INTRODUCTION

Reflections on the Carnegie Scholars Program on Islam and Muslim Societies

by Shibley Telhami

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It is not surprising that the tragedy of 9/11 provided a prism of pain through which many Americans looked at Arabs and Muslims. In times of pain, people are drawn to those aspects of the other that relate to their pain and fear. Despite the early attempt to separate between the attackers who carried out their horror in the name of religion from the vast majority of Muslims around the world, the national discourse rapidly moved to associate the Islamic religion and culture with the issues that have been in the center of our debates, from terrorism, to the scarcity of democracy in Muslim societies, to sectarianism, and even local conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli issue, and internal conflict in the Sudan and Lebanon. In the American public arena, there were suddenly a large number of "experts" who were offering narratives and advice about everything that was wrong in Muslim-majority countries and in Muslim societies—often based on limited knowledge and armed-chair reflections.

Even in the arena of scholarship, by virtue of the way national resources were pooled as the focus became terrorism and Muslim communities, it became tempting for many scholars who had not worked on these issues in the past to reframe their work and tap into available research funds. A new discourse emerged that framed the Muslim communities as constituting a "Muslim world" as if the Islamic characteristic of Islamic societies trumps all else—even though few would accept the notion of a Christian world that refers to all Christian-majority countries. And the clash of civilization thesis, popularized before 9/11 by the late professor Samuel Huntington, acquired new adherents.

In some ways, the tendency to focus on obvious religious and cultural differences as explanatory variables in times of conflict is natural, as they provide easy answers.

Certainly there are both religious and cultural differences between the US and the West broadly and societies in Muslim majority countries. But such differences have always been there, through good and bad relations, and they rarely provide the answer for the trend in relations. In the big picture, the religious differences between Islam and Christianity and between some Islamic cultures and Western cultures are dwarfed by the differences between, say, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, and between Indian, Chinese, and American cultures. Despite the religious and cultural gap between India and the US, relations have remained strong, even at the level of public perception, including in the past decade of global anger with American foreign policy. If strategic conflict between India and the US should emerge in the future, it is almost certain that many will scrutinize the substantial religious and cultural differences and attribute conflict to them.

Certainly, there were those who took issue with the emerging paradigm and with the clash of civilization thesis in the scholarly and public discourse, starting even before the 9/11 tragedy. Vartan Gregorian, among others, wrote an important book whose very title "Islam: A Mosaic, Not a Monolith," is reflective of a different take on Islamic societies. But the post-9/11 paradigm was particularly stubborn. Even among many of those who were more generous about Islamic societies and critical of our foreign policy toward Muslim-majority states, the language of the "Muslim world" took hold; for many, the issues are how to interpret this "world" and how best to deal with it.

The problem in the discourse was not how people interpreted the "Muslim world" but that the very language of a "Muslim world" elevated the importance of the Islamic characteristic as an explanatory variable in many of the important issues of the day to a point that our understanding of these issues was distorted. There was already much evidence for this. Just as our discourse, for example, was focused on a clash of values, public opinion polls in Arab and Muslim countries consistently showed that majorities of Arabs and Muslims were mostly angered by American foreign policy, particularly in Iraq and toward the Palestinian-Israeli conflict—not by an Islamic allergy to American values. In Arab countries in particular, the most admired leaders have not been Islamic religious leaders, or even leaders from Arab and Islamic countries, but the likes of France's Jacques Chirac and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.

Even among regional leaders, those admired went against the prevailing narrative. At a time when Shiite-Sunni sectarianism was a focal point of our discourse, largely because of the internal conflicts in Iraq and Lebanon, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Lebanese Shiite group, Hezbollah, was more popular in Sunni-majority countries such as

Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan, than any Sunni leader. As one of the distinguished scholars profiled in this collection, Vali Nasr, showed in his work, there is a Sunni-Shiite divide (and there have always been differences among Shiites and Sunnis) that is certainly relevant to understanding the dynamics in several countries. But one cannot automatically leap to conclude that most Arabs and Muslims view the important issues of the day primarily through the prism of this divide.

Religion is of course important, sometimes central in many Muslim communities around the world. It is an integral part of society, in the way people live their daily lives, and often in their politics. Its import is sometimes underestimated—as it is in the case of many religions in many parts of the world, from India to the United States. Sometimes the role of religion is understudied by social scientists. And certainly, there is much room to examine and understand the multiple aspects of diverse Muslim communities around the world. The problem however is that one cannot leap from this observation about the import of religion, to seeing religion as the central variable explaining the central political and social issues that these societies are confronting.

In that sense the elevation of the role of religion itself in understanding society and politics in Muslim-majority countries often misinformed more than it informed. It distracted from scholarly works that linked the scarcity of democracy in the Middle East in particular more to political economy than to culture and to credible works that linked the gender gap in Muslim societies in the work force and in politics more to oil economies than to religious beliefs. These are of course debatable questions and should be subject to serious investigation—but that is just the point.

The Carnegie's Scholars Program on Islam, which was envisioned even before 9/11[1] and the subsequent national and international attention on Islam, provided an enormous service to both the scholarship on Muslim societies and to the public discourse. It helped broaden the picture of Muslim societies beyond the narrow prism through which they were viewed especially after 9/11. There were five things that were particularly striking about this program.

First, it empowered leading experts on multiple aspects of Islamic societies and the Islamic religion in a manner that added to a critical mass in both the scholarly and the public discourse, and in that sense, served as an important information-based dimension to our national conversation.

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[1] For a discussion of the evolution of the Corporation's focus on Islam, please see the Afterword on page 63.

Second, it was interdisciplinary in scope and included outstanding scholars from the social sciences, to scholars of law and religion, to historians, artists, and journalists—but all with substantive strengths on aspects of Islam and Islamic societies.

Third, while Islam was a central theme, the program was structured to avoid the narrow focus on religion as such, although that too was addressed, but instead to focus on issues of society and politics broadly; in this way, there was a clear attempt to avoid automatically attributing the phenomena studied to Islam itself.

Fourth, by virtue of the diversity and the strength of the expertise of the Carnegie Scholars, alternative and diverse explanations that are grounded in scholarship emerged on the many issues that had risen to the top of our national attention and interest.

Fifth, while scholarship was always a central criterion of scholar selection, the projects themselves were also viewed—but not narrowly—through their prospect of dissemination in the public discourse arena and to policy makers. In that sense, the project was to be grounded in excellent scholarship, but projected beyond the world of scholarship.

From the outset of the process in which I was involved, there was an effort to hear authentic voices while assuring a diversity of views and approaches. Thus, the emerging products from the Carnegie Scholars, by design, provide less of a coherent whole and more of a rich literature that is thoughtful, information-based, representative of multiple disciplines, and often with differing conclusions. But as a whole, the works that were produced and the outstanding scholars who were supported provide collective weight and a literature that cannot be ignored in addressing Islam, society, and politics.

In this volume, there is but a snapshot of the type of scholars the program has supported and of the work that they have produced. But even in this small snapshot one gets a picture of the diversity of the community of the Carnegie scholars and of their fields and methodologies. Amaney Jamal is a young social scientist who partly relies on quantitative methods, who was supported by the Corporation early, and who is emerging as a young and influential star. Vali Nasr has been a credible voice in carefully articulating the Sunni-Shiite divide and has projected his work onto the public and policy arena as he later was appointed adviser to the U.S. Department of State. Bruce Lawrence reflected the breadth of the program in researching Religious Minorities as Secular Citizens in Ethiopia, Egypt, the Philippines and Indonesia. Jen'nan Read focused on Muslim identity in America in a manner that was designed to be accessible to the public arena. Noah Feldman, whose work on Islamic jurisprudence received much national attention, broadened his work and touched on themes of the day including a changing Iraq. And Brian Edwards

sought to study how a new world of cultural globalization operates in the Middle East.

The impact of the program has already been felt through the individual contributions of the Carnegie scholars. But perhaps the most lasting impact will be in enhancing a community of knowledge that, collectively, adds substance and authoritative reflection in the battle of ideas that is constantly waged both in the policy world and in the academy. When the project started, it was with the thought that ideas matter, that better knowledge of the cultural, social, economic, and political realities in Muslim societies will enhance the ideas and debates on issues that have become central nationally and globally. It's hard to measure success, but there is no doubt that the project produced new ideas that are grounded in credible scholarship and that will have weight in the continuing battle of ideas pertaining to Islam and Muslim societies.