



MUSLIM
LEADERS
OF TOMORROW
COPENHAGEN-DENMARK 06

CONFERENCE REPORT

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The American Society for Muslim Advancement is deeply indebted to the following individuals, for their efforts in helping compile this report:

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Muslim Leaders of Tomorrow Conference Copenhagen – July, 2006

Introduction:

In the midst of increasing global turmoil, the Muslim Leaders of Tomorrow (MLT) program is developing a pervasive network of young Muslims who embody a pluralistic Islam that is focused on the promotion of peace. By precipitating an electrifying forum and thereby challenging the minds of its riveted participants, the program took a substantial step toward the empowerment of a new generation of international Muslim leaders who are becoming change agents in their communities.

On the one year anniversary of the July 7 London bombings, 120 Muslim leaders, scholars, authors, and artists—from 17 Western countries, all under age 45, and moreover representing a broad spectrum of views on religion, politics and ideology—convened under theme of *Muslim Integration in the West*. Tolerance and respect, two qualities essential to human development, peace, and prosperity, are often lacking at such charged forums in both the Muslim world and the West. The MLT conference, however, was marked by constructive and open dialogue that both encouraged and engaged a diverse set of voices on several important issues. This conference was a seminal step in developing a movement of young Muslims that will create global impact in the promotion of peace.

Friday

The diversity of viewpoints represented at the conference was evident at the very outset during an ice-breaker entitled “**The Paradox of Labels.**” Participants were asked to place themselves inside a giant “H” encapsulating the conservative → liberal spectrum according to what they were most often labeled by others. In addition to seeing who fell on which side of the “H”, it was fascinating to witness people’s discomfort in attempting to compartmentalize their complex points of view into labels. While the exercise expectedly problematized labels, it was also key in breaking down ideological barriers between participants.

In the **Welcome Address** that followed, conference organizer and Director of ASMA Society, Daisy Khan reflected on her own extremely diverse background—Daisy spent her childhood playing with Hindus, Sikhs & Christians in her native Kashmir only to be later transplanted into a strictly Jewish neighborhood upon moving to America in her teens. Daisy poignantly described her journey toward discovering the power of resolving conflicts by combining diverse points of view. “The answer lies not with one person,” she related. “Everyone contributes a piece of the solution.”

John Bennett, co-founder of the co-sponsoring Cordoba Initiative and four time mayor of Aspen, Colorado, followed with this reflection: “There is conflict in the world today, but it is not a Clash of Civilizations- Muslims and Jews, or Muslims and Christians... it is

between the narrow minded and the pluralistic... The ultimate question is ‘how to remain true to our own beliefs, while still respecting others?’”

Feisal Abdul Rauf, Imam of the Masjid Al-Farah in downtown Manhattan, and Chairman of the Cordoba Initiative, called for tolerance not only for the sake of global harmony, but as an essential tenet of Islam: "Only Allah knows who his standard bearers are...let God be the judge of others, not men." He followed this statement with gentle advice, reminiscent of a spiritual *sohbet*: “Leadership is about being yourself- perhaps you are who you are because only you are capable of making the contribution Allah wanted you to make. Focus on doing what *you* do... and keep trying to do it better.”

Saturday

On Saturday morning, delegates were welcomed to Copenhagen by **Susanne Clausen** of the **Danish Integration Ministry**. She addressed the recent controversy arising from the Jyllands Posten cartoons stating that while the Danish government did not necessarily support the offending cartoons, censorship of the Danish press is outside the range of its legal authority. She noted that while reactions in some parts of the world may have been violent, those who expected the same outrage among Denmark’s Muslim population found only civilized and respectful debate.

Following Ms. Clausen’s remarks, acclaimed author Reza Aslan gave us an in depth presentation on the height of Islamic civilization during **A New Cordoba**. According to Mr. Aslan, the scientific and cultural production of Muslim Cordoba, Spain, is perceived as the peak of Islamic Civilization in the minds of Muslims and non-Muslims alike. His point of departure for the ensuing discussion was: How do we stop looking back at this glorious past, and pave a way for a new future?

Panelists Imam Abdul Rauf and Alistair MacDonald, the session’s other two speakers, were unanimous in the view that Islam expanded through the absorption of positive aspects of local cultures, and not through their suppression and replacement in favor of its own ideology. The decline of Muslim civilization was brought on by military invasions, as well as the rise of European power and ideology. Along with these outside factors, internally, according to Imam Abdul Rauf, Islamic institutions began to question their previous tradition of knowledge transfer, and moved to a policy of unprecedented thought control. This, he continued, was a departure from what was held to be a religious mandate: The mandate to seek knowledge.

Mr. MacDonald added perspective by explaining that a return to richness of knowledge and experience requires *deep pluralism*- pluralism that is not merely tolerance of other faiths, but of each individual’s views. He reminded us that the advancements made by great minds of Cordoba are not simply stripes on the flag of Islam. In fact, they belong to all humanity. Those of us alive today can lay no claim to it, other than our sacred responsibility to build on it.

Following a brief break, the conference delegates organized into smaller groups and brainstormed in a session called **Discuss the Undiscussable**. The questions posed to the group were simple: What about the Muslim community frustrates you? What about it makes you proud and hopeful? What are particular obstacles specific to your country which are inhibiting the successful development of the Muslim community? What are the enablers in your country?

Animated conversations consisting of frustrations, critiques, wishes, and crushed hopes abounded, as lists got longer and longer. Amazingly, despite the diverse minds at work on the problem, the responses were remarkably similar, hinting at variations of larger problems at work. The top five frustrations regarding the state of the Muslim Ummah were: 1) a prevailing attitude of intolerance; 2) the lack of competent and clearly defined leadership; 3) antiquated attitudes towards gender roles; 4) mistrust of Muslim governments and gross injustices and violations of civil liberties; 5) being judged, by mass media and individuals, Muslims and non-Muslims alike. These common themes suggest that something must—and likely will—be done to change these trends in the Muslim community in the coming years.

The top points of optimism and hopefulness include a 1) growing number of increasingly educated young Muslim professionals who are active in community work; 2) the growing influence of Western Muslims in defining world Muslim opinion; and 3) the increased focus from all sides on Muslim-West relations.

After lunch, followed by a **talent bazaar**—a forum for delegates to share with other attendees their scholarly works, art, and other information on their organizational affiliations—was a short group exercise on **Knowledge Transfer**. Having heard historical accounts of the flourishing of Islam in **A New Cordoba**, and then reflecting on the frustration that has resulted from the shift in the emphasis on knowledge-seeking during **Discuss the Undiscussable**, one question was looming in all our minds: Quite simply, what preconditions are necessary to share and transfer knowledge?

Among the top answers were “preserving the integrity of knowledge itself;” “respect between transferor and transferee;” “interaction with original sources, without intermediaries;” “ability to think critically and criticize freely.” Inherent in these answers is an underlying call for greater egalitarianism in the freedom to interpret Islam. However, many others maintained that “respect must also be had for the system of knowledge transfer already in place, one that, despite the turbulence of history, has managed to continually relay a system of belief and values for the better part of 1400 years”.

The problem is that while well-intentioned Muslims scrupulously discuss whose province it is to define Islam, while being afraid of stepping on others’ toes, extremists with little regard for this caution define the religion for the majority. Combined with news media that are under pressure for higher ratings and hence in search of the most sensationalist, the extremist point of view gains greater prominence, relevance, and currency, particularly among Muslim youth. According to Aftab Malik’s energetic presentation on

Extremism on the Internet, while most Muslims are tired of having to constantly prove to others that they are “good, moderate Muslims,” it is sobering to see that much extremism is promulgated from websites run by European extremist Muslims, or in other words, people living “in our own backyards.”

According to Mr. Malik, extremism on the internet represents a “crisis of authority”. The case is not that Muslims lack figures to speak with nuance on Islam, but that everyone wants and claims to be speaking *on behalf of* Islam. Needless to say, this creates confusion for both Muslims and non-Muslims, and raises the question, “by what authority can one speak for Islam?” The Prophet himself warned his followers, “Beware of extremism in religion.” Furthermore, zealotry and uncritical belief are roundly condemned elsewhere in the Qur’an and Hadith. In fact, Prophet Muhammad warned of those who “transfer Qur’anic verses meant to refer to those of no faith to refer to Muslims” and “recite the Qur’an and consider it for them but it is against them; and feared “men who interpret verses of the Qur’an out of context.”

Mr. Malik showed us further characteristics of these extremist websites: 1) a belief that their school of thought possesses an exclusive understanding of the “salaf;” 2) regular condemnation or ex-communication of any who disagree with their views; 3) inherent exhibition of a medieval worldview, characterized by a Dar-el-Harb (abode of War) and a Dar-el-Islam (abode of Islam).

Clearly, the fact that others are speaking for Islam while we debate the finer points of religious pluralism should spur a sense of urgency in Muslims liberal and conservative alike. While we continue to debate and discuss, we should not forget to unite in our condemnation of the views of extremists who advocate restricting our right to do so.

From one mode of expression to another: **The Artist’s Role** featured a panel of six accomplished Muslim artists who shared with us their art, as well as their reflections on how the process of making is, for many of them, a religious pursuit as well as a medium for advocating positive social change.

Comedian Azhar Usman explained how “stand-up” comedy can be used to “stand-up” to power. Mr. Usman performed the following day, and, aside from it being well entertained, the audience saw how many of Mr. Usman’s “jokes” were simply truths that were so ludicrous that they were funny. Dutch novelist Yasmine Allas expressed a similar sentiment- that writing allowed her to be “free” without losing her religion. Ms. Allas’ commitment to artistic freedom was further demonstrated by her essay tribute to Theo Van Gogh, the Dutch filmmaker who was murdered for his controversial film on Islam. It was interesting to note how this idea coalesced with the overriding conclusions reached in earlier sessions- the cries for freedom to express; the calls to embrace multiple perspectives. For this reason, as renowned contemporary artist Shazia Sikander noted, artists have always been at the forefront of social change.

While art can be liberating, it can also be devotional. Music producer Tayyeb Shah, after a conversation with Yusuf Islam several years ago, became interested in how music could

be used to express love for Islam. Singer/songwriters Ani Zonneveld and Rajae El Mouhandiz create beautiful melodies that, for some, are akin to religious meditation. . . . Rajae in particular recounted how powerful it was for her when, upon returning to her native Morocco, she sang one of her most personal songs about Islam in concert- and was joined in the chorus by 40,000 people. Truly, one of the most amazing aspects of art as a devotional conduit is that it can be shared so easily with others.

The Imam’s Circle was a chance for MLT delegates to posit questions, comments, and misgivings to an entire panel of seven western Imams, each of whom heads a congregation or *jamaah* in a different country. Most interesting of all, more than any question posed or response given, was getting to know the Imams themselves as people. Whereas many Muslims see their Imams as inapproachable, hearing the diverse paths each of these men—they were all men—walked to arrive at their position helped ascribe a needed quality of humanness to them.

MLT’s heard Tahir Anwar of San Jose, California reminisce about how he “wanted to be a pilot before he ever wanted to be an Imam,” and relate how he gets the attention of younger Muslims by listening to Qur’anic recitations on his iPod. David Munir of Portugal was a young religious student who was asked to fill in for two weeks at his local, fledgling mosque in Lisbon while they sought a replacement. Twenty two years later, they still have not found one. Sergio Yahya Pallavicini of Milan, Italy, caught participants’ attention with an unusual combination of conservative Islamic views with a very contemporary dress sense. His keen fashion sense earned him the affectionate title of *Imam Prada*. Usama Hassan of London, England’s position as an Imam shared time with his duties as a lecturer of Artificial Intelligence at a local university, as well as host of a UK based television program on Islam. An Islamic renaissance man, Mr. Hassan is a man of religion, science, and media.

The diversity on the panel was truly amazing, with one salient exception: the absence of women. Delegate Dr. Kecia Ali was the first to speak up: “There is tremendous power in the giving of khutbahs (by Imams), a power which is denied to women. What are the consequences of this?” The answers as to *why* the role of Imam has been denied to women were varied: one response was that women are the most important leaders in Islam to begin with, since they were mothers; another humorously complained that being an Imam was a thankless job that he would not wish on anyone; yet another, in perhaps the most frank answer to the question, responded that it was simply tradition that we as a community have not been willing to change, but may wish to in the near future. Support for the empowerment of women was apparent in participant Abu Eesa Niamatullah’s exclamation that while fellow participant Dr. Ali may not become an Imam, she could become a mufti, a position that was infinitely more powerful. And if she did accomplish this, he continued, “I will be the first one to sit at your feet!”

Sunday

Pluralism. The idea was first brought up in John Bennett’s welcome remarks, when he asked the “ultimate” question: how do we remain true to our beliefs while still respecting those of others? The reason this is truly the ultimate question has become apparent over the past 24 hours, if it was not already: even within the fold of Islam, there are different perspectives- beliefs within the Belief. Some would have us believe that pluralism is the opposite of unity; this weekend helped to reinforce that it is just the opposite- pluralism is the only hope unity has. Without pluralism, there can be no unity.

Faiz Khan began by discussing pluralism from a Shar’i (Islamic legal) perspective. The original meaning of the word “Shariah,” explained Dr. Khan, is “the path to water.” The idea of Shariah is meant to be a code of conduct, or a path one walks, imagery that conjures up something subtly different from inflexible law. Shariah encompasses “latitude of behavior” in all aspects of life that lead a Muslim down the correct path. He posed a question for us to ponder: “Do you think God’s embrace is singular or pluralistic?”

Where do we, as Muslims, draw the line? Do we embrace only Gnostics? Or do we include Agnostics? How do we view those who have different views than us regarding religiosity, dress, gender roles, public interaction, or political views? If the diversity of the pluralism panel was anything to go by, clearly all were welcome. The panel consisted of Irshad Manji, an out-of-the-closet ijthihad advocate; Yasir Kazi, a Salafi, University of Madinah graduate; Reza Aslan, a prolific author and self-defined progressive Shia Muslim, Anas Osman, a deeply spiritual Sunni investment banker, ; Zahra Jamal, an Ismaili anthropologist; and Youcef Mammeri, a Sunni French Muslim of North African descent. Further the side panel of commentators on the panel was comprised entirely of women all of whom made several profound comments on the discussion.

The session to follow, **Construct Your Identity**, was met with some reluctance, particularly by delegates who felt questions around identity crises or trouble reconciling various national and Muslim identities were not relevant. However, the question posed by session facilitator Yousuf Siddiqui was framed differently. Yousuf asked the audience what they thought Muslims could change about their internal values to enable others to perceive them in a more positive light. The answers that emerged from the group were extremely insightful, and probably another conference moment among many others that gave hope for a more enlightened and better equipped Muslim leadership in the future. Some of these are listed below:

- Build institutions in the West which reflect the needs of Muslims and which can help strengthen Islamic knowledge, particularly amongst youth.
- Start from our state as a human being before building a Muslim identity: Being a Muslim is not the only thing that defines us, in fact, all extremism is rooted in not considering other people as equal human beings
- Fund educators, writers and other leaders who find creative ways of fostering an environment that embraces critical thinking in Islam

- Accept each other as we are without prejudice and take part and participate as a responsible citizen of your country. Debate and talk about important issues in your country rather than just complain about moral or Islamic issues

In the identity panel Anas Osman observed that often questions around identity are really questions about identity politics. Imam Abdul Rauf aptly cited an example to illustrate Anas' point, explaining how many African countries are loose coalitions, if at all, of different tribes that happen to live within the same artificial boundary drawn around them by various colonial powers. In noting this, one immediately begins to see how synthetic national identity can be.

Often itself complicit in both stirring and shaping identity politics, the media came into focus in the following session: **Media and its Portrayal of Islam**. Guest panelists Debra Amos of NPR Radio in the US, Kustaw Bessems of *Trouw* in the Netherlands, and Chris Dickey of Newsweek US, as well as moderator, Egyptian journalist Mona Elhatawy, indicated that ordinary citizens' skepticism toward media, far from unjustified, is essential to developing more accurate worldviews.

Mr. Dickey acknowledged a prevalent trend of stereotyping and using arguably "misleading" photographs to accompany articles. Ms. Amos was surprisingly candid in admitting that her job is sometimes to "simplify" the truth. The recent war in Iraq was the first time that Americans were, on a wide scale, presented in the media with the difference between Sunni and Shia Islam; Ms. Amos says her editors have difficulty with putting out stories where the picture is too complicated as the reality of any situation often is. She contends that a concept such as Sufism would be far too complex for the American public to understand at this stage.

Perhaps such lack of faith in the public toward the media is part of the problem, but these media professionals' honest accounts underscore the difficulty involved in conveying a story, with all its nuances, to the masses. Participant Usama Hassan reflected that it is in all of our interest to *help* the media do their job by learning how to speak wisely and eloquently, in short sound bites.

Interestingly, Mr. Bessems noted the "fear factor" present in the equation. Everyone fears being misquoted by the media; the carelessness the media exhibits in doing so leads to a destructive cycle in which the quality of information is compromised. Given its precarious position, the Muslim community Mr. Bessems has found is particularly sensitive to the fear of being misquoted.

By this point, it was late Sunday afternoon: minds were exhausted after two days of intense debate, and yet the theme of the conference remained to be discussed. **Integration in the West** started with moderator and scholar Hisham Hellyer asking the primordial question: On what basis are we "integrating?" Based on our faith, or our ethnicity? Panelist Ensar Eminovic brought a Bosnian perspective to the question, advocating integration in favor of being a "slave to our ethnicities." Mr. Hellyer later

echoed the need for active participation on new communities within nations, saying that integration is a two-way street: “The US is a society of migrants, if the channels are open, we must contribute.”

However, there was disagreement over whether such “channels” were always open in various countries. British human rights lawyer Tufyal Chaudhry stated that in his experience, Muslims want to integrate, but that frequently, Western perspectives on history, culture, and behavioral norms alienate Muslims. He noted that, historically speaking, Muslims were not only the Arabs on the “other side of the Crusades,” but that they made valuable contributions to European history and identity as well, a fact that is rarely discussed.

Delegates Yousef Azghari and Famile Arslan disagreed vehemently over whose onus it is to prompt integration of Muslims in the Netherlands, their shared home country. Dr. Azghari insisted that Muslims in Holland were famous for criticizing policy, but never being politically active, or even voting. Ms. Arslan countered by citing recent elections where Muslim votes were thrown out in a highly controversial decision, simply because they engaged in block voting.

Monday

The last day of the conference started with a refrain from Imam Abdul Rauf. He framed the result of the conference in the words: “We have to move forward!” He continued, “We have the resource of six Imams here in the West. Invite them to your country or town!” He was making reference to all the individuals that participants had gained access to over the course of the conference. Other participants mentioned that the conference had opened a world of Muslim diversity to them, within a comfortable atmosphere. This they felt had been the most valuable outcome of the conference. The general feeling of the group at the end of the session was this was indeed an important and worthwhile initiative that we need to continue, expand, and replicate in various countries, with the ultimate aim of having a global MLT next year.

The morning session ended with the unveiling of the MLT website. Daisy Khan explained that the purpose of the website was to give participants a tool to continue engaging one another, and to encourage future collaboration. She urged participants to take advantage of the resources available on it.

Several fascinating debates took place during the final and most provocative session, **Freedom of Expression**. Flemming Rose, editor of the now infamous Jyllands Posten, was present to face his first audience with a Muslim group since the publishing of the controversial Prophet Muhammad cartoons. Mr. Rose explained the genesis of the idea: his paper commissioned several cartoonists to publish cartoons on Islam; the assignment was neutral in nature from the beginning. It became clear to Mr. Rose that this was no ordinary assignment when almost three quarters of his cartoonists either insisted on anonymity, or refused to submit entries at all, due to fear of reprisals. To a leading editor

in Denmark, a country that of course values free speech but also has a long tradition of satire, such events only served as further motivation to publish the cartoons.

While the resultant cartoons were admittedly offensive, as a few audience members pointed out, they are telling in that they give an indication of how many in Europe view Islam. More specifically, they do little in the way of dispelling stereotypes in an already tense environment where many see Islam as a threat to the foundations of European culture. This alone would have been a worthy topic for debate, but it was quickly overshadowed by many who insisted that while freedom of expression is an important privilege, it comes with responsibility, a responsibility that Jyllands Posten disregarded in its decision to publish the cartoons. Panelist Reza Aslan was able to present the debate in sociological terms, explaining that those who were most upset about the cartoons- mainly Muslims in the most impoverished, war torn countries- were simply human beings who were upset about their status, largely blamed the West, and consciously or not were seeking a polarizing event to voice frustration. One Danish Muslim audience member accused Mr. Rose of knowing this, implying that his actions went beyond “journalistic curiosity” and were sheer “provocation.”

Another audience member noted that while there had provocation in the affair, Jyllands Posten was not behind it. In many Muslim countries, cartoons far worse than those published by the newspaper were published, cartoons that were created by extremist Muslim groups who had an interest in inciting discontent. Panelist Jamal Mahmood was vocal in expressing that the most important revelation to come out of this controversy was the tendency of the Muslim world to impose death threats against men like Mr. Rose and others (including a Jordanian journalist who re-published the cartoons).

Flemming Rose later remarked, *“Now many people in Denmark recognize that freedom comes with a price.”* The dialogue went on to examine how respect for the sacred and freedom of speech become competing values. Several participants asked their peers, “Why aren’t we talking about death threats within the Muslim community?”

Concluding the conference, Salih Memecan an American Muslim cartoonist exhibited his insightful and humorous cartoons which portrayed deep rooted sentiments felt by many in the Muslim community. With his quick wit, Mr. Memecan cleverly depicted many of the conference themes in his cartoons, including freedom of expression, integration, the exportation of democracy, and assimilation. He ended with the hope that “in time, Muslims will become more tolerant, and the West will become more respectful.”

Assessment of the Conference:

74% of participants rated its “take home value” as excellent, and 78% rated its effectiveness from *Very Good* to *Excellent*. Newsweek journalist Christopher Dickey commented that that he had never seen such a wide spectrum of Muslim voices represented; and he added, *“This was the best and most educational conference I’ve attended in the last two or three years, if not ever...”*

Another participant, noting the effect the diversity had on how he understood himself said, *“This was an extremely valuable and important opportunity to network with fellow*

Muslims from so many different settings and, if often to sharpen differences, and not only to agree, at least to better understand and self-understand.”

Similarly, another participant wrote, *“I really want to thank you again for this opportunity you have given us to understand each other.”*

Finally, the ultimate compliment came from a participant who nearly missed the conference:

I have attended a number of conferences on similar issues that did not achieve much but I wanted to let you know that I really think it was a success in an extremely challenging and difficult area ...[with] an absolutely excellent group of people and the sessions included pioneering constructive debate and dialogue...you have also revived my faith in Muslims - whilst my faith in God goes from strength to strength my faith in western Muslims had been somewhat eroded but you brought together such a lovely collection of people and I thank you from the heart... I have no doubt that this venture will go from strength to strength and that you will achieve change in a worthwhile sense.

In summary, the conference established the foundations of a Muslim leadership network, empowered the participants towards action and allowed for sharing knowledge and best practices. The participants, organizers and supporters found themselves united and resolute in their optimism and hope in the increasing interest of improving Muslim Western relations, the establishment of pluralistic societies and innovative and strategic solutions arising from civil society.

The MLT conference was organized by the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA Society) and cosponsored by the Cordoba Initiative. Assistance was provided by the World Economic Forum C-100 and other foundations.