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ISLAM–WEST DIALOGUE

A Critical Analysis of the Davos Report

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ISLAM–WEST DIALOGUE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE DAVOS REPORT

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✎ The *Tabah Analytic Briefs series* aims to empower Tabah clientele – Shari‘ah scholars and Muslim opinion leaders – with background information and critical analysis of contemporary events and debates. Each brief is a concise introduction to a concept or topic relating to culture and social change in the global community. The purpose of this series is to provide vital information that will assist scholars and policy makers in formulating a clear conception of the “Shared Public Space”, developing an informed discourse, and mediating the challenges facing the Muslim world today.

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ISLAM–WEST DIALOGUE

A Critical Analysis of the Davos Report

Subject: A summary and critical analysis of the document *Islam and the West: Annual Report on the State of Dialogue*, January 2008, its core issues and recommendations for Muslim leaders and scholars of Islamic Sacred Law (Shari‘ah).

Significance: Given that the Muslim-West dialogue is a vital and expanding enterprise at the international, national, and local levels, the *Islam and the West* report benchmarks the state of this dialogue by defining more precisely the issues that are shaping it. It is of utmost importance that Muslim scholars be fully apprised of the state of this dialogue in order to foster meaningful interaction and collaboration among Muslims and non-Muslims in the West and lead their respective communities in their capacity as religious scholars.

Executive Summary: The 2008 *Islam and the West* report, commissioned by the World Economic Forum¹ and Georgetown University, is a global reference on the state of the Muslim-West dialogue for leaders across multiple sectors, including government, media, education, civil society, and faith communities.² Overall, it highlights the activities of approximately 90 organizations and describes more than 80 events around five issue areas: International Politics; Citizenship and Integration; Religion, Ethics, and Ideology; Education and Intercultural Understanding; and Economic and Social Development. It also draws on the Gallup Muslim-West Dialogue Index and media content analysis carried out by Media Tenor International to discuss public perceptions of the dialogue and the tone of media coverage both in Muslim and non-Muslim countries. Very few perspectives from within the community of scholars of Shari‘ah are offered in the report.³

1. See www.weforum.org.
2. A faith community is a group of people organized around a religious or spiritual belief system. Faith communities under the direction of religious leaders are increasingly engaging in inter-religious dialogue, supporting civic values, and mediating community-wide conflicts. These efforts belie the widespread view that extremists are drowning out constructive voices. But the persistence of that misperception underscores the need for a greater visibility and coordination of dialogue efforts.
3. There are various reasons for this absence. Rather than building partnerships in dialogue initiatives with other stakeholders – Muslim and non-Muslim – who hold different views from themselves, a number of Muslim leaders adopt an insular and one-dimensional approach when dealing with issues faced by their community. Some Muslim leaders in the West argue that isolating themselves from other communities in the West will protect their communities from the vagaries of the time. In the past decade, the flawed

This brief introduces the report, discusses its main findings, and offers suggestions on how Muslim scholars and opinion leaders can contribute to the dialogue in a meaningful way. This report is an opportunity for Muslim scholars to build on the discussion already in progress, share best practices on how to further promote dialogue, and become better equipped to answer the needs of diverse Muslim communities.

Contents of Report. The report discusses the five issue areas of concern for the dialogue, highlighting representative local, national, and international organizations, programs, and events that address the different issue areas and support divergent agendas, the Gallup Muslim-West Dialogue Index, and the Media Tenor Content Analysis.

The Problem with Definitions. The inherent diversity both in the West and in the Muslim world has left many uncomfortable with the use of broad terms that suggest homogeneity. Some argue that such terms may contribute to misleading oppositions made popular by Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations thesis. Others simply find the terms too inaccurate and unclear. Authors of the report contend that these terms have essentially become a permanent part of our political vocabulary. At the same time, intellectual and ethical responsibility behooves us to define and deploy the terminologies in a manner consistent with the complexity and multifaceted nature of reality, a reality that does not juxtapose a uniform West and a monolithic Islam. Rather, these entities are driven by myriad political and economic factors as much as religious or cultural ones. As such, when these terms are utilized in the report, there is an emphasis on the diversity that lies behind them.

There is no nation in the world today, regardless of its level of advancement, which is homogeneous. Everywhere we find social groups made up of people of different backgrounds, a vast variety of languages, cultures, ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, races, and religions.

—HRH Princess Lolwah Al Faisal

In the report, the “West” refers mainly to Europe and lands of significant European settlement, including North America, Australia, and New Zealand. The definition is geographical-historical rather than cultural. Although Christianity, Judaism, liberal democracy, free markets, individualism, and consumer culture are part of a European legacy, to associate them exclusively with the West is no longer valid as they are increasingly transnational and global phenomena. The term “Islam” refers to a religion that finds diverse expression around the world. The “Muslim world” denotes both Muslim majority countries and a transnational Muslim community that includes growing minorities within Western and other countries. Although this community is incredibly diverse, what binds it together is a shared religious identity based on monotheism, the prophethood of Muhammad, and belief in the Qur’an as revealed scripture.

The Meaning of Dialogue. Writing shortly before the 1956 Suez Crisis, the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith issued the following warning: unless Muslims come to terms with Western

logic of this argument has failed to convince young Muslims as is demonstrated by the surge in Muslim participation in the Civic Public Forum in America. Another explanation for the absence of Shari’ah perspectives in the report reflects a larger failure on the part of compilers of the report to reach out to Shari’ah scholars and incorporate their diverse perspectives.

society, it would be impossible for the religion to flourish, and unless Christianity and the West exercise the ability to recognize “that they share a planet not with inferiors but with equals”, both Muslims and Westerners would fail the crucial test of the 20th century. September 11, 2001, and subsequent violent reactions have shown that neither side has learned these important lessons. And now more than ever, dialogue is essential. But dialogue, as Karen Armstrong writes, “aims not to convert our partners to our own point of view, but to cooperate with them in creating fresh insight”. We must listen to our interlocutor and not just so that we can prepare a clever riposte, but to understand, to engage, and to alter our own minds about the “other”. Ultimately, the purpose of dialogue, HRH Prince Hussam bin Saud bin Abdulaziz Al Saud contends, is to “restrain violent action, not dilute belief”. Dialogue involves communication among individuals and groups, public and private, religious and secular. With the participation of religious leaders, elected officials, civil servants, representatives of non-governmental organizations, scholars, members of the professions of law and medicine, and the business community, dialogue has the potential to break abstractions, increase knowledge and understanding, build relationships, establish trust, foster collaboration.

There is no point in dialogue if we are not prepared to change our minds, alter our preconceptions and transcend an orthodoxy that we have long ceased to examine critically.

—Karen Armstrong

Five Issue Areas. The report marks the first serious effort to chart Muslim-West dialogue activities and explore best practices across a range of issue areas.

- International Politics
- Citizenship and Integration
- Religion, Ethics, and Ideology
- Education and Intercultural Understanding
- Economic and Social Development

International Politics. In 2006-2007, international conflicts at the intersection of the West and the Muslim world dominated headlines and diplomacy. The United States’ war in Iraq, the Israeli war in Lebanon, instability in the Palestinian territories, international terrorism and efforts to combat it, and the US-Iranian confrontation were the major flashpoints. It is true that each conflict had a religious and a cultural dimension, but they also were informed by unique political, economic, and strategic stakes. Still, political leaders – both religious and secular – collapsed these diverse factors and framed these conflicts in the narrow context of West-Islamic relations.

Over the course of this year, there has been a flurry of activities underscoring the vital importance of dialogue for peace. The Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), consisting of 57 mainly Muslim-majority countries, has emerged as an important voice in

international affairs. OIC Secretary-General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu has repeatedly called for political action and dialogue to address the hotbed areas of conflict and tension, most of which involve Muslim parties or Muslim concerns. In June of 2007, the US acknowledged the growing importance of the OIC by appointing a special envoy, Sada Cumber.⁴

To illustrate, thus far, US public diplomacy efforts have failed to “win the hearts and minds” of Muslims as evinced by the results of the Gallup World Poll (2001-2005) reporting that the percentage of citizens in key Muslim-majority countries holding an unfavorable opinion of the US increased substantially. Animosity towards the US was shared by the non-Muslim world (69% in France, 74% in Germany, and 57% in the UK). These results not only reveal a “structural chasm” between the US and the rest of the world, but also that the major fault lines in world affairs are the economic and security interests of states, not the clash of entire religions, cultures, or civilizations. The asymmetry between antipathy towards the West and support for al-Qaeda or terrorism by Muslims must also be stressed. When asked about support for al-Qaeda attacks on Americans, support for terrorism in general, and the position of Islam regarding attacks against civilians, the numbers were progressively low, mainly under 20 %, going as low as 2% in Morocco.

Iraq was the most obvious failure of dialogue and diplomacy in 2006-2007, domestically and internationally. Successful democratic elections in December 2005 gave rise to a new government, but conflict within and among the Shi’a majority and the Sunni and Kurdish minorities prevented the implementation of effective political and economic reforms, escalating with the bombing of the Samarra mosque in February 2006. Efforts to influence domestic and international policy at the level of civil society also had limited impact (e.g. Iraqi Institute of Peace).

The destinies of nations have become deeply interconnected. No matter where in the world we live, we are touched by the successes and failures of today’s global order.

—Klaus Schwab, Executive Chairman of WEF

The US-Iranian standoff also demonstrated the limits of the dialogue. In an open letter to George W. Bush in May 2006, President Ahmadinejad invited the US president to a dialogue (without preconditions) based on shared Abrahamic principles, including “monotheism, justice and respect for human dignity”. The Bush administration refused, citing Iran’s ongoing nuclear program. Over this period, European leaders attempted to intervene in a potential US-Iran war, but their diplomatic efforts were thwarted. In 2003, Iran cancelled its Comprehensive Dialogue with the European Union in protest against efforts to advance human rights within the country. Since then, Ahmadinejad’s comments on the imminent destruction of Israel and his repeated references to the Holocaust as a “myth” have soured relations with Europe. Efforts to improve this relationship and defuse tension have continued on the level of civil society, when in February 2007, a high profile religious delegation from the US met with Iranian leadership in Tehran.

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict repeatedly made headlines in 2007-2008, with some arguing

4. This position has since been renewed under the Obama administration and continues to be an important office for fostering discussion about American foreign policy and Muslim interests.

for its centrality in the Muslim-West dialogue. In the November 2006 report issued by the High Level Group of the UN's Alliance of Civilizations, authors of the report argued that progress in dialogue depended on advance towards peace in the region. Failure to resolve this conflict would exacerbate the state of this dialogue: "Israel's continuing occupation of Palestinian and other Arab territories and the unresolved status of Jerusalem – a holy city for Muslims, Christians, and Jews – have persisted with the perceived acquiescence of Western governments and thus are primary causes of resentment and anger in the Muslim world towards Western nations". Others, such as Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, rejected this logic, arguing that deeper problems are behind this conflict, in particular the struggle between Muslim moderates and extremists, with the latter exploiting the conflict to mobilize supporters. The core political issue, Livni insists, is the willingness of Israel's neighbors to respect its right to exist within secure borders. Despite the resoluteness of both sides, a lot of energy has been expended to laying a foundation for a durable Israeli-Palestinian peace, the boldest initiative being the Alexandria Process. A historic meeting of religious leaders in the Holy Land culminated in 2002 in the Alexandria Declaration, a pledge to work for lasting peace in Israel and Palestine based on the principles of security and self-determination. This process of interreligious consultation continued in more recent years by a widening circle of civil society institutions (Search for Common Ground, Brookings Institute, International Centre for Reconciliation, Combatants for Peace, Women to Women for Peace, and the Abraham Fund).

One crisis that has impact well beyond its borders on people far away from the conflict is the Israeli-Palestinian issue.
—Kofi Annan

None of the major issues of 2006-2007 pitted a monolithic West against a uniform Muslim world. The economic and security interests of nations remain the main fault lines in Middle East affairs and elsewhere. At the same time, geopolitical and territorial conflicts are shaped by religious and cultural identities. The delicate balance between identity and the fault lines in international politics must not only be widely acknowledged by the media gurus and pundits who inform public opinion, but they must also be taken up and addressed by politicians and Muslim scholars in a systematic way. Lines must be drawn and redrawn if need be, as Muslim scholars are tasked with a huge challenge to be proactive in shaping the discourse and suggesting relevant solutions.

Religion is a fundamental part of who we are, but perhaps we have a tendency to let religion explain more than it can and should. We politicians – and religious leaders as well – should be much clearer on when religion ends and where politics begins.
—Jan Petersen

Citizenship and Integration. Citizenship and integration is an increasingly important issue area in shaping the Muslim-West dialogue. The complexity of the terms "West" and "Islam" is particularly noticeable in this area. In Western and Muslim majority countries, Islam is both a cultural and religious identity. It can be a force in civil society, an element of national identity, and/or a foundation for political institutions. Muslim majority countries are also home to a growing number of non-Muslim minorities who may or may not identify with Western countries. Western countries are equally complex in encompassing secular

institutions, Christian majorities (many with a secular outlook), and citizens of other faith traditions (including Judaism and Islam).

In Europe, Islam is a growing political issue, especially with respect to domestic policies concerning immigrants. Europe's Muslims, a diverse demographic, are comprised of the children and grandchildren of immigrants from Turkey, North Africa, and South Asia. While some have made great economic strides and enjoy social and political rights, many others live below the poverty line and are marginalized from European society. However, the growth of Muslims in Europe alone is not sufficient to explain the rise of Islam-related issues on the political agenda. This is due more to popular anxieties about Islam in Europe and skepticism concerning Muslim commitment to democratic ideals and national identity.

The bombings in Madrid (2004) and London (2005) heightened fears in Europe of Islamic extremists. The headscarf controversy in France (2004-2005) and the Danish cartoon controversy (2005-2006) pointed to sharp cultural differences. It did not seem to matter to the European public that the vast majority of European Muslims rejected violence against civilians and were more concerned with economic opportunities and social services than religious symbolism. Muslims were increasingly emerging as the "other" in anti-immigrant domestic politics, with public opinion polls revealing high numbers of non-Muslim Europeans viewing Islam as incompatible with democracy and/or modern European life (67% in Germany, 62% in Italy, and 62% in Spain). Ironically, when Gallup asked Muslim Europeans about their commitment and support for democratic institutions, they actually found higher approval ratings for the government and a stronger commitment to democratic institutions among Muslim citizens than non-Muslim citizens in Europe.

The extent to which religion itself and the explicit focus on Islam can be used as an identity marker has been called into question by some, including Tariq Ramadan (2007). In cautioning against "Islamizing other issues," he argues, "we have social problems, we have economic problems, and we have urban problems. They have nothing to do with religion. They have to do with social policies". Dr. Lale Akgün, a member of the German Bundestag, echoing this sentiment emphasized the importance of equality and opportunity over religious issues: "Youngsters in France do not want to live in an Islamic society with the Sharia". They do not want their sisters to wear headscarves. They want to have a real chance to belong to the French society, to find jobs and houses and to start a family".

The three Abrahamic faiths all came to Europe at times and by paths that we can pinpoint. All are equal in belonging to Europe. Europe must understand that we are here as indigenous Muslims. —Mustafa Cerić, the Grand Mufti of Bosnia-Herzegovina

In response to escalating tensions, European leaders have attempted to institutionalize dialogue with Muslim citizens and residents. Some of those efforts have included "The French Council for the Muslim Faith" (2003), a forum for consultation between the Muslim community and the state. In the aftermath of the London bombings, Preventing Extremism Together, a taskforce with Muslim participants emerged. In September 2006, the German government created the German Conference on Islam "to improve religious and social

integration of the Muslim population in Germany”, all the while “requiring the complete acceptance of Germany’s liberal democracy”. Italy has also expended resources to set up consultations to facilitate dialogue with Muslim leaders on pressing issues (Consulta Islamica and Unione delle Comunita de Organizzazioni Islamiche in Italia).

Our famous tolerance has degenerated into indifference. This makes people feel excluded – sometimes literally because they do not speak the language – so that they retreat into their own bastions and cultivate their own truths. —Maria J.A. van der Hoeven

The Netherlands, a country wracked by tension in the wake of the 2004 murder of Theo van Gogh, was the site of a fourth annual meeting of the *Union of NGOs of the Islamic World* in June 2007, sponsored by the Islamic University of Rotterdam. The meeting, a first of its kind in Europe, brought together more than 50 representatives of NGOs from 15 Muslim countries to discuss best practices and techniques for increasing collaboration and cooperation among stakeholders in dialogue initiatives. Meetings with Dutch NGOs preceded the event.

To succeed at integration, a society has to make it possible for the citizen to belong to the minority and the majority at the same time. —Daniel Sachs

Controversies that polarized Muslims and non-Muslims in Europe included the headscarf controversy and the cartoon controversy.

The headscarf controversy informed much of Muslim-West dialogue that touched upon women issues. French legislation banning headscarves and other conspicuous religious symbols in public schools placed the issue on the European agenda in 2004. Proponents for the legislation argued that the headscarf was an indication of women’s subjugation, and prohibiting headscarves in schools and other public spaces was a means to uphold ideals of equality. Critics of the ban insisted that it violated religious freedom and that clothing should be beyond the reach of state power. As the issue was debated, it also emerged more strongly in other European societies, including Sweden and England. Efforts to empower Muslim women to take the lead in this issue and to advance discussion around the status of women within Islam and in the West increased in the aftermath of the controversy. The American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA) and the Cordoba Initiative in America organized a program called the Women’s Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equity (WISE). While the value of these initiatives has yet to be evaluated, their existence should be duly noted, for among their stated aims is to identify ways to bring women’s voices more forcefully into contemporary debates on the role of Muslim women in the global community. That Muslim women should speak about “the role of Muslim women” is beyond obvious.

In North America, themes of citizenship and integration addressed discrimination and enhanced security and surveillance measures implemented after the 9/11 attacks.⁵ Various alliances, councils, institutes, and centers throughout North America organized events and activities that broached these themes (Couchiching Institute on Public Affairs, Muslim Pub-

5. A 2006 Gallup Report found that 39% of Americans supported the idea of a special identity card for Muslims.

lic Affairs Council, Council for American-Islamic Affairs, The Interfaith Alliance, and The Interfaith Center of New York).

The cartoons linking the Prophet Muhammad with terrorism, published September 2005 in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* and subsequent republication across Europe, uncovered deep cultural divides overlaid by issues of economic and social exclusion. While Western leaders in Europe criticized the decision to publish deliberately offensive cartoons, none was prepared to restrict freedom of expression. Muslim leaders in Europe were divided in their response. Almost all were critical of the cartoons, but some argued that government censorship must protect the sensitivities of communities of faith. Others maintained that Muslims should learn to live with established norms of freedom of expression. In July 2006, Denmark hosted a conference organized by the American Society for Muslim Advancement called the “Muslim Leaders of Tomorrow”, bringing together young Muslims leaders from more than 16 countries to discuss strategies and solutions for the advancement of Muslims in Europe. Flemming Rose, the Danish editor responsible for the printing of the cartoons, was the keynote speaker of the conference.

Dialogue efforts in non-Western countries are as diverse and important as their counterparts in the West, although efforts to track them can be difficult. In countries like Nigeria and Malaysia which boast of a large Christian and Muslim population, dialogue between communities has been on the rise in recent years. The Muslim-Christian Dialogue Forum and the Interfaith Mediation Center in Nigeria are two important examples of initiatives that provide open space for Muslims and Christians from a cross-section of society. Similarly, the Malaysian Open Dialogue Centre brings together an array of religious and secular voices. Such efforts are sorely needed in places like Sudan (particularly Darfur) and other countries that are wracked by civil war and genocide kindled by ethnic and religious tensions.

The issue of religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries is becoming particularly controversial in both national and international politics. Episodic reports of restrictions on the public practice of Christians and bans on the construction of churches and the distribution of Bibles are routinely exploited to spark controversy in the West. In 2006-2007, the Western media picked up on two cases of Muslims converting to Christianity in Afghanistan and Malaysia who were subjected to persecution under the prevailing Shari‘ah law courts. Unfortunately, high-profile cases in the media have overshadowed important examples of robust religious and civic pluralism in Muslim-majority states, including Senegal and Indonesia, both of which routinely host discussions across different faith traditions on public policy issues.

As the above examples demonstrate, there are close connections between political and religious pluralism in today’s world. But the diversity of issues should give one pause. The challenge is not primarily a theological one. In Western Europe, for example, controversies about citizenship and integration have centered as much on economic and social exclusion as religious differences.

Religion, Ethics, and Ideology. In 2006-2007, the rhetoric of political leaders, sharpened by ongoing international political conflicts, formed the backdrop of dialogue efforts among

religious and secular citizens on all levels of civil society. A series of high-level meetings brought together religious leaders to address issues of common concern, including the Global Assembly of the World Council of Religions of Peace in Kyoto, Japan (August 2006) and the annual interfaith meeting convened by the Rome-based Catholic lay organization, the community of Sant'Egidio in Naples (October 2007) under the heading "A World Without Violence: Faiths and Cultures in Dialogue".

Aside from political action that needs to be taken to resolve conflict, it is essential to recapture and develop the spirit of Jewish-Muslim dialogue and mutual respect.

—Rabbi David Rosen

Two ambitious meetings brought together Jewish and Muslim leaders over this period: World Congress of Rabbis and Imams for Peace in January 2005, with a second meeting in March 2006. These meetings called for a repudiation of violence in the name of any ideology and "especially when perpetrated in the name of religion". Unfortunately, each of these events received modest press coverage. The media instead focused on the Israeli war in Lebanon and the civil war in Iraq. Further controversy held the media's attention when Pope Benedict XVI made critical remarks about Islam during an address at the University of Regensburg in his native Bavaria. Particular attention was paid to his quotation of a 14th century Byzantine emperor, who maintained that Muhammad had brought "evil and inhuman" things into the world.

Since then, Muslim leaders have taken advantage of this controversy as an opportunity for dialogue. Thirty-eight leading clerics and academics endorsed an open letter in October 2006 that rejected any connection between Islam and illegitimate violence. They also noted that Christianity and Islam together "make up more than 55% of the world's population, making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world". A second letter – "A Common Word between Us and You" – followed in October 2007. Signed by 138 Muslim leaders, the letter was directed more broadly towards their Christian counterparts. In November 2007, the Pope extended an invitation to a Muslim delegation to visit the Vatican for formal talks in early 2008.

Religion has repeatedly become the product of political exploitation in history for the creation of hostilities and the fueling of fanaticism between people.

—The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I

The response of Muslim leaders also raises an important question that remains unanswered: Who speaks for the Muslim world? Although the likes of John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed have attempted to answer that question through their 2008 offering *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think*, it has been observed that the decentralization of Muslim religious authority has led to message fragmentation and the rise of dubious authoritative voices, which in itself needs to be discussed further. Some leaders have tried to counter this trend. For example, King Abdullah II of Jordan supported the proclamation of the *Amman Message* in November 2004. The *Amman Message* recognized the established schools of law, forbade charges of apostasy among Muslims, and set forth preconditions

for authoritative legal rulings (*fatāwa*). Over the next two years, the *Message* gained wide support within the Muslim world with the OIC endorsing it in December 2005 and the International Islamic Fiqh Academy in July 2006. Unfortunately, the *Amman Message* has received very little attention in Western media.

Education and Intercultural Understanding. Social and political tensions at the intersection of Islam and the West are fuelled by prejudice and ignorance. In the educational and cultural spheres, multiple efforts are underway to defuse tension, dispel misunderstanding, and build mutual respect among different national, cultural, and religious communities.

Gaps in knowledge are widely attested by public opinion polls. In a September 2007 study conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in the US, 58% of American respondents say they know “nothing” or “not very much” about Islam. What is perhaps most unsettling about this finding is that this number has changed little since 2001, despite a surge in efforts to increase public awareness.

In the past few years, both Islamophobia⁶ and anti-Semitism have also become persistent problems. Consider Franklin Graham’s reference to Islam as a “Satanic religion” and Pat Robertson’s 2006 comments, asserting that Americans, “especially the American left, need to wake up to the danger” that Islam presents. These are among the many discriminatory comments that have circulated in the wake of 9/11. In an attempt to address Islamophobia a number of leading American Muslims and US officials gathered in December 2006, organized by the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institute.

Anti-Semitism, which has a long history in the Christian West, is a more recent phenomenon in the Muslim world. Tendencies to blame Jews for the world’s ills and to indict a vast Jewish conspiracy as the source of the travails of the Arab and Muslim world are evident in extremist Internet sites and in the religious rhetoric of some prominent Imams. Sheikh Abd al-Rahman al-Sudais, Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, has referred to Jews as “the scum of the human race, the rats of the world, the violators of pacts and agreements, the murderers of the prophets, and the offspring of apes and pigs”. Sheikh Tantawi of Al-Azhar University contends that “the charge of anti-Semitism was invented by the Jews as a means of pressuring the Arabs and Muslims and with the aim of implementing their conspiracies in the Arab and Muslim countries”. One attempt to counter such voices is the UK organization Muslims Against Anti-Semitism, which supports events and programs to combat hatred and Holocaust denial, and to highlight Muslim-Jewish commonalities, including positive legacies, such as coexistence in medieval Spain.

In the past several years, a series of education and curricula reform efforts designed to close knowledge gaps and promote mutual understanding have been initiated. Educational institutions in the West have jumped on the bandwagon in adapting to greater cultural and religious pluralism, and the increasing salience of Islam in particular. These initiatives have sometimes met with great resistance. The Khalil Gibran International Academy is a case

6. Islamophobia points to the increase in discrimination and hate speech directed against Muslim minorities in the West.

in point. Part of New York City's response to address the needs of its diverse population, the school was embroiled in controversy from the moment plans to open the school were announced. Opponents of the school, active in the media and on the Internet, organized a campaign, "Stop the Madrasa: Protect our Public Schools from Islamist Curricula".⁷ Three Faiths Forum, a London-Based interfaith foundation, fared better in its attempt to integrate diverse religious traditions in school curricula to encourage classroom discussions of shared values and differences.

Education is "a special vaccine" for girls. It immunizes against untimely death, poverty, and unemployment, and helps them build healthy, hopeful futures.

—Queen Rania of Jordan

One of the few efforts to engage Muslim educational authorities with an eye to helping them reform and improve their schools is the DC-based International Center for Religion and Diplomacy's Madrasa Reform Project, which has sponsored a series of workshops with school leaders and education officials in Pakistan to help schools move away from rote learning and focus more on reflective learning, practical knowledge, and understanding of other cultures. Since the program's inception, thousands of men and women have attended ICRD workshops.

In 2006-2007, the centrality of the youth in shaping interreligious and intercultural understanding was widely heralded. Two important initiatives that were launched included Seeds of Peace and Interfaith Youth Core. Seeds of Peace supports a summer camp that met for the fifteenth time in 2007, bringing more than 300 Egyptian, Israeli, Jordanian, Palestinian, and other Middle Eastern teenagers together to learn from one another, expand their mediation skills, and advance the goal of coexistence through empathy, respect, and engagement. The Interfaith Youth Core was founded by Ebrahim "Eboo" Patel in 1998 and connects youth from different religious and ethnic backgrounds in dialogue around concrete service projects in areas such as education and housing.

We're witnessing a clash of ignorances, people who don't know each other and therefore fear one another.

—Bill Clinton

Economic and Social Development. This realm plays a fundamental role in meeting basic needs, promoting opportunity, and counteracting the material anxieties and resentments that contribute to Muslim-West tensions. In late 2005 and 2007, the world watched in horror as throngs of youth in France erupted in rage. Nightly riots shook Paris suburbs. Although many in the global media attributed these events to Islamic radicalism, evidence suggests that the concerns of these rioters were much more mundane, namely the widening gap between rhetoric about integration and economic opportunity.

As long as many people are without a decent life today and can truly hope for a better life tomorrow, stable and harmonious societies are a wistful illusion. —Katherine Marshall

7. The *New York Times* has extensively covered this story. For example, see "Critics Cost Muslim Educator Her Dream School", by Andrea Elliott, April 28, 2008.

Global disparities in wealth and welfare between Western countries and most Muslim-majority countries play a fundamental role in shaping dialogue. The fact that many Muslim countries number among the poorest in the world translates into a serious divide between the two spheres. The second issue of impact is the unbalanced economic and social development in both the West and the Muslim world. Some scholars have rightly argued that poverty and ignorance can fuel violence, irrespective of religious beliefs. Hence, the need to systematically eradicate poverty and close the equality and quality gap of education is ever-growing. For some Muslim leaders, like Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the main constituencies to be targeted include women and youth. “Most of the Muslim world today [confront] the formidable challenges of poverty alleviation and social and economic development. We need to invest in our vast human resources, especially the development of our youths and the advancement of women by empowering them into a constructive and productive force”.

In 2006-2007, a number of initiatives were launched highlighting the need for the development of the Muslim world. In the second World Islamic Economic Forum, held in Pakistan, the president of the Islamic Development Bank Group called for direct foreign investment as a catalyst for growth and critical for the social development of this part of the world. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) between 2002 and 2005 launched a series of Arab Human Development Reports under the leadership of prominent Arab intellectuals. The reports emphasized the “depth of the crisis, in a bid to shatter the complacency and denial that afflict the Arab discourse on development”. The reports received wide media attention. *New York Times* columnist and author Thomas Friedman said, “If you want to understand the milieu that produced bin Ladenism and will reproduce it if nothing changes, read this report”.

In recent years, Islamic Banking has made huge strides in discussions on economic development with Indonesia and Malaysia emerging as key players in the development of Islamic banking and finance. Although there is a long-standing debate within Islam about the compatibility of tradition with modern finance instruments and the charging of interest, in the contemporary political economy, practitioners of Islamic finance are coming up with creative ways to uphold the Qur’anic injunction against exploitation of the weak and in favor of economic activity that supports the community. Some of the major organizations involved include the International Centre for Education in Islamic Finance, the Islamic Development Bank, the Islamic Bank of Asia, and the Dow Jones Islamic Fund.

Women globally play a central role in framing the dialogue and discussions on economic and social development. Western criticisms of a lack of equality or limited opportunity for women in Muslim-majority countries are at times dismissed as inappropriate or misinformed. The Women Leaders’ Intercultural Forum and Sisters in Islam are examples of undertakings to combine advocacy for women with dialogue on sensitive topics and to build on the commonalities that clearly exist.

Problems arise, however, when Western activists act not as “honest interpreters” for Muslim women, but rather reframe the message according to their own beliefs and in conflict with the beliefs of the Muslim women for whom they claim to be advocating.

—Ingrid Mattson

An example of this reframing occurred when the Pakistani activist and gang-rape survivor Mukhtar Mai travelled in the United States to speak about the violation of her human rights. She emphasized that the sources of her oppression were illiteracy, government corruption, and an ancient tribal caste system. However, many of Mukhtar's "advocates" kept reframing her message as that of a woman oppressed by Islam; Mukhtar herself rejected this interpretation of her situation, highlighting instead the importance of Islam as her source of spiritual strength. She also pointed out that the support of the local religious leader (*mullah*) was the reason why her case succeeded.

Another important challenge that has moved up the policy agenda in recent years and remains on the radar of different faith traditions is global warming. A recent report from the London Islamic Network for the Environment (LINE) warns of catastrophic effects for the Muslim world. In Bangladesh, a sea level rise of only 100 centimeters would reduce the country's landmass by 20% and potentially affect the livelihood of more than 100 million people. In Senegal and Mauritania, a decline of rainfall of 20% would stifle agricultural production as much as 50%. US Muslim leaders joined members of other faith communities in May 2007 to support an Interfaith Declaration on the Moral Responsibility of the US Government to Address Global Warming.

Gallup Muslim-West Dialogue Index: A Deficit in Trust. The report draws upon an original survey by the Gallup Organization that explores public popular perceptions of the state of Muslim-West dialogue and its future prospects. This survey is carried out in the following 21 countries: Bangladesh, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Italy, Malaysia, Netherlands, Pakistan, the Palestinian Territories, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States. Key findings in the index are that majorities of people agree that violence can be avoided, but they are skeptical about the state of the relationship between the West and the Muslim world. The average score for the 21 countries surveyed on the state of the dialogue is 37 (100 being the most optimistic), an alarmingly low level of optimism. Americans, Israelis, and Palestinians are among the most likely to say Muslim-West relations are worsening, reflecting the acute conflicts currently raging in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Palestinian Territories. Results also show that majorities around the world say that a better relationship between the Muslim world and the West is important to them, although they admit that they do not think the "other side" is committed to improving the relationship. The issue of respect is also shaping the dialogue, as 65% of respondents in Muslim-majority countries say that they respect the West, but 60% say that the West does not respect Muslims. This bears out asymmetrically with majorities in the Western world that say that the Muslim world does not respect the West (82% in America, 73% in Israel, 63% in Spain, 69% in Denmark) and that the West itself does not respect Muslims (60% of Americans and Europeans).

Media Tenor International. A global content analysis organization based in Switzerland, Media Tenor, presents an analysis over a fifteen-week period of three TV news shows, three print publications, and one business publication from 24 different countries. The analysis was conducted around the five issue areas above and was performed by Media Tenor researchers who coded content in their native languages. The countries covered included twelve Muslim-majority countries (Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Malaysia, Morocco,

the Palestinian Territories, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and United Arab Emirates) and twelve non-Muslim countries (Brazil, Denmark, France, Germany, Israel, Italy, Namibia, Russia, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States).

Tenor Key Findings.

1. *Primacy of international politics:* Coverage of Middle East conflicts dominated the media on the topic of Muslim-West relations, giving it an overall negative tone.
2. *Negative tone towards the “other”:* While most coverage of Muslim-West issues contained no positive or negative judgments, media from Muslim majority countries were more likely to provide negative coverage of individuals and groups associated with Christianity and Judaism and with non-Muslim majority countries. Conversely, media from non-Muslim majority countries covered Muslim majority countries and Muslim protagonists more negatively, but to a lesser degree.
3. *Focus on political and militant Islam:* Most reports involving Muslims depicted them engaged in political, militant, and extremist activities. In contrast, Christians and Jews were most often presented in the context of religious activities.
4. *Education and intercultural understanding covered most neutrally:* Reports designed to inform people about religious and cultural traditions were the least negative and the second most visible coverage area. However, they focused primarily on Western tradition and were only covered heavily in non-Muslim majority countries.

Overall Conclusions of *Islam and the West* Report. By the end of 2007, Muslim-West relations experienced contradictory trends. Positive gains were made as Israeli and Palestinians leaders sat down in Annapolis, Maryland in November 2007 with US officials and committed themselves to negotiations. Moreover, in a full-page open letter in the New York Times, Protestant theologians responded positively to an invitation of dialogue (“A Common Word Between Us and You”) by 138 Muslim leaders. The Protestant response, called “Loving God and Neighbor Together”, was signed by 300 signatories, mainly evangelical and mainline Protestant theologians and some Catholics. Despite these gains, there were also a series of crises that marked the end of the year. The situations in Afghanistan and Iraq became increasingly volatile. Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in Pakistan. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for a car bombing outside UN offices in Algiers.

Future Recommendations by Authors of Report. Crucial gaps to fill include the following areas:

The Elite–Grass Roots Gap: Dialogue among political and religious elites occupies most of the media’s attention, while most of the creative work takes place at the local level. Shining more light on work being done at the grass roots level can bring local activities to the attention of leaders and potential investors. Closing this gap can also facilitate the sharing of best practices.

The Politics–Religion Gap: Political leaders often have little contact or interaction with diverse religious leaders. Given the importance of the Muslim-West dialogue, political leaders must reach out more proactively to faith communities to better understand their motivations and support their engagement with one another around policy challenges.

The Business–Professions Gap: Over the past decade, dialogue and debate about corporate social responsibility, education, legal, and medical ethics have intensified at all levels of civil society. However, conversations in both business and professional circles have rarely been linked to the parallel Muslim-West dialogue initiatives addressed in this report. Leaders across civil society must be engaged more fully in order to move these initiatives beyond theological and ideological questions towards more practical efforts to address global economic and social challenges.

The Inside–Outside Gap: Some of the significant dialogue is taking place within, not across, religious and secular communities. Religious leaders, supported by scholars, can do more to highlight the rich diversity within traditions to counter the attraction to extremist views and personalities.

Recommendations for Shari‘ah Scholars. While it is established in the Islamic tradition that Muslim scholars are entrusted as inheritors of the prophets in their capacity to teach, edify, and guide people, this role has been increasingly relegated to the sphere of ritual worship with some notable exceptions. Moreover, a continued tradition of rote learning has come at a price; strict adherence to formalism in matters of jurisprudence has disconnected scholars from their audiences and the realities they face and rendered parts of the tradition obsolete or irrelevant. Even though opinions are often issued after a rigorous and sophisticated process, they are not always grounded in the reality of the questioner’s cultural, social, or political context. Sometimes, the opinion is not even grounded in the questioner’s time period. For example, if one mines through collections of *fatāwa* (non-binding legal opinions), one can easily find some recent *fatāwa* that mirror opinions issued on similar questions in the pre-modern period. For example, on the question of interacting with one’s Christian neighbors or mimicking the habits of the People of the Book, there are formal legal opinions (*fatāwa*) issued by scholars of sacred law (*fuqahā*) in the medieval and pre-modern period that have carried over to the modern period without critical review of their relevance now. This should give one pause because it suggests (if not imposes) an untenable paradigm that jurisprudence is a repository of recorded opinions issued to a single undifferentiated mass with a perennial answer to each question. Instead, jurisprudence should be viewed as legal scholars of Islamic civilization have long viewed it: a sophisticated science of deriving rulings from the sacred sources so that they relate and speak firsthand to both content and context. This process is conducted according to a qualified jurist’s best understanding (*fiqh*) of scriptural sources and their intention.

Another issue that has hindered jurisprudence from relating to the Muslim masses is that too much intellectual energy is expended by Muslim jurists over questions that are marginal *compared to* the more pressing needs of Muslim communities, living in both Muslim majority and minority societies. Disproportionate attention is given, for example, to the classification of various types of water, whether payment of *zakāh* must be made in Islamic gold dinars

and silver dirhams, and similar topics. However valuable these matters may sometimes be, they are hardly as important as such community-wide issues as the smooth integration of Muslims in non-Islamic societies, the alarming rise of divorce amongst Muslims, Muslim participation in the democratic process, and the nurturing of a working normative tradition for Muslims living outside of Muslim-majority societies. The extent to which social norms, gender roles, and cultural traditions are constructed has not received the attention it deserves by Shari‘ah scholars. The model of marriage that is espoused today in the Friday sermons of mosques in America is the same model espoused in mosques in Egypt, with no attention to differences in cultures, norms, and geographical locations. And as an unfortunate result, young Muslim men and women take marriage and courtship matters into their own hands without consulting sacred paradigms, which ironically can indeed apply to their contexts if given serious thought. Unless this changes, Muslim jurists and scholars will miss out on the opportunity of helping Muslims live upright lives in accordance with the Qur‘an, prophetic model (*sunnah*), and the precepts of their religion in a manner befitting their current realities. What is called for is what Muslim scholars have done in every age: to return to the texts and to face current and coming challenges by mining the tradition for solutions for their respective communities. This process will undoubtedly lead to different answers and solutions. Sometimes it will lead to no answers. And when the sources are silent, we need courageous and contemplative scholars, who have fidelity to sound methodology, to open the gates of *ijtihad* (*critical* and informed analysis followed by sophisticated practical prescriptions) in order to revitalize our tradition and make it speak in profound ways to current challenges. *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) has to catch up with changing times now more than ever and the onus is on Muslim jurists to lead this enterprise.

Throughout this process, we cannot be hamstrung by the inertia of our recent history. With the advent of technology, which has closed all gaps of time and space, none of us live in an isolated community. We live in a global world and share space with people of different cultures, values, and perspectives. Today, as communities dialogue with other communities, it behooves Muslims more than ever to not be complacent in a parochial understanding of orthodoxy and its defense, but to engage with the tradition and the traditions of others in order to increase understanding, be more inclusive, and incline our hearts towards each other through the discovery of a shared ethic, our humanity. This does not mean that scholars should compromise the basic tenets of Islam, but it does call for a reading of the tradition whose end is not to rehearse the opinions of earlier jurists to the point that it compromises the intent and objectives of Islamic values. Neither is it sufficient to take texts and try to make them relate to new problems in creative ways. A good example of how creative and narrow reinterpretations can have disastrous effects is the widely reported *fatwa* that a female employee can give her male colleague some of her breast milk to drink so they could work together in the same office with the door closed. Not only does this *fatwa* fail to deal with modern challenges of inter-gender interaction in the workforce, but it also fails to relate to commonsense and basic sensitivities of the masses or their cultural norms. I am reminded at this juncture of the statement of Imam al-Shāfi‘ī, which does not just demonstrate his deference for juristic differences in opinion but also reveals jurisprudence to be a flexible science that can yield many answers: “My position is correct with the possibility of being wrong; and the position of my opponent is wrong with the possibility of being correct”. Part of the challenge of Shari‘ah scholars today is that they are cloistered in the straits

of formalism, unable to bridge between text and context. In the process, they fail to see that they are the living tradition, and it is within their reach and power to reignite the tradition and mobilize Muslims once more to return to religion for guidance.

Lines need to be drawn and in some cases redrawn between religion and politics. Today, we wonder what issues fall under the exclusive purview of the religion of Islam and what are of the suzerainty of political authorities? This is a question for Shari'ah scholars to debate. Ignorance, discrimination, and especially fear have collapsed the diverse dimensions of these issue areas. Today some Muslims advocate collapsing the line between religion and politics – Islamist political parties are an excellent illustration of this position. Others advocate a total separation between the two. Still others negotiate these boundaries. Notwithstanding, Muslims leaders can contribute and demarcate the boundaries between religion and politics. Does Allah, Most High, address these issues? And when do our political systems or cultural and social norms own these issues?

With the politicization of Islam, the religion has become reified as an entity or an actor that speaks for itself. The challenge today is for Muslim scholars to rise and become the actors or agents to guide their communities with knowledge that can improve our state today. Muslim scholars are strongly urged to participate in these dialogue initiatives and speak with the authority of the Qur'an, sunnah, and the whole of the tradition to these challenges. Today, the breakdown and loss of Islamic religious institutions has lead to a vacuum of interpretive authority where the likes of Osama bin Laden and others are emboldened to speak on behalf of Islam, and some of the lay public become vulnerable to listening to them. The voices of the Shari'ah community must be louder but their voices must not espouse sheer rhetoric. Muslims must answer the challenges of the day with action. As John Esposito reminds us: "There is a culture war out there. The forces of bigotry and confrontation have powerful resources and access. The driving force behind all initiatives has to be the belief that actions really do speak louder than words. There, the challenge to all joint statements issued by religious or political leaders will be the question: So what?" Shari'ah scholars cannot just issue *fatwas* and statements but must translate their messages into action plans that will penetrate the fabric of our societies. Through collaborative efforts and by working with grassroots organizations across the various sectors, Shari'ah scholars can make their messages be heard and yield outcomes that are transformative in nature.

Shari'ah scholars also need to encourage methods of reasoning that interpret positions on the basis of the dynamic tools of the Shari'ah, such as *al-qawā'id al-fiqhiyyah* (legal maxims), *maqāṣid al-shari'ah* (the objectives of the Shari'ah), *'urf* (custom), and in light of contemporary global challenges. Furthermore, more discussion needs to take place about the dynamic interplay between law and society. According to Her Eminence Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa, "The relationship between an overbearing state and a passive society in many Muslim-majority countries must be recalibrated". We need the Shari'ah community to be leaders in these interpretations.

Culture war aside, we are also experiencing a revolution of social justice where the grievances of the world's poor weigh terribly on all of our consciences. Muslim scholars today must leave the confines of their study circles, the mosques, and their pulpits to advise on

initiatives, projects, and activities that are attempting to improve the state of this dialogue. Whether you are an Imam in the ghettos of Paris or a prince in the Gulf, we are all equally invested in advancing this dialogue. And so, it behooves the Shari'ah community to expand their roles in this debate beyond even the level of interfaith dialogue. Such an expansion must be preceded by securing an intimate understanding of the detailed and nuanced context of the world and in turn how the Islamic tradition relates, embraces, and engages with that context. Shari'ah scholars must also show some respect for the fact that the world is bigger than the Middle East. Only then can they begin to articulate and work through a clearly envisioned plan for promoting peace based on our own authentic methodologies and theological principles of dialogue and justice.

Oftentimes the problem with interfaith dialogue is it just does not go far enough and is not always action-oriented. Jan Petersen, Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2001 to 2004, is instructive on this point: "Why do I come from dialogue meetings with so few ideas for concrete action? Participating has been a wonderful learning experience for me. But still, I am frustrated by so much vagueness, so many academic details, so many fine theological points – so little I can use when I get home to my parliament".

Conclusion: The significance of this report is that it presents a tentative roadmap for action-oriented engagement. Shari'ah scholars can participate and contribute to this dialogue by being a knowledge base for leaders working across civil society in each of these issue areas. Their knowledge can be put to action in collaboration with others. We need not replicate our efforts but join each other's causes for a common cause: peace and justice for all. The Shari'ah community must carve out their place among the peacemakers.

*We can't solve problems by using the same kind of
thinking we used when we created them.*
—Albert Einstein