



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

W A S H I N G T O N , D C

**“And He has united their hearts in love. If you had spent all that is in the earth, you could not have put love between their hearts, but God has put love between them. Surely, He is Powerful, Wise.”  
(Surah Al-Anfal, 63)**

*American University's Center for Global Peace  
and  
The Mohammed Said Farsi Chair of Islamic Peace*  
present a symposium on

**Contemporary Islamic Synthesis**

**October 4-5, 2003  
Library of Alexandria, Egypt**

***Purpose:***

Islam is perhaps the most misunderstood religion today, among both non-Muslims and Muslims alike. The saying of the Prophet Muhammad appears to have been realized: “Islam began as a stranger (*gharib*, i.e. exiled and unrecognized), and it will revert again to the condition of being a stranger. Blessed are the strangers.” The West views Islam as quintessentially foreign; Muslims feel estranged from its ideals.

When considering Islam, what both Muslims and non-Muslims often forget is that religion is not only an abstract theological doctrine, but also a historical dynamic that finds expression in lived experiences and circumstances of people. Understanding the essence of Islam, then, requires willingness to discover creativity in the tension between the real and the ideal, between expectations and achievements. It is arguable that active tension between the real and the ideal is even more pronounced in the lives of Muslims than among the followers of many other traditions, because Islam has no church and every Muslim is individually responsible for seeking the Muslim ideal.

We complicate our understanding of Islam when we concentrate one-sidedly on either the ideal or the real, while ignoring the struggles of Muslims to reconcile them. The history of Islam is a story of never-ending efforts on the part of Muslims to comprehend the ideals of the Qur'an, and then to transform this understanding into a lived reality. In this dynamic process, the ideals of Islam are not static but emergent. Every historical period and cultural milieu has given a different *synthesis* of Islamic command. Every generation in the Muslim world develops a unique yet integral Islamic synthesis which distinguishes that generation from previous ones.

This two-day conference is designed to offer reflections on the following questions: “What is the Islamic synthesis prevailing in the Muslim world today?” “What are the most important issues and forces behind this contemporary Islamic synthesis?” With these questions in mind, this conference provides an opportunity to construct a genuine intra-Muslim dialogue on a number of themes that are of particularly

critical importance to today's Muslims, such as social justice and civil society in Islamic thought and practice. An introductory session, four thematically organized panels and a concluding session will help to structure the conference's deliberations.

It is our hope that this conference will become a catalyst for continuing dialogue and exchange amongst Muslim scholars of Islam, religious authorities, governmental officials, and community leaders in the Islamic world, in turn, contributing to a larger discourse through which Muslims derive new insight about the meaning of Islam for the contemporary world. Each participant will be invited to write a paper responding to the stated objectives of the conference and to the topics of the specific panel to which he or she has been assigned. These papers and summaries of conference deliberations and conclusions will be compiled in a final publication.

***Description of Sessions and Panels:***

The introductory session will be entitled "*Toward a Contemporary Islamic Synthesis*," in which prominent religious and scholarly leaders from around the Muslim world will seek to clarify how Muslims are attempting to realize ideals of peace, social justice, and human dignity within today's world historical context. Speakers will initiate the conference's discussions on how essential Islamic values address a wide range of challenging issues: role of interpretation, political participation, tensions between the full development of the individual and the enrichment of the community, democracy, and sustainable coexistence.

In the first panel, "*The Many Voices of Islam: Cultivating Intellectual Pluralism*," participants will explore diverse views of Qur'anic interpretation and their impact on Muslim societies. Particular emphasis will be placed on need for dialogue among Muslims who approach revealed scripture in different ways, in accordance with diverse intellectual traditions, cultural contexts, and social challenges.

*Preparatory Questions:*

How do approaches to interpretation differ among "traditionalists", "reformists", "renewalists", and other types of contemporary Muslim thinkers?

What are some of the potential benefits of dialogue among "competing" tendencies in Islamic thought?

To what extent do problems faced by Islamic societies reflect a lack of synthesis within contemporary Islamic thought?

On what grounds can Muslims affirm pluralistic approaches to interpretation?

Should Muslims do more to support the principle of commonality in our multiplicity?

In the second panel, "*Applied Ethics of Political Participation*," we will investigate the relationship of Islamic principles to political life, with particular attention to challenges of broadening participation in political processes, enhancing the accountability of governments to the governed, and promoting respect for both the dignity of individuals and the integrity of communities. In the process, panelists will discuss the ways that Muslims express both their political identity and their diverse interests with an Islamic vocabulary, and seek a cultural and not merely a technological future.

*Preparatory Questions:*

How do Islamic values promote accountable and participatory governance?

What are the challenges affecting Islamic societies that seek to democratize?  
What historical events and experiences have shaped contemporary Muslim attitudes towards civil society and political participation?  
How would reform of political institutions in the Muslim world (e.g., democratization, accountability of human rights, etc.) foster a stable social peace?  
How do Islamic values support the “flowering of the individual” in Muslim societies?

In the third panel, *“Applied Ethics of Peace and Nonviolence in Islam”* the focus of discussion will be an analysis of strengths of the Islamic faith and practice which contribute to peacebuilding, social justice, and global peace. Particular attention will be given to principles, values, and traditions within Islam which support the resolution of deeply rooted conflicts with a minimum of violence and coercion. In addition, participants will discuss Islamic conceptions of peace and their similarities and differences vis-à-vis Western understandings.

*Preparatory Questions:*

What is the Islamic standpoint on violence and its justification?  
Is nonviolence to be located solely within the domain of personal morality and individual self-training, or may it be applied to the collective needs of society (both Muslim and non-Muslim) and of governance?  
What are some examples of constructive, nonviolent, Islamic actions and movements?  
What are the most important Islamic resources for peacebuilding and peacemaking?  
How can Islamic conceptions of social justice be applied for conflict prevention and resolution?

In the fourth panel, *“Coexistence and Reconciliation: An Enduring Responsibility of the Muslim Ummah,”* will examine the proposition that Islam transcends exclusive identification with either “East” or “West,” and that Muslims can play a unique role in the world today – spiritually as well as culturally and politically – as a “Middle People.” Contributions of Islamic values to reconciliation among cultures and to human solidarity will receive special consideration.

*Preparatory Questions:*

How can an Islamic synthesis for today be derived from the diversity of Islamic interpretations and cultures?  
Can this synthesis establish common ground between Islam and the West without compromising core Islamic principles?  
How can the conception of Muslims as a “Middle People” be applied to efforts to resolve cultural and ideological conflicts within Islamic societies?  
What can Islam contribute to peacemaking efforts, both within Muslim societies and globally?  
What are the Islamic approaches to reconciliation and coexistence? And how can Muslims strengthen their precepts of peace and coexistence?  
What can be done to strengthen transnational alliances for reformist thinkers while maintaining positive relationships with other Islamic thinkers?  
The conference will conclude with a roundtable discussion in which participants will be asked to draw up recommendations for future, sustained dialogue. Participants will be invited to draft a statement of principles on this subject, as a step toward engaging the larger Muslim community and sharing insights generated by the conference.

**Schedule:**

*Friday, October 3, 2003*

*6:00-9:00pm                      Dinner hosted by  
Mohammed Said Farsi and Hani Farsi*

*Saturday, October 4, 2003*

*9:00-10:00am                      Introductory Session*

*10:00-12:00pm                      Panel I*

*12:00-1:30pm                      Lunch*

*2:00-4:00pm                      Panel II*

*4:00-4:15pm                      Coffee Break*

*4:15-5:30pm                      Roundtable Discussion*

*7:00-10:00                      Dinner*

*Sunday, October 5, 2003*

*9:00-11:00am                      Panel III*

*11:00-1:00pm                      Lunch*

*1:00-3:00pm                      Panel IV*

*3:00-3:15pm                      Coffee Break*

*3:15-5:30pm                      Roundtable Discussion*

*7:00-10:00pm                      Dinner*