forever joined at the hip, and never can the two be separated for fear of violating a presumed divine commandment. Both beliefs or assumptions deserve revisiting and reexamination.

The first assumption proceeds out of a kind of democratic fundamentalism, if I may call it that, or democratic absolutism, which holds that there is one recipe for establishing democracy and any system that falls short of total conformity with its prescriptions, including secularism, cannot qualify as a fully functioning democracy. This dogmatic view fails to take into account the different inflections of democracy in different parts of the world, with varying degrees of secularism. It also ignores the resurgence of religious values in democratic America, for example, and the process of negotiation that this has entailed between religious and secular values. For a democracy to live up to its name, it has to be accommodating of religious values and sentiment if this is reflective of the popular will. As Abdolkarim Soroush has perceptively remarked, and I quote, "In a religious society, any purely secular government would be undemocratic."

The second assumption is based on an ahistorical reading of the growth of Islamic political thought and completely overlooks the lack of evidence in the early sources for a notion of sacred or sacralized politics in the formative years of the Islamic polity. Rather, political governance was deemed necessary for the utilitarian purpose of containing chaos in the temporal realm and maintaining order in society, rather than as the realization of some religious imperative. No particular system or mode of government was understood to be divinely mandated in order to attain these utilitarian objectives. This, however, did not mean that religious and moral values and religiosity had no place in the public sphere. To the contrary, politics as part of the public sphere is also subject to broad and, one may argue, universal moral guidelines, and any system of government that best reflects the Quranic prescription of consultative and collective decision-making could be deemed acceptable.

It is this kind of political culture that has remained a desideratum in most Muslim majority societies. Religion and morality are meant to be the allies and reinforcers of consultative, accountable forms of government. This pairing has its parallel in Western political theory as well, starting in the period of classical Athenian democracy. How each, religion and politics, should be calibrated to fulfill the requirements of the other and to maintain a positive symbiotic relationship, is open to collective human deliberation and negotiation in variegated times and places. This is an important manifestation, after all, of what we now deem to be the democratic process.

Thank you.

Gail Kitch: We'll hear from all three speakers, just so we know what we're going to be doing, and then I'm going to invite them to respond to each other's remarks, and then I'll open it up for questions. And now our second speaker is Elizabeth Thompson. She's at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. She was a 2005 Carnegie Scholar, and her work is *Seeking Justice in the Modern Middle East*.

Elizabeth Thompson: Good morning, and thank you for having me here. I didn't travel far; I'm lucky to be here in Washington, DC, but I'm with some children who inevitably give me colds at the most inopportune times, so I hope you'll be able to understand me and I'll drink lots of water.

I am a historian of the late colonial period. What interests me about this is the last decades of colonialism, particularly in the Middle East and the Arab world, and I'm particularly interested in the 20th century, when democratic movements mobilized in a situation of foreign occupation, and foreign occupiers in particular, who were placed there after World War I with the intent of teaching Arabs to govern themselves and teaching them democratic values. I'll come back to that, and for those of you who don't see the immediate relevance of those themes to our current situation today, I'll draw them out.

What I'd like to do is move to the story of Arab democracy merely 100 years ago. We talk about creating Arab democracy, and there it was. It's a story much neglected in today's policy debates. It's a story about the convening of a constitutional assembly, debates over more than 100 articles of that constitution, the rise of an opposition party against the king's elitist party that succeeded in wrenching from the executive greater powers for the legislature, and enshrining those in the constitution. The constitution was probably more democratic than any constitution to that point – this is the year 1920 – and since.

It is an extraordinary story, that I think contributes to efforts of scholars like Asma Afsaruddin to boil down the basic democratic principles within Islam. But it is one that is instructive because it is in the almost living memory of many Arabs today. These would have been great-grandfathers of people living in Syria today, certainly, and it was a living

memory, because it was in fact there, in the city of Damascus in 1920, that this constitutional congress took place.

A few details: one star of the show, the king involved, was King Feisal. If you saw the movie Lawrence of Arabia, that was Alec Guinness. I show that movie to my students at the University of Virginia still, it's a fine movie, but their test is always, "what's wrong with the last scene?" The last scene presupposes that there were no people in Damascus who knew how to run the city and that it was overrun by tribal Bedouin and there's the funny scene of Omar Sharif standing on desk the and yelling, and they're fighting over a generator. "Does anybody know how to get the electrical generator running?"

In fact, what happened in Damascus after that point was this extraordinary story of Arabs coming together. They were Arabs from Lebanon, from Palestine, from what would become Transjordan, there were some from Egypt, and there were some from Iraq as well as Syria, who came together there. And Feisal called together the constitutional congress in the spirit of the moment.

This was the post-war moment when, like Obama today, Woodrow Wilson was the rock star of his age. When he arrived in Paris in January 1919, his face was plastered over newspapers all over the world, and especially in the Arab world. They had been publishing his speeches in their newspapers about this being a war for democracy and the right of even small nations to govern themselves as long as they were free. Those Arab societies that had recently come out from under military rule by the Ottomans at the end of the war got the news a little bit later, but nonetheless, in Syria they rallied to the cause.

The second star of the show was the president elected of the constitutional congress. His name was Rashid Rida. He was the most famous Islamic reformist of the day. Let me repeat: the man who oversaw the drawing up of the most democratic constitution in the Arab world was himself an Islamic reformer. He wore a turban, he published the most read journal on reforming and modernizing Islam for the modern age, and he was well-versed in the scriptures and in the sources on the functioning of Arab government and Islamic government under the prophet and his successors in the 7th century. And he proclaimed what you and I would call essentially a pretty average-looking but fairly liberal constitutional monarchy set up in 1920 Damascus as an Islamic form of government. And Muslims would be proud of it, and certainly there were sheikhs and scholars in that congress and outside who approved of it.

Another interesting detail about that congress was that the issue of women's suffrage came up. Women had been mobilized during WWI building schools, providing soup kitchens, and trying to rebuild a society devastated by the war. Feisal had organized them to help promote his message of social progress and rebuilding from the war, but they defied Feisal, just as the opposition party did, and there's a famous story of them riding a train from Beirut to Damascus in June of 1920 to present their petition asking for the right to vote in that constitution.

There was a wonderful debate that ensued in June 1920 about women's right to vote. Men stood up from Palestine and Lebanon and Iraq and said women should have the right to vote; they were consulted by the prophet and they are citizens of our country. Others stood up and said no no no, heaven forbid, if we let women vote and make decisions like that on their own, they won't obey their husbands anymore. Outside of the congress a mob formed and rallied against the question of women's suffrage.

And here I come to the point of interest today, for thinking about how one goes about promoting democracy, and particularly women's rights, in the Middle East. I look at this moment as one from which we can draw lessons, and which we must necessarily pay attention to if we seek to intervene in these issues, because what happens here? Rashid Rida came to the front of the constitutional congress as president, and gave the last word on the debate. He said, my friends, we have people outside, the popular groups rallied by the opposition party, which I remind you, was more democratic than Feisal's elitist party; they were much more populist and did not want Feisal to have absolute power as a monarch, but they were also very religious. They did it on religious grounds, and they were mobilizing the discourse of Islam.

They were playing along with this congress, but this was a boundary and a contentious point. All of us who know our own history of constitutional law, and the debates over who would be included as a citizen and who not, would sympathize here. But he said, we cannot afford to vote on this today. Why? Because the French have amassed their troops across the border in Lebanon and they are ready to occupy Damascus. We must show the world that we are a functioning democratic government, so that the French will not invade us.

This is the world he lived in, the world of Woodrow Wilson. He appealed to world opinion, as Wilson did, to defend and uphold against all hope that this Arab kingdom in Syria would remain independent. And so the vote for women's suffrage was set aside, and the constitution was adopted with universal male suffrage only.

The lesson of interest here today, I think, is this: that it was precisely at that moment and in the memory of women and men who had supported the cause, that the threat of foreign occupation that had undermined their cause. Men were already worried about their authority at home: if women went off to vote, would they obey their husbands? And now, they had to worry that they would not even be able to rule themselves; that they would not be given the dignity proclaimed by Wilson of self-determination.

Set in motion in July 1920 – as the French troops came in and occupied Damascus and Feisal fleeing – was a profound change in the political culture of the Arab world. The congress in 1920 had built on early constitutional movements, most notably one in Egypt in 1882, and one led by the Ottoman Turks in 1908. But after this moment, Rashid Rida himself turned against the West, defined Islamic government as something opposed to Western liberalism, as something different in quality, and led an inspired but new political movement in Egypt – he had to flee Syria where he was publishing his magazine

– and inspired Hassan Abdullah and the Muslim Brotherhood to advocate a model of just Islamic government that would be based on a basis different from the West.

And here I have to clarify something, before you jump to any conclusions. While the basic principles would be different, and the political strategy here is clear to the historian, it means that the West has nothing to teach us. We don't have to be taught democracy; we have our own principles. And indeed if you look at Rida's vision, it is constitutional. He too emphasized popular sovereignty as Islamic, and the need for the ruler to consult, and the rule of law. He did not hold the rigid view of Islamic law that is now prevalent in the Middle East. This is a consequence of this break and this moment. He actually held a fairly flexible view if you read his readings, and I have painfully done so. He was an ornate, wonderful writer, but boy do I wish he wrote simple newspaper Arabic.

But in the end, then, came the divide between Islam and the West, and the idea that somehow Islam and democracy are two separate things. This is the legacy of the occupation of Syria in 1920. It is a memory held by the Arabs today, told to them by their grandparents, of democracy and rights stolen; a story of justice interrupted, which is the title of an article that I'm writing on this very topic. It is relevant today because the story also tells us two things: that Arabs do have a culture that is open to democracy; there's not a problem with their culture, there is a problem with the political history that has mobilized anti-democratic elements – every society has anti-democratic elements, even our own, as we well know – and that it was in fact, in their memory, foreign occupation that had mobilized and strengthened the most anti-democratic elements in their societies.

I don't care if it's the United States, if it's the French, the British; any foreign power who goes into a country must rule through intermediaries. They do not go to the local communist party and women's movement as their intermediaries, they go to landowners, tribal chiefs, and religious authorities: people who can control the population, who look stable. That is what the French did. That is what we have done in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is not an evil thing to do; it is a necessary thing to do when you are a foreign occupier, but it should give us pause when we start conceptualizing a program and a policy that envisions building democratic politics under the conditions of occupation.

Just in a practical sense, it doesn't work, if the foreign occupier must rule through anti-democratic elements. But in a cultural and moral, and in a practical sense as well, particularly in the Arab world, it mobilizes those memories of 1920 and other occupations. It was laughable to Arabs to hear Americans: I remember the speech of George Bush proclaiming the war on terrorism, and there was Tony Blair sitting right in front and center, and Arabs who had been ruled by the British in the 1920s and '30s and '40s knew the British did not bring democracy, and that they could not, and that we would not.

But it is also instructive, and I'll end with this note, that Arabs did then and do remember Woodrow Wilson. And they do remember that there was another way of promoting and giving countries a space internationally, a sovereignty and security from the outside while respecting their own right to self-determination and to their own democracy. Thank you

very much.

Gail Kitch: This is all very interesting. And our third speaker, Elora Shehabuddin, is with Rice University. She's a 2006 Carnegie Scholar writing on *Women at the Muslim Center: Islamist Ideals and Democratic Exigencies*.

Elora Shehabuddin: Thank you again, to repeat what Asma said, for organizing this wonderful event. I'd like to begin with an excerpt from a 2004 article in Newsweek. "For more than 30 years, much of the Muslim world has been sliding backward, away from modernity. Some voices of reason, however, have to stand up and say, 'Enough! There is a modern world and Muslims should be part of it.' Well, at long last that chorus is growing among Muslims, and if you listen to the most strident voices, damned if they don't sound like an all-woman band. They're way out there on the edge of the faith; their message and their lifestyles are so far from the torpid Muslim mainstream, they're almost in the desert."

The moderate Muslim is almost a Western invention, and since 9/11, she has been eagerly sought out as an ally in various causes and adventures. As this quotation shows, the moderate or "good" Muslims celebrated in the West today also happen to be female. I take that back. They are female precisely because certain Western entities and cultural outlets insist that Muslim women are severely and uniquely oppressed, even in the torpid Muslim mainstream, and need to be saved. Perhaps aware of the scholarship criticizing the long tradition of colonial feminism, journalists, scholars, and bloggers of a certain type are now relieved to have found women who are Muslim, ex-Muslim, or non-Muslim but from the Muslim world, to further their missions to bring democracy and women's rights into those benighted countries.

What is striking about the recent refrains about moderate Muslims and calls for an Islamic reformation is their blatant disregard for history and politics. They assume that Islam must follow a path similar to Western Christianity and that modernity and freedom must be understood the same way by everyone, everywhere. They also ignore the well-documented historical precedence of such calls to save Muslim women. Lila Abu-Lughod has written extensively on this, and I know we'll hear more later.

While there are clear parallels in the use of Muslims women's rights as a justification for the colonial enterprise of the 19th century and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan today, there are of course also significant differences between the two situations. Not only are there differences in the formal structures of the former British and French empires and American empire today, but the very nature of the relationship between the West and the Muslim world has changed and today is mediated through oil, wars, and very crucially, the presence of Israel.

Moreover, Muslims, whether converts or immigrants, are now present in the West in numbers that could not have been foreseen at the height of colonialism. It is from this population that the most vehement and best publicized attacks against the Islamic oppression of women have been launched, with great implications for Muslim women as

well as for scholarly research about them. Here I have in mind bestselling authors and speakers like Irshad Manji and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, but also Nonie Darwish, Brigitte Gabriele, and Wafa Sultan.

In a 2007 report titled “Building Moderate Muslim Networks,” the RAND Corporation argues that it is incumbent upon the United States to help develop and support networks of moderate Muslims in order to fight the “ideologically-driven global jihadist movement,” just as the US fought the spread of communism during the Cold War by supporting democratic institutions and networks in the Soviet bloc. One of the first steps in this process, the report points out, is to separate “true moderates” from those who might appear to be moderate. While the report formally identifies support for democracy, pluralism, and gender equality as the mark of true moderate Muslims, one finds time and again that support for neoliberal and neoconservative agendas are taken to be far more reliable indicators of ones moderation.

Thus, longstanding local efforts to combat injustice are studiously ignored or hastily dismissed when these groups or individuals don’t quite fit the mold of the moderate. For instance, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, RAWA, merits no merit at all is Irshad Manji’s lengthy discussion of the Taliban in her bestselling book. RAWA, as it turns out, and as you may know, had been openly critical of the US plans to bomb Afghanistan, predicting correctly that Afghani women’s suffering would only increase.

To fully appreciate why these particular women authors are so celebrated, it’s also worth turning our attention briefly to another female ex-Muslim critic, one who often appears on the same lists as Manji and Hirsi Ali, but significantly, not always. The Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen, quickly dubbed “the female Rushdie” by NPR, rose to international fame a full decade before the others in 1993, long before 9/11 and the current moment of fascination with Islam. I believe she has distinguished herself as the wrong kind of Muslim dissident because she has been critical of all religion, as well as of the recent US-led wars, and because she has not identified Christianity or Judaism as better for women and the West or Israel as havens of gender equality.

By contrast, though they’re working from the same manual, the popular authors I mentioned earlier – Manji, Hirsi Ali, etc., whose memoirs have all appeared in the past five years – all attack the treatment of women in Islamic countries, they celebrate gender equality in Israel and the West, and generally ignore all recent serious scholarship on these subjects.

What is most pernicious, of course, is that it is their books, rather than the painstaking labors of scholars, that is eagerly consumed by the media and the public, reinforcing misconceptions and lending support to destructive policies. These personal stories are seen as representative of all Muslims and Arabs. These individuals are taken to be exemplary victims of an Islam that is opposed to women and feminism. They are then feted as authorities on Islam, on Muslim women, and feminism, at all times and in all places. This failure on the part of these women, as well as their audience, to understand

the internal complexity of these categories has profound political consequences. A lack of attention to context and history leaves us with unhelpful caricatures that simply perpetuate Islamophobia and complacency about intolerance within the West.

My point is not that there is no such thing as moderation in Islam or among Muslims, and certainly not in the sense proposed by those who would have us believe that all Muslims harbor a latent hostility to the West and democratic liberal modernity. Rather, I'm emphasizing the need to contextualize Islam and, of course, Muslim individuals, men and women, groups, parties, states, and ideologies. However, in moving beyond dichotomies like radical and moderate, we should be prepared to find out that while Islam and democracy may be quite compatible, these democrats hold views on women, Israel, and US foreign policy that confound us.

In reality, of course, and now we have the survey data to prove this, large numbers of Muslim men and women throughout the world are struggling for change. Their diagnosis of the problem, however, is different. For them, it is not Islam that is the problem, and this changing or doing away with Islam is not the solution. Muslim women are certainly fighting male-biased interpretations of the Quran, but they are also protesting unjust secular laws. They're also protesting the unequal fruits of economic globalization and neoliberal policies, oppressive states that may well be allied with the US, and in some instances, American presence itself.

No doubt they also want democracy, but real democracy, not one where Western aid is suspended when the results are displeasing, as in the case of Hamas a few years ago. Also high on the list is likely to be electricity, running water, and security; scarce commodities in places like Iraq and Gaza. Women are engaging in these struggles both through secular organizations and the Islamist movements I've been studying as part of my Carnegie research. These women, as must be clear, do not neatly fit the image of moderate Muslim women created by think tanks, the media, and sections of the public, fabricated, indeed, in direct opposition to the figure of the terrorist or fundamentalist.

Since the latter is generally seen to be a bearded man who is religious and lives in the past and hates America, Israel, and their culture and policies, the moderate Muslim must be a woman who is not visibly religious but rather modern and Western – i.e. she doesn't veil – thinks critically about Islamic texts and traditions, or better still, has renounced Islam and loves America, Israel, and their culture and policies.

These bestselling memoirs do make for good reading. What's forgotten is that they are fascinating precisely because they are unusual, dramatic experiences. After all, who really wants to read, let alone pay money for, a book about an ordinary, generally happy Muslim childhood? Yet their stories are taken to be emblematic of the authentic female Muslim experience, both in terms of the basis for their suffering, Islam, and the source of their hope and renewal, the West and in some cases Israel. Those who support them can simply point to them in response to charges that the East has not been allowed to represent itself, that the subaltern has not been permitted to speak.

Yet in the end, the only acceptable feminist voice becomes one that is anti-Islamic, pro-war on terror, pro-West, and pro-Israel. That emerges as the true moderate Muslim voice that the US media and government seek out so urgently. This is dangerous not because a few women are achieving fame and fortune, but because it diverts attention from the wide variety of very real problems facing women in the Muslim world, as elsewhere, and vital resources from projects that could help them, and because it suppresses critics of government policy towards the Arab and Muslim worlds by dismissing them as anti-Semitic and Islamo-fascist.

Surely, in this global climate, it is not immoderate to point out that what is needed is not an Islamic reformation led by those who support the wealthy and well-armed. What this era demands is attention to history and politics, and feminism that is anti-racist and critical of unjust policies everywhere, in the West as well as in the Muslim world. Thank you.

Gail Kitch: That was an absolutely fascinating exchange, and nicely complementary. I can't help but ask, since we had the thing about missed opportunities for early women's suffrage in history and then putting that up right against what we're talking about now, which is a different kind of feminism, and thinking about, what did feminism look like at that constitutional moment [in June, 1920] that you were talking about, and what are the seeds of where we are today in that missed opportunity?

Elizabeth Thompson: Excellent question, and I'd love to talk with Elora on this because the women who did that were adamant in refusing to accept what Europeans demanded as making a choice between being modern, secular, unveiled, and democratic or being Muslim. One of the more famous cases – not a Syrian (I know the Syrian cases, no one reads these books right?) – is a woman named Halide Edib who was Turkish and lived through the 1908 constitutional revolution but then broke with Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey. In 1924 she started up an opposition party. He didn't like that precisely because she insisted that Islam was democratic, and that women would work from within and through their religion to participate. She insisted on throwing out Islamic law and sought to change to civil law.

Very interesting woman, she traveled to India and spoke to Indian women in the '30s but finally came back in the 1950s and became a member of Parliament, but in Kemalist Turkey, which means a Turkey run now through a secularism guaranteed by the military. By the 1950s change was hardcore and Ataturk himself, I think, in the 1920s, back in that world, could not imagine that Turkey truly could be modern without dumping all the Islam. The voices of people like these women were just really not heard.

Elora, I'm going to turn it over to you and maybe you have a sense of where these women are coming from and whether that's a consequence of something different.

Elora Shehabuddin: Well, I think as John pointed out and Asma brought up, what's very clear is that there's a need for another kind of democracy, and that's what a lot of these women in their countries are pushing for. Of course they want rights; of course they

want equality. But it looks very different to them and to be told they're not a true feminist because they're not looking like us and dressing like us and thinking like us, and it's offensive and it sort of turns them against any efforts by western feminists to help them. There haven't been as many efforts together to listen to their perspective, and that's what I'm trying to get at with this paper.

There are these very prominent women in this country now, and in Europe, promoting a certain kind of salvation: there's only one way to be free, and that's by renouncing Islam completely, but there's no way to be Muslim and feminist and care about gender equality, and that's what has become subjective, because these women have had unhappy lives and they're entitled to tell their story, but if you try to formulate policy based on these experiences you're not going to get very far.

Gail Kitch: And I guess that's what Asma's commentary was also about that there are these democratic traditions inherent within Islam itself, are the kind of notions we think of as being purely Western notions.

Asma Afsaruddin: Another point that I wanted to make sure was stressed, in my brief presentation, is that democracy can take different forms, and ultimately democratic processes are the result of negotiations among the principal actors. I think Elizabeth's paper was very good in pointing out that these agents, practically speaking, are constantly reacting to outside stimuli and constantly reacting to interventions. So even with the best of intentions and a strong desire to establish democratic policies, often times the attempts are aborted because of the fact that they have to react to the reality of the pressure of foreign countries and forces that are considerably more powerful. So I think we have to consider the historical contextualization that has contributed to this problem. They're not occurring in vacuums, and oftentimes they're occurring in a reactive mode.

Question: I first of all wanted to congratulate all the panelists. It's very heartwarming for someone like myself who's quite a few years older than they are to see this new generation coming up. These were excellent presentations, and I have been also working on this thing for like 22 years now. First of all, on the last point that Asma made, I think it's very important that we talk about this idea of modernization and democracy of Islam, and the main point of that was precisely to show what the other factors are that have hindered this process, whether it was war, civil war, or some of the legacy of colonialism. The other point that Elizabeth made that is very important is that most of the Muslim world spent 200 years under colonial rule. I don't see any evidence that the colonial powers ever tried to create institutions that could really lead to a successful democratic transition. So I think that you're absolutely right that we have to contextualize and even regarding each country.

The second point that I wanted to say is regarding the whole woman issue. I note everything you say about people like Hirsi Ali, and frankly, I have been on panels with her, and she's incredibly ignorant about very basic issues that she's talking about. But the point I think is most important to make is that trying to make women instruments, so-called, of change, is backfiring. Because for any discourse to be successful, it has to have

credibility, it needs to have an audience. By making the problem about Islam one is actually undermining this. So I thank you for all your presentations just thought you might have a few ideas on the issue of the credibility of them.

Question: You were speaking at one point about what is happening in Turkey and with Ataturk and how that has become a secular society to a certain degree. There's a lot of discussion in Turkey about something that's called "street pressure" or "neighborhood pressure," which is this notion that in a society that is 90-odd percent Muslim, even in a secular society, when it's that degree of a religious pressure or pressure to behave in a certain way, then it's been creating an unsafe situation for people that do not agree or do not want to observe these practices. My question is, what could we do to prevent that, and should we prevent that, or should it be understood that this is the society that you're in, these are the rules you need to follow, just in the same way certain practices in Israel are followed?

Question: First of all, I want to say that I think it's fabulous that the Women's Foreign Policy Group has gathered these incredible voices. I'm looking forward to the rest of them, but already this first panel has been great. And just to pick up on what Professor Esposito said and some points that Elora made: voices of people with real expertise have been marginalized both from the active policy-making and also from the mainstream political discourse in this country for too long on Middle East issues, and we need to understand that, and I'm just hoping there are people in this audience here or people who have access who really understand that we are missing some fabulous expertise here that needs to be included in the mainstream discourse, rather than systematically excluded from it, and this has happened all the time I've been in Washington, DC, since 1982. That's the first point.

Secondly, I had a question for Elora: whether you are actually looking at the women in Hamas and Hezbollah as part of your study. I went in 2006 to interview some Hamas people in the West Bank: the newly elected Hamas parliamentarians, who included women parliamentarians. I went around with one Hamas MP, and I went around Gaza with the women of Hamas. It's a fascinating story that has not been told at all. I managed to publish my news and observations and report. Are you actually looking at these issues? Because they take on the way that people in this country think of all Islamic movements.

John Esposito: These were fantastic presentations, all three of them. Just a quick comment: when you asked about the Turkey situation, the reality in Turkey is that for decades it has been the secular elite that has dominated and imposed, you know, not wearing a headscarf. If you look at contemporary politics right now, they still reflect it, so part of what I find very ironic is that there's a tendency, for example in our media, to say, Oh gee, there's religious pressure for women to cover. Well, first of all, there's religious pressure in every religion. I grew up Roman Catholic, I was in a monastery for many years; I can tell you about religious pressure. People look and say, women are being pressured to cover. But the reality of it is women had been pressured not to cover, and they're still being pressured not to cover. The government – which represents a majority – did not itself address this issue vis-à-vis its society.

And I would just ask all of you also to look at Paul Berman's editorial in the New York Times last year on a Sunday, in which he talked about the failure of Western liberals to help liberal Muslim women. Paul wrote a great introduction and then he cited his only example of a liberal Muslim woman, which was Hirsi Ali.

Question: One important thing I want to reiterate is the contextualizing the Middle East and the Muslim world; I know you've all considered that, but a lot of times we gloss over that; we don't realize that the history and culture and so on has so much more to do with the representation of especially women's issues. The other thing I just wanted to share is that I was in Pakistan recently doing some work with some educators, and we found, to our surprise to some extent, that the women's madrasas were so much more extreme than the men's, because they'd been incubated and isolated and not allowed to go with the other kids. So they were that much more, in that sense, extremist. But the interesting thing was the way that they were reaching out and asking for more training and more stuff that we were doing in peace education, and these were the ones that were in the forefront, saying we need more of that.

But the caveat and corollary to that was that we don't want it from so-and-so and such-and-such, we want it from the person that speaks like us and that speaks through an Islamic lens. So we were talking about peace education through this kind of Islamic framework, and that's what they've been adding more and more. So now in the development community we're talking about how do you culturally contextualize programming to meet the needs of some of the people themselves. Those are the challenges we're facing now. We're talking about helping out, we're really talking about where is an input from within that we can respond to or at least nurture, rather than bringing in our own programming priorities. So this is a challenge that we have in terms of representation and voice, but it's also the engagement process itself; who are we engaging in the field and how are we coming up with priorities from within the community.

Gail Kitch: I think we have a couple of ideas out here on the floor and would like to hear responses from our panel, and then we'll wrap it up.

Elora Shehabuddin: I think the issue of credibility is incredibly important, but the reason women have been focused on is also part of the colonial legacy, right? The colonial powers made women the mark for civilization, and in response they've been used often in defensive posture. Again, going back to what's already been said, the movements that arose that were incredibly secular and one of the problems in the Muslim world is that they are often seen as agents of imperialism or agents of the West, and where I think they've been more successful is where they've tried to pay attention to religion and not tried to be so separated and keep religion out of the discussion. So even some feminists from many Muslim countries are having to pay attention in a way that they might not have in the past.

I'm focusing on women in Hezbollah and women in the Jemaah Islamiyah in Bangladesh. I haven't done Hamas in Palestine, but I think it's very important that we show why women are drawn to these movements and what they're doing within the movements to change these movements, because the inclusion of women, as we know, into any organization does bring about some kind of changes that are critical, if there are large enough numbers, and that's what I'm interested in.

Paul Berman's editorial I think that was clear. I think those are the main questions I need to talk about.

Elizabeth Thompson: This gives me an entrée into my kamikaze story of arriving in Washington. I had a lunch my first night here with a columnist who writes for major magazines and for the Washington Post and someone at Brookings. And I happened to mention that Paul Berman wrote an unfortunate article about Sayyid Qutb and his interpretation of the Quran. To do this – to slog through volumes and volumes of a translated thing – without knowing Arabic was admirable. But it [his article] was astonishing [to me]. And I was trying to make the point, of course, that people who know the language might have something to say, but instead they looked back at me and said, But he's our friend! Haven't you read his latest book on Islamic groups? And I just felt like crawling back to Charlottesville. There's no credibility for a historian so I thank you for giving me the opportunity to bore you.

On that point, and on the very good point about pressure in Turkey and in Israel, and I know it from Damascus and Cairo; less so in Beirut for reasons you can surmise. To me, that scarf issue is the tip of the iceberg. Such an intricate and important wrapped-up set of political issues going back, of course, the mark of modernity being made by colonists: if you want independence, make your women unveil. This is what they were told in the Arab world.

Ataturk's already understood that; he wanted his women to unveil so that Turkey could be European. And what is the reaction? Ataturk is not only responding to a conversation begun. I give my students often the writings of missionaries, and what they were telling people about Islam, how you have to drop it in order to be a civilized person. It is a response to hostage by the gun by the West. But it is also a response by the secular elite that took the results of the pressure of colonialism in the early 20th century. Halide Edib was angry because Ataturk was replicating the same patriarchal thing that the religious scholars had engaged in and that had been minimized. She wanted women to have free choice as an expression of an individual religious value, and had she organized pressure groups that had told him no, listen to our group, and dress as we tell you to.

That's part of the larger conversation of power. What do you do when you don't have politics, when you're excluded from the political realm? In my experiences in Turkey and Damascus and Cairo I read about pressure coming from popular groups but also the reality of the legacy of power and the way power has been deployed culturally to this point. That said, it's very uncomfortable to be an individual subjected to that pressure. It was also very uncomfortable for me to take the knee-jerk position of the secular elite

when I know that history. And so all power to Elora and others who are writing and trying to help those who want to get by those dichotomies and mobilize, even though, it is true, there are side effects of using religion as your sort of political means. And they're very unfortunate, often; they can lead to appeasement and oppression. I think they are best read historically as side effects of the need to find an alternative political venue.

Asma Afsaruddin: I don't think I had a question directly addressed to me, but on the question of veiling practices that was brought up by a couple people, Leila Ahmed in her book *Women in Islam*¹ actually points to this; how unveiling was actually more important to male feminists, so to speak, more than to the women themselves. She points to a sort of colonial feminism that was created to appease the colonial occupiers and frankly speaking, the decision to unveil comes at very little cost. If we can just banish the veil it proclaims women to be liberated, you don't actually have to give them real rights too. You don't have to worry about creating educational systems that address the needs of women.

... wrote a very influential work in the colonial period on the liberation of women, which is a prime example of this kind of colonial feminism. It did nothing to address the issue of why there weren't enough primary schools for girls at that time. And frankly speaking, it took the pressure off, because it deflected the pressure away from real questions of empowering women through cosmetic changes that would appease a few people but did not really bring about revolutionary change in society.

And just a quick comment to the person who talked about her experience in Pakistan in the madrasas and the need to come up with, I think you phrased it as "peace education," but through an Islamic conceptual lens. I think it's absolutely important that scholars, and Muslim scholars in particular, go back to the sources and pull up the resources that do exist within the tradition to create these possible paradigms for the future. That is absolutely essential to establishing the credibility of such programs so that they don't seem to be imperialist ventures coming in from the outside and serving the goals of that power, but rather that there is an impetus from within the tradition itself and that resounds with Muslims. I think that there's a lot of work to be done in that sphere.

¹ *Women and Gender in Islam*