

Understanding Sufism and its Potential Role in US Policy

Edited by Zeyno Baran

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Introduction

On October 24, 2003, the International Security Program of The Nixon Center hosted a conference in Washington to explore the role how Sufism—the spiritual tradition within Islam—relates to US foreign policy goals. The purpose of the meeting was to introduce US policymakers and the policy community to this rather neglected part of Islam, often referred to as “Cultural Islam.” Sufism is practiced by millions of people around the world, including in the United States.

The meeting focused primarily on Eurasia and its largest Sufi order—the Naqshbandi Order—as well as on Turkish Sufi traditions. At the first session speakers outlined the theology, organizational structure, and societal role of Sufism as a whole, while the second panel discussed the religious, social, and political impact of various Sufi orders active in the Caucasus and in Central Asia. The third and final panel discussed US government programs vis-à-vis the Muslim world. While the questions were framed for the Eurasian countries, the policy implications are applicable elsewhere.

The highlight of the conference was a keynote discussion featuring Professor Bernard Lewis and Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani. Lewis is the renowned author of several dozen books, including *What Went Wrong: the Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* and *The Crisis in Islam*. He has also advised policymakers at all levels of the US government on ways to constructively engage Muslims. Shaykh Kabbani is the deputy leader of the Naqshbandi Haqqani Sufi Order, which has over 2 million adherents around the world. He was the first Muslim leader to warn the United States about the imminent threat posed by Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda terrorist network; he also led the Muslim world in immediately condemning the attacks of September 11th. Shaykh Kabbani is a tireless promoter of moderate, traditional Islam and a staunch opponent of radical Islamism.

This report includes a full transcript of the on-the-record presentations and summarizes the key points of the rest of the conference.

Cliff Kupchan
Vice President
The Nixon Center

UNDERSTANDING SUFISM AND ITS POTENTIAL ROLE IN US POLICY

Panel 1: Sufism: History, Theology, and Orders

Dr. Timothy J. Gianotti, Department of Religious Studies, University of Oregon
Dr. Zeki Saritoprak, Department of Religious Studies, John Carroll University
Dr. Hedieh Mirahmadi, Executive Director, Islamic Supreme Council of America

Dr. Timothy J. Gianotti, Department of Religious Studies, University of Oregon

Concentrating his discussion on the origins and evolution of Sufism within Islam, Gianotti began by explaining that the term “Sufism” is itself one of the chief obstacles in any discussion of Sufism today. This is because of the wide variety of groups, beliefs and practices the term has come to represent. Although many individuals today identify themselves as “Sufi,” it should not be assumed that they have any formal or even informal affiliation with Islam. For example, one may belong to a Rumi reading group or to an eclectic New Age movement inspired by Sufi ideas or practices but have no substantive connection with the traditional Sufism that is so firmly rooted in traditional Islamic faith and practice.

Yet, despite the tenuous connection to Islam exhibited by individual practitioners, Gianotti asserted that Sufism may be regarded as quintessentially Islamic, as it is impossible to conceive of Islam without the core value systematically celebrated by Sufism—the value of righteousness, or “*al-ihsān*.” This righteousness is understood to be the “inner awareness or mental orientation that strives to place every moment of one’s life in the presence of God, an awareness unobstructed by ego, vain imaginings, preoccupations with the past or the future, and worldly distractions.” Sufism, so understood, represents the core of Islam as both a religion and as a personal quest, for it focuses on preparing the individual pilgrim for his or her ultimate encounter with the Divine.

Gianotti began his brief survey of Sufi history with the founding of Islam in Medina, where the Prophet Muhammad established the first Islamic society in 622 and where he personally educated and molded the first generation of Muslims. Referring to an encounter between the Prophet and the angel Gabriel, Gianotti laid out the essential framework for understanding Sufism’s place within Islam. According to the story, the Prophet was asked about the three most basic aspects of the religion. Belief, or “*al-īmān*” is “to believe in God, His angels, His books and messengers, the Last Day, the [ultimate] meeting with Him, and [to believe in] God’s determination of affairs, whether good or bad.” Practice, or “*al-islām*,” is “to bear witness that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God, to offer prayers and pay the required charity, to fast the month of Ramadan, and to make pilgrimage to the house [of God in Mecca] if one can find a way.” Righteousness, or “*al-ihsān*,” is “to worship God as if you see Him, and, if you do not see Him, then [to worship God knowing that] He surely sees you.”

During the first centuries of Islam, when it began its rapid and unparalleled imperial expansion and intellectual florescence, much zeal was devoted by pious Muslim intellectuals to the systematization and codification of the new religion. Thus, these early scholars, the *ulama*, began specializing in areas that had practical applications in people’s daily lives, such as the

standardization and memorization of the Quran, the study of Arabic grammar (which allowed for more exact interpretations and recitations of the Quran), the hadiths (the gathering and verification of the Prophet's precedent-setting words and deeds), the working out of a more expanded "orthodox" creed in the face of various "heretical" groups, and the codification of the basic Islamic way of life (science of jurisprudence or *al-fiqh*). This latter effort relied heavily upon the earlier efforts to standardize the Quran, establish the creed, and assemble authoritative collections of hadith. In short, establishing the specifics of orthopraxy (*al-islām*) and orthodoxy (*al-īmān*) consumed the attention of the majority of religious scholars during this time.

Some Muslims, however, sensing a danger in this increasingly exclusive focus upon the external requirements of the faith, began to elucidate and codify a complementary science that focused on the inner life (*al-ihsān*), a science rooted in the Quran, the Prophetic custom, and the practice of Muhammad's closest companions. This was called by some scholars and practitioners the "Science of the Way of the Afterlife" (*ilm tarīq al-ākhirā*), and it included both a practical, action-oriented knowledge that concerned the purification of the heart, and also a theoretical dimension that entered into the mysteries of faith. Acknowledging the ongoing validity and necessity of the duty-oriented religious science of jurisprudence (*al-fiqh*), these scholar-practitioners of the "inner way" argued that external form was not enough, as they turned their attention to the scrutiny of the attitudes, intentions, and mental states that are essential for the purification and governance of hearts striving to make their way toward God. Thus the sphere in which these "Doctors of the Afterlife" exercised their judgment and authority was the unseen world of the heart, a subtle domain beyond the perception of physical eyes and yet perceivable through experience and the spiritual eye of intuitive understanding.

Over time, certain masters came to stand out as exemplary teachers and practitioners of this discipline. By the twelfth century, Sufi lay societies or orders emerged, each governed by a great master, or shaykh, and by a personally-appointed successor, or kalif, in each generation. Each order's spiritual validity was authenticated by an unbroken chain of spiritual formation and transmission extending back to the founding shaykh and, beyond him, all the way back to the Prophet.

Sufism thus unfolded both as a religious science and as a social movement, with each society or order commanding large numbers of adherents. Indeed, as these orders continued to unfold and spread across the Islamic world, their masters came to wield tremendous authority—not just in the spiritual realm, but in the temporal world as well. These masters came to command the reverence and allegiance of thousands, even tens of thousands of disciples, each of whom had given an oath of obedience to the shaykh—and through the shaykh, to the Prophet and ultimately to God.

Thus, Gianotti concluded, the Sufism that helped to spread Islam through Central and East Asia, the Southeast Asian archipelago, the Indian Sub-Continent and sub-Saharan Africa was both a spiritual and a social force. The legacy it left was an Islam that preached with cultural sensitivity, promoted tolerance and inter-religious cooperation, and never abandoned the inner life and the spiritual core for the sake of solely political activism.

Dr. Zeki Saritoprak, Department of Religious Studies, John Carroll University

Saritoprak began his remarks by asserting that the theology of Sufism is a deep and mystical means through which one is able to penetrate into the world of unseen (*al-ghayb*) or into the realm of utmost reality. In fact, he argued, the whole tradition of Sufism in Islam can be expressed as a “continual quest for the unseen.” This is emphasized in the very first verses of the Quran, according to which those who are fearful of God and conscious of the divine are “those who believe in the unseen” (Q. 2: 3). In other words, it is through the eyes of one’s heart, and not one’s physical eyes, by which one comes to know God.

Saritoprak highlighted the importance of spirituality in Sufism by referring to the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad—the two main sources of Islam. All Sufis follow the Quranic saying, “This worldly life is nothing but a sport and the real life is the life of the hereafter” (Q. 6:32). Stressing the paramount importance of the heart, the Quran says, “Be aware. The heart can be satisfied only through the remembrance of God” (Q. 13:28). Saritoprak considers this the most relevant Quranic verse for Sufism, since it supplies two very important key terms: “purification of the heart” and the “remembrance of God,” both of which have comprised the essence of the Sufi tradition.

Sufis expect that as the result of knowing God, one will have His love and, hence, joyfulness of spirit. This journey encompasses three stages: belief in God, knowledge of God, and love of God; the latter stage results in love of God’s creation. As the famous Turkish mystic poet Yunus Emre said, “We love creatures for the sake of the Creator.” Sufis look at this universe as a book of God—every part of nature is considered as a sign of the divine. Through contemplation of nature, Sufis find a sense of spiritual joyfulness and peace. Consequently, Saritoprak stated, there is no place for hatred in the hearts of Sufis.

Medieval Islamic mystics constructed Sufi orders to assist followers in attaining the highest level of certainty during their journey towards the realm of the unseen. Emphasizing the importance of a guide in this journey, the famous thirteenth century Muslim mystic and poet Rumi said “If you enter the way without a guide, it will take a hundred years to make a two-day journey.” This journey is essentially a struggle against all human weaknesses. The Quran speaks of the human soul (*nafs*), which commands evil, as one such weakness. This struggle continues throughout the entirety of one’s life, as the *nafs* remains with humans until death. This is the case even for those who have attained the highest level of certainty. The struggle is not directly against the soul, but all evil or bad inclinations and habits. Concerning these constant efforts, Sufis view the saying of the Prophet Muhammad as their point of departure: “Your most dangerous enemy is the soul within you.”

Through this struggle, a Sufi will attempt to reach the level of what they call the “perfect human” (*insan-i kamil*). In these, the Sufi tradition also comprises three different stages of religious dedication: *‘ilm al-yaqīn* (certainty through learning); *‘ayn al-yaqīn* (certainty through observation); *haqq al-yaqīn* (certainty through experience). The latter is the highest form and is also described as the knowledge of God—which cannot be attained by all Sufis, though all Sufis strive to reach it.

Saritoprak stated that Ali, the fourth caliph and the son-in-law of the Prophet, provides a great personal example of this level of faith. Ali said, "If the veil of the unseen opens, the strength of my faith will not increase." In other words, his faith was so strong that even were he to see God, he could not believe with any more certainty. Accordingly, Ali is considered the sultan (spiritual leader) of all Sufis. Because the figure of Ali is so important for Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, it can serve as a type of common ground between the two traditions. Sufis in the Sunni tradition, in particular, greatly emphasize the importance of Ali. Accordingly, Saritoprak argued, they can promote dialogue between Shi'ites and Sunnites, two traditions which he labels as politically disparate yet theologically identical.

While the sources of Sufi theology are the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet, there can be no doubt, he argued, that Muslim mystics borrowed much from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The latter influenced Sufism through the personal examples of converted former Christian and Jewish mystics, as well as through the more general cultural interaction that would continue from the seventh century up to and beyond the period of the Crusades. As a result, many Sufis also consider Jesus an important spiritual example. There are even Sufis who remained celibate just to imitate Jesus in his celibacy. But despite the fact that Muslim Sufis have interacted with Christian and Jewish mystics, and respect Judeo-Christian traditions, the Quran and the sayings of Muhammad are considered to be the main and infallible sources of Sufism.

Nonetheless, throughout the history of Islam, there have been tensions between Sufis and scholars of Islamic law who reject that Sufi ideas are rooted in the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet. These are divided into two groups: those who rejected Sufism in the name of Islam and those who rejected Sufism in the name of modernity. The former group argues that Sufism was an innovation against the teachings of Islam, while the latter contends that Sufism was not applicable to modern times and simply a pacifism which resulted in the backwardness of the Muslim world in an era of science and technology.

The center of this tension was that the scholars esteemed the *shariah*, whereas Sufis respected the *haqiqah*. Scholars of Islamic law demanded that Sufis follow *shariah*, but many Sufis saw the code as nonessential, choosing instead to use the rational capabilities which they believed the Quran advocated. According to Saritoprak, Sufis believe that the scripture encourages Muslims to think and to use their reason to understand the meaning of creation. Some Muslim intellectuals, however, followed the way of reason as recommended by the scripture. Therefore, an Islamic judiciary system and much of Islamic thought came into being as a result of these scholarly efforts. Today, this tension continues in an extreme way as a struggle between Wahabism and Sufism.

Saritoprak argued that majority of Sufis remained loyal to the basic, traditional, teachings of Islam, but modern day developments brought new challenges for their lives. In Turkey, for example, despite being abolished in 1924, there are still a variety of Sufi orders who try to adapt to the challenges of modern life. The Naqshbandi order remains very popular in the politics and culture of Turkey. Other groups have established journals, newspapers, and even some financial institutions.

There are also some religiously oriented civic movements, which are technically not considered Sufi orders but have some Sufi elements in their spiritual life. Saritoprak considered as most important among such movements the followers of Fethullah Gulen, who emphasizes a compromise vision holding both modern life and Islamic spirituality as valuable. The Gulen movement is structurally different than the Sufi orders, particularly in its loose-knit relationships and its lack of a hierarchy. Like Sufi orders, it also does not abandon the “dimension of the heart.” Simply put, it strives for a sense of balance.

The sympathizers of the Gulen movement, who number in the millions, have established a large television network, a prominent newspaper – *Zaman* (Time), several financial institutions, and universities in and outside of Turkey. They favor a liberal education, focusing heavily on sciences. They also appear very open to diversity within these settings, with their student bodies encompassing a variety of ethnic and religious traditions.

The founder of the movement, Gulen, is not considered a shaykh, or leader of a Sufi order, but has authored various works on Sufism. Because there is no membership associated with this civic movement, and there is no Sufi style of structure, one could say that it is a civic spiritually-oriented movement with a modern understanding of Sufism. In other words, it can be understood as a new way of Sufism, or “neo-Sufism.”

Saritoprak concluded that the traditional way of Sufism will reconstruct itself according to the conditions of our modern day. As the spiritual pattern of Islam, Sufism will surely survive, although less prominent and powerful. He argued that neo-Sufism will draw more attention as it moves beyond merely spiritual matters into the social, political, and even economic realms.

Dr. Hedieh Mirahmadi Executive Director, Islamic Supreme Council of America

Underlining the points made by Gianotti and Saritoprak, Mirahmadi argued that the most important aspect of the history of Sufism is the fact that it has existed alongside other Islamic traditions from the earliest days of the religion’s existence. She stated that in the early years of Islam, spirituality was a discipline without a name, and now it is becoming a name without a discipline.

To explain the above comment, she began by discussing how the traumatic events of the 20th century (the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the various colonial conquests by Western powers, and the general decline of Islamic civilization) brought a new wave of thought in the Islamic world, which sought to unify Muslims into a political force directed against Europe and the US. This new ideology, commonly referred as Wahhabism (and which today is sometimes called Salafism) was described to believers as an attempt to purify the practices of Muslims around the world from the Western-influenced actions of Sufis and others. These new ideologues explained that the reason behind their failure to resist Western colonialism was the corruption of the faith. They argued that Muslims had been “too lenient” with the new cultures entering Islam and as a result had earned God’s wrath.

The success of this politicized fundamentalism depended on the creation of a united force that would be capable of opposing the West. The solution was to rely upon the Holy Quran. In order to exploit the scripture, they redefined Islamic law based on an extremely literalist

interpretation of the religion's written traditions. This solution was indeed successful, Mirahmadi pointed out, and people did not realize that the Wahhabis were reinterpreting reasoned theological and legal opinions that had stood for centuries. It appeared to almost everyone that they were simply "purifying the faith."

The new interpretations gave the reformers all the legal cover necessary to obscure their systematic obliteration of tolerant, pluralist Muslim practice. First to come in this "deconstruction" of Islamic culture, as Mirahmadi termed it, was the elimination of social Sufi centers where shaykhs and young students would learn from one another, building lasting social networks. In the new educational centers and mosques which replaced them, the focus on spirituality was eliminated and the curriculum revamped with a heavy new emphasis on political theory. The new imams that replaced the shaykhs similarly began preaching excessively on the superiority of Islam over other religious traditions.

Mirahmadi said that people often ask how such a massive population of people over 1 billion allowed their faith to be altered so dramatically. The simple answer is that it was not a matter of "allowing" it to be altered—some resisted, and resisted mightily. She argued, "This massive Wahhabi deconstruction effort has brought blood and violence to nearly every corner of the Muslim world. Parents and children turned against each other and families were torn apart as the new generation was educated in Salafi thought."

Therefore, she stressed, it is important to realize that long before this aggression manifested itself against the US and its allies, it destroyed the social fabric of mainstream Muslims everywhere. Mirahmadi concluded that it is impossible to escape the influence of Salafi and Wahhabi destruction anywhere in the world.

Turning to the question of US policy, she argued that due to the secular nature of the American political system, it is difficult to imagine US policymakers openly endorsing the value of Sufism. However, she stated, if the US can approach assistance programs holistically, keeping in mind the culture and history of the various countries, it may find itself able to help such nations regain their lost heritage. A very real incentive for the US to do so is to deflect some of the increasing criticism from Muslims that the war on terror is purposely directed at destroying Islam. Accordingly, she presented three specific ways in which the United States could help.

First is in the preservation and/or reconstruction of shrines of Saints and their associated centers of learning. The Salafis deny the concept of Saints and often destroy and desecrate centuries-old shrines, particularly in Central Asia. Rebuilding and preserving them would fortify the ancient traditions of the people. She reminded the audience that these are the places where people from all over the world would gather to socialize, learn and build bridges of tolerance and understanding. They also are great sources of legitimate foreign-currency earnings because they attract international tourism.

Second is in the preservation and translation of ancient manuscripts. Some of the great poetry and science as well as historically important literary manuscripts remain obscure because there is no funding for efforts to disseminate them. With such assistance, the documents could prove to a wider audience the historical precedent for such inclusive traditions within Islam.

Thirdly, the US could be helpful in the creation and funding of educational centers that focus on ancient history and civilization of the region, with a particular emphasis on the precedent of religious and ethnic toleration. These centers can also help the community “retrain” those youth who have become disenchanted with the aggressiveness of Wahhabi thought.

These initiatives will be very helpful provided that the US undertakes proper due diligence so it does not fund the wrong groups, and accordingly only works with those who have proven themselves in their communities to be advocates of peace, multi-religious tolerance and moderation.

Panel 2: Sufism in Eurasia

Dr. Alan Godlas, Department of Religion, University of Georgia

Dr. Mohammad Faghfoory, Department of Religion, George Washington University

Dr. Charles Fairbanks, Director, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University

Alex Alexiev, Senior Fellow, Center for Security Policy

Dr. Alan Godlas, Department of Religion, University of Georgia

Godlas addressed the loss of the collective memory of Sufism in Central Asia—especially in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan—during the period of Soviet rule. He argued that the US can support the preservation of this collective memory by supporting indigenous revivals, but this must be done differently in each country.

Unquestionably, throughout Islamic history one of the primary centers of Sufism has been Central Asia. Yet for nearly 80 years the Soviets so thoroughly repressed Sufism in the region that it is largely unknown today. The mechanisms by which this repression was carried out are broadly comparable to the tactics of the Wahhabis. Sufi religious leaders were often killed, and the *madrassahs* in which they transmitted knowledge were closed. Sufi texts were banned, and religious scholars who attempted to research them were considered as backward and, worse, as “enemies of the Soviet people.” As a result, studies in Central Asian Sufi texts and culture were avoided by Soviet scholars of religion who were concerned with their lives and careers. Exceptions were made only when they could recast certain Sufis as “proto-Marxists” struggling against feudalism. One of the major problems today in the research of Sufism in Central Asia is that Soviet-era academic work portrayed Sufism in this limited and inadequate fashion. As a result, Godlas contended, the recent history of Sufism in Central Asia is little known, both to Western scholars as well to the people of Central Asia themselves. Since Sufism was largely absent in the collective memory of Central Asian Muslims, after the collapse of the USSR this gap in culture and identity was filled by extremist Muslims of the Wahhabi, Salafi, and Maududi sects.

Fortunately, some Central Asian countries have realized how important the recovery of Sufi culture is for their societies. In Uzbekistan, there has been an increase in the publishing of works about Sufis such as Baha ud-din Naqshband and Najmuddin Kubra. Most recently in 2004, the state has supported the publishing of an important masterpiece of Central Asian Sufi literature, translating into modern Uzbek Alisher Nava'i's *The Language of the Birds*. There has

even been a governmental public educational attempt to combine the Western concept of “civil society” with recast elements of Sufism. For instance, in Uzbekistan, in 1994 a ministry called the “Public Center for Spirituality and Enlightenment” was established, but instead of the original meaning of *maneviyat* (spirituality) and *ma'rifat* (direct knowledge gained through spiritual experience), these terms were portrayed in secular senses, i.e., “reaching one’s full potential” and “participating fully in civil society.” While far from being an institutional revival of traditional Uzbek Sufi culture, such moves can nevertheless be seen as a non-Wahhabi step beyond its Marxist past, containing at least the seeds for a marriage of traditional Uzbek Sufi values with those of a “civil society.”

Godlas suggested that another component of any reconstruction of Sufi identity in Uzbekistan must be the support of its traditional Naqshbandi Sufism in particular. This tradition already has a foothold in the country: the largest *madrassah* in Central Asia is led by a Naqshbandi, as is the state committee for religious studies. Additionally, near the city of Kokand there is a shaykh currently exemplifying and teaching classical Naqshbandi values. Soviet era scholars tended to highlight Sufi militant activity and in official circles there still appears to be a degree of fear of religious activity. However, he said, it seems that Naqshbandi culture in particular and Sufism in general is being seen by at least some in the Uzbek government as supportive of social change through gradual cultural reeducation, rather than through militant Wahhabi revolution or Taliban-style forcible imposition of religious values. Although it is unlikely that Uzbek Sufis would welcome foreign assistance (the dangers of such collaboration being well known), in the very least the US can encourage governmental openness to the reemergence of Naqshbandi Sufism.

In addition to revivals of traditional Central Asian Sufi values in public educational institutions, publishing, and Naqshbandi Sufism, another cultural revival of Sufi values—throughout Central Asia—is through shrine visitation. Referring to David Tyson’s article entitled, “Shrine Pilgrimage in Turkmenistan,” Godlas underlined the importance of shrine visitation and its connection with Turkmen tribal identity. Under the Soviets, however, the Sufi cultural and historical connections to the shrines—particularly in Turkmenistan—were often lost, creating a cultural void. The significance of Sufi shrine visitation, however, is by no means unique to Turkmen identity; it also plays an important role—to varying degrees—in the identity of Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Afghans, and Tajiks. To some degree a cultural revival connected with the shrine of Baha al-din Naqhsband in Bukhara is already in progress; but what has been done is just a fraction of what is possible. By publishing translations of Sufi or Sufi-related works into local languages as well as English (such as has been done with the Ahmet Yesevi in Kazakhstan), this cultural void can be partially filled, thereby assisting each country in the revival of its own traditional Sufi identity and its integration with a contemporary national identity.

In short, Godlas stated, as Central Asian countries reconstruct their identities and move away from both Marxist and Wahhabi identities, the US would do well to support each country's own attempts to revive its local Sufi identity and integrate it with each national identity, through 1) encouraging the publishing of works about local Sufis and of translations of the classical Sufi texts (by local Sufis) in both modern local languages and in English (given the popularity and significance of English for the youth, in particular); 2) encouraging the integration of Sufi values

with those of civil society in educational institutions; 3) advising various Central Asian nations to adopt an attitude of openness toward Naqshbandi revival in particular; and 4) encouraging Sufi cultural and literary revivals specifically in conjunction with the existing traditions of shrine visitation in each country. Recently, in a completely different region of the world that has nevertheless suffered from Wahhabi inroads, in Morocco, Godlas learned through conversations with Moroccan officials that a similar program of intentionally reviving traditional local Sufism—albeit without US assistance—is being implemented.

In the end, he said, Wahhabi versus Sufi Islam is indeed in a genuine battle over who will define and lead Islam in Central Asia and throughout the world. If the United States takes a proactive stance in supporting the revival of Central Asian Sufism, it may be able to move the region out of the hands of militants towards a more irenic future.

Dr. Mohammad H. Faghfoory, Department of Religion, The George Washington University

Faghfoory focused his presentation on Persia, which has long had a close connection with Sufism, as evidenced by Persian spiritual practices and reflected in Persian literature. Salman Farsi, the first Persian convert to Islam and a close companion of the Prophet, symbolizes the Persian soul's curiosity and love of the truth. Many important Sufi orders including the largest Sunni *tariqah-i mubarakah-i Naqshbandiyah* grew within a Persian cultural framework and was enriched by such poets as Abd al-Rahman Jami. Another order, the *Nimatullahi* order that grew in the Shi'i Persia has been popular for many centuries in Iran. Sufism has also given birth to popular practices like *A'yin-i futuwwat/Javanmardi* (spiritual chivalry) and *Pahlavani* and institutions such as the bazaar guild.

Although the history of Sufism in Persia is marked by occasional conflicts between Sufi orders and the Shi'ite clergy, in general the relationship between the two groups has often been non-violent. Often both sides tolerated or ignored one another. After the victory of the Islamic revolution in 1979, said Faghfoory, the age-old tension and conflict between *arif* and *alim* (that is, between Sufis and orthodox clergy) came to the fore once again. There were reported threats against *khaniqahs*, or Sufi meeting-houses, some of which were in fact attacked by the mobs. Their activities were restricted by the anti-Sufi atmosphere promoted by low-ranking members of the clergy. The leadership of most orders left Iran for Europe and the United States and advised their disciples to keep a low profile for their safety and security.

Despite all this, however, because of Sufism's deep roots, the last decade has witnessed an unprecedented rise in its popularity. One indication has been the publication of a large number of books on Sufism, especially texts that were previously available only to Sufis in the form of manuscripts. To this list, Faghfoory said, should be added translations of many books on Sufism and Islamic spirituality by well-known scholars of Sufism such as Frithjof Schuon, Titus Burkhardt, Martin Lings, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

Some scholars have published editions of their works intended for a broader audience. Among them are books such as the biography of Rumi by Abdul-Husayn Zarrinkoob, the treatise on *Shams Tabrizi*, and the eighth edition of *Allamah Tabatabai's Lubb-i lubab*. There also has been a revival of Sufi music as indicated by the popularity of certain musicians such as

Muhammad Reza Lutfi, Shahram Nazeri and Muhammad Rida Shajarian, in addition to the Qawwali music of Nusrat Fath Ali Khan, the recording of the Sama sessions, the videotaping of the *majalis* and the music of *Mevlevi* and *Khawati-Jarrahi* orders.

Faghfoory then listed several well-known orders active in Iran with branches in Europe and the United States:

1) The *Nimatullahi* order –Originally a Sunni order that became Shi'a in the sixteenth century. Currently, this order has four main branches. One is derived from Munis Ali Shah Dhur-riyasatayn. Its present Shaykh, Dr. Javad Noorbakhash, resides in London. This branch is very active in publishing books on Sufism.

2) The *Kawthariyah* order: Hajj Muhammad Hasan Maraghehi, known as Mahbub Ali Shah Pir-i Maraghah, was one of the most prominent and exalted Sufi masters of Iran in the twentieth century and was recognized as the *Qutb* of the *Nimatullahi-Kawthariyah* order until he died in 1955. According to one report he left a written will in which he had designated Mr. Ali Asghar Maleknia, his *khalifah* and trusted disciple, as his successor. Those who joined him became collectively known as the *Nimatullahi Kawthariyah* order.

Members of this Shi'a order, explained Faghfoory, observe the *shariah* and are especially punctilious in commemorating the birthdays of the Prophet and Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib and other important Shi'i events. In terms of ethnicity and class composition, it is interesting to note that the order is predominantly composed of Azerbaijanis of both traditional and modern middle classes. The main *khaniqah* of this order is in the city of Rayy outside Tehran but it has deep roots in Azerbaijan where a *khaniqah* is maintained in the city of Maraghah. Mr. Maleknia (whose *tariqah* name was Nasir Ali Shah) passed away in 1998 in France. His body was taken to Iran and buried in his *khaniqah* in Rayy, next to his master Mahbub Ali Shah.

3) *Nimatullahi Gunabadi* order: One of this school's most eminent masters in the twentieth century was Sultan Husayn Tabandeh. He was an orthodox Shi'ah and carefully observed the *Shariah*.

4) *Shamsiyah* order: This order was named after Sayyid Husayn Husayni, also known as Shams ul-'Urafa (1871-1935). His disciples were divided after him.

5) *Safi Ali Shahi*: This order was also named after its chief figure, Safi Ali Shah Isfahani

6) *Dhahabiyah* order: this order, as Faghfoory points out, was originally an offshoot of a Central Asian order known as the *Kubrawiyah*. Its founder Sayyid Ali Hamadani (b. 1314) was a descendent of Imam Sajjad, and a disciple of Ala al-Dawlah Semnani(d. 736/1336). The main center of this order is Fars province in Iran (particularly the city of Shiraz), but it also has a *khaniqah* in Tehran and another in Tabriz. The *Kubrawiyah* order itself was established by Shaykh Najm al-Din Kura in the city of Khwarazm., and is particularly known for its resistance to the Mongol invasion of that city in 1221/618. Among the most eminent Shaykhs of this order is Sayyid Muhammad Nurbakhsh (d. 1464/869). Under the latter Shaykh, the order accepted

Shi'ism. The *Oweysi tariqah*, known in Iran today as *Maktab-i Tariqat-i Oweysi Shahmaqsoodi* branched out of the Nurbakhshiyah order.

7) In addition to these and other smaller groups (i.e. Aliullahi) which are Shi'a, there are several Sunni orders in Iran that are closely identified with particular ethnic groups. In Kurdistan, for example, the Naqshbandi and Qadiriya orders have a considerable number of followers, while in Luristan, the Qadiriya order has a fairly strong presence.

There are several important and unique aspects that characterize Sufi orders, Faghfoory reiterated, which originated and are still present in Persia/Iran. The most notable aspect is their adherence to Shi'ism (*Irfan Shi'i*).

The hitherto unknown *irfani* current, which has not been seriously studied to date, is a strand of Sufism that has existed in secret. It is found mostly among the *ulama* who reject formal *tassawwuf* but are attracted to the esoteric teachings of Shi'ite imams, especially Imam Ali, Imam Zayn al-Abidin Sajjad and Imam Ali ibn Musa al-Reza. Faghfoory explained that it possesses all the characteristics of a *silsilah*, linking master to disciple, but it lacks the formal organization that characterizes the khaniqahi Sufi orders. Instead, its membership is predominantly limited to religious scholars, with the addition of a few dedicated bazaar merchants and religious intellectuals. It involves regular transmission of the power to initiate (*wilayah*) and spiritual direction. In sum, it has all nearly characteristics of other Sufi orders except the name "Sufi" itself.

This current has been present in the Shi'i learning centers (*hawzah*) in Qum, Mashhad, Tehran, as well as in Karbala and Najaf, but its presence remains rather hidden. Its methods and disciplines are taught only orally to a highly selected group of individuals who are initiated while studying the major texts of theoretical *irfan*. Among the most important masters during the last two centuries, Faghfoory mentions Ayatullah Sayyid Mahdi Bahr ul-ulum, Mulla Husayn Quli Hamadani, Shaykh Ahmad Karbalai, Sayyid Ali Qadi Tabatabai Tabrizi, Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, Sayyid Hashim Haddad, Muhammad Jawad Ansari, and Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Husayni Tehrani. All these men were among the most remarkable *ulama* of Persia and Iraq and respected highly as not only religious scholars, but also as saintly men to whom miracles were often attributed.

Nearly all of the above-mentioned groups have or soon will have had established contacts with counterparts in Central Asian republics, particularly as those orders (*turuq*) that were forced underground during the period of Soviet occupation begin to come into the open in the newly independent states. If history is to be a guide, said Faghfoory, Iran will thus continue to be a major source of inspiration for the Sufi Muslims of the region.

Central Asia was first conquered by Muslim forces during the caliphate of Mu'awiyah. Particularly after the Mongol conquest of Baghdad in 1258, Sufism became the main channel for the spread of Islam in Central Asia. Compared to other Islamic traditions, Sufism spread more rapidly due to its openness to and acceptance of other religions and its clear yet simple emphases on simplicity, piety, and purity. The process continued apace during the Ottoman period (14th-18th centuries). In fact, Central Asian cities, such as Bukhara and Samarkand, became major

centers of Islamic scholarship, housing hundreds of *madrassahs*. The School of Khorasan that emerged, represented by towering figures such as Bayazid Bastami, and Hakim Tirmadhi, Abu Nasr Sarraj, Abu'l-Hasan Kharraqani, and Abd al-Rahman Sulami, found widespread popularity in the Greater Khorasan (i.e., Central Asia).

In Central Asia, as in other regions, Sufism represents the cosmopolitan, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of Islam, which are capable of and willing to engage in discourse with other cultures and religions (especially the other Abrahamic faiths). Sufi history in Central Asia, argued Faghfoory, bears out this point: upon entering the region, it faced a variety of religions and religious traditions ranging from Zoroastrianism to shamanistic animism. Yet Sufism accepted them all as different manifestations of a single Truth, treating them with respect (and earning their respect in turn). Since Sufism spread predominantly by merchants and traveling scholars, it was able to gain access to a ready audience in both urban and rural areas. Once established, it remained nearly unchanged for several centuries. He mentioned that as late as 1988 an observer noted that organized networks of Sufi brotherhoods that have been popular in Central Asia since medieval times continue to exercise considerable influence on the Muslims. Of these, the Naqshbandi order is the most popular, followed by the *Qadiriyyah*, the *Khalwatiyya*, and the *Yasawiyah* orders.

Despite the defeat of several Muslim uprisings against Tsarist Russia during the nineteenth century, Islam survived in the Russian Empire and later in the USSR due mainly, said Faghfoory, to the strength of Sufi networks, particularly that of the Naqshbandi order. According to 1970 statistics, 500,000 out of 27 million were involved in Sufi brotherhoods. Some of the older Sufi orders including the Qadiris and the Chishtis avoided direct political involvement, but others, especially the Naqshbandi, became involved in Russia's political life during the latter half of the 19th century.

In general, the organization of the Sufi brotherhoods was highly effective in spreading religious concepts, as well revolution and armed resistance. Throughout these years, Persian remained the main medium of communication (especially in Sufi poetry). Faghfoory believes on the basis of the evidence that this trend will continue and gain new momentum in the years to come. Already in Tajikistan increasing attention is paid to the closely-related Persian language and its poetry, as indicated by new editions of *diwans* and Sufi texts.

Faghfoory urged the audience to realize that Sufism can play a dual role in the contemporary Muslim world. It can become a constructive part in the political process because, on the one hand, it is capable of "*Islamizing*" democracy; on the other hand, it is capable of *democratizing* Islam. It can also contribute to political stability in Iran and Central Asia by bringing about understanding among competing political groups and factions and much-needed tolerance toward other religions, ideas and currents. By virtue of its cosmopolitanism and tolerance, Sufism can also become an important factor in Iran's relations with the outside world on intellectual, spiritual, cultural, and political levels. Because of the richness of its legacy in Persian-Islamic culture, Persian Sufism can act as a source of inspiration for other Sufi groups and movements beyond Iran's territories in places such as Tajikistan and Chechnya. In this capacity it can facilitate Iran's relations with Central Asian republics as well as Afghanistan, particularly with regions such as Bukhara, Samarkand, Heart, and Khawarazm.

However, Faghfoory cautioned, Sufism in the entire Muslim world today is still the target of attack from two directions. Sufism is criticized by modernist groups because they consider it passive, soft before power, and in conflict with the modern way of life. It is also attacked by the fundamentalist camp on the grounds that it is against Islamic orthodoxy. Sufism considers these two currents as the two sides of the same coin. Because both of these groups—knowingly or unknowingly—are actively engaged in the *ideologization* of Islam and using Islam as a political ideology to attain their goals.

Dr. Charles Fairbanks, Director, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University

Fairbanks focused his presentation on Sufism in the North and South Caucasus. He argued that in a war against terrorism of a quasi-religious nature, Washington's secular foreign policy elite starts at a great disadvantage. In addition, though there has been some excellent scholarship done on the roots of terrorism in the Middle East, this work has a certain impress of its historical origins in 18th-century Enlightenment Germany. The forerunners of today's scholars were mostly children and grandchildren of Protestant ministers. Consequently, Fairbanks argued, modern scholarship has implicitly served the historical function of the scholarly anti-clericalism which sets up yet another obstacle that must be overcome in order to develop a better understanding of the origins of terrorism.

After all, said Fairbanks, if one takes a long view of history, one can see that modern scholarship has served to assist in the replacement of the medieval Christian Commonwealth (and, to a lesser extent, the replacement of the Islamic *umma*) by modern, secular nation-states. Scholarship still tends to be colored by Protestantism, particularly in countries with a protestant tradition. Modern scholarship is also biased by the fact that many English-speaking specialists on Islam come from the Indian subcontinent where there is a Salafi or anti-syncretistic tradition of Islam that eventually merged with Wahhabi currents.

However, explained Fairbanks, there are two correct scholarly generalizations that apply to Sufism in the Caucasus. The first is that the Caucasus—except the Shi'ite areas of Azerbaijan—is indeed part of the majority of the Muslim world where the great synthesis of *shariah* and Sufism pioneered by Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali was totally successful. In the North Caucasus—at least until Wahhabism was introduced from outside—there was a fusing of Sufism with Islamic scholarship or religious science. All Sufi shaykhs were well educated, and, before Communist rule, the literary language of Dagestan and of Chechnya was Arabic. After 1991, French and Russian scholars discovered small villages in highland Dagestan, near the Georgian border, which retained an active tradition of teaching Arabic and the Islamic sciences in secret throughout the Soviet period.

Fairbanks next discussed the Naqshbandi presence in the Caucasus, which was introduced into the region in the 14th century. It was later reinforced by the Naqshbandi Haqqania suborder, which was predominant in the 19th century. This occurred on the heels of a major revival of, what Fairbanks calls, “political Sufism,” an insufficiently analyzed, though important, phenomenon. Later in this century, the Naqshbandia Haqqania began to confront Russian imperialism and was soon identified with the broader anti-colonial struggle. The

northeast Caucasus, i.e., Ingushetia, Chechnya, Dagestan and parts of Azerbaijan, became a place like Poland, Lithuania and Ireland—lands in which religion and nationalism were virtually fused.

There were four Imams in the North Caucasus beginning in 1829, and the last and most famous Imam Shamil, chosen in 1832, waged an extremely successful war (*jihad*) against Russia on the pattern of similarly successful *jihads* waged by people like Abdul Qadir, a Qadiri Sufi in Algeria in the 1830s and 1840s and the West African *jihads* by people like Usman dan Fodio in Nigeria and Niger. There was a great outpouring of political Sufism in the 18th and 19th centuries, and Imam Shamil became a very famous man. Fairbanks pointed out that his significance increased dramatically after his death, especially during the persecutions by Stalin after World War II. Even the descendants of those who fought him in Dagestan and Chechnya celebrated him as a national hero who had a great impact on the world.

Though Imam Shamil's state, in most respects, was very close to *shariah*, the harsh Soviet rule had a tremendous impact in keeping his memory alive. In this period, the Quran was hardly printed, the Hadiths were accessible only if one had buried a copy in the backyard, and *kutub* primary schools were suppressed in the 1920s and 1930s. All *madrassahs* and all institutions of secondary or higher Islamic learning, closed in the late 1920s. Two Islamic institutes with a very distorted and shortened curriculum began again from 1952 on a tiny scale. Education in Arabic continued only in secret or (after a thorough period of government scrutiny) at the Oriental Institutes of Moscow, Leningrad and a few other places. As a result, the *ulama* diminished substantially; for example, in Bukhara, the number went down from 45,000 at the time of the Russian revolution to 8,000 in 1955.

Sufism, driven underground (because of Imam Shamil) and deprived of its connection with Islamic scholarship, became more folkish, more local, more ethnic and more “pagan” (the latter according to the Salafis), which had an international impact on the *tariqat*, or the orders. With no permissible teaching of Islam, the differentiation of students and those who develop into *khalifahs*, or successors, of a Shaykh became truncated. The hierarchy and the links to the international Sufi orders ultimately collapsed. Due to the need for secrecy, there were no particular buildings where Sufis met or lived. Sufism—either the Naqshbandiya or the Qadiriyyah order—was inherited directly from one's parents. Sufism became more of a social institution and an aspect of Chechen and particularly northwest Dagestani social and family life rather than a real path one chooses. Neither student nor the *mullahs* differ markedly in appearance or in practices from the surrounding society. This is the starting point for Wahhabism, which has taken over the political-ideological dimension of Islam.

There is no political Islam of the Sufi nature in the north Caucasus, and in the end, concluded Fairbanks, it is not Sufism that the West must fear in the Caucasus. The Sufis may fight against Russia—and most of the Chechen fighters are still Sufis—but it is a personal matter—they do not want to fight and die for world *jihad* like their Wahhabi-influenced compatriots.

Alex Alexiev, Senior Fellow, Center for Security Policy

Alexiev focused his presentation on the conflict between Sufism and Wahhabism. As other speakers noted, this conflict is not new; in fact, it dates back to the founding of Wahhabism. The conflict in the Caucasus, however, is new, because until very recently there simply were no Wahhabis. After the fall of Communism, Sufi Islam was revived, and according to a Dagestani official, 60 percent of the local population identify themselves as Sufi. There are 40 registered brotherhoods, and it is not an exaggeration to say that Sufism is again assuming its historical role in North Caucasus. But the rise of Wahhabism has been far more remarkable.

Alexiev argued that the conflict between Sufis and Wahhabis is emblematic of a larger struggle between fundamentalism and syncretism, a struggle for the very soul of Islam. One important difference between the two is the interpretation of *jihad*: in Sufism, it is a striving for personal spiritual purification, while for Wahhabis it represents the struggle for the worldwide victory of Islam. Similarly, tribal, clan, and national loyalties are important for Sufis, while Wahhabis consider such thinking as anti-Islamic. They argue that one should strive for a North Caucasian Islamic Republic first and then ultimately for the triumph of the *umma* worldwide.

Accordingly, Alexiev explained, the Wahhabi influence serves to exacerbate existing conflicts within the region. For the Chechens, the primary objective in their armed conflict has been autonomy and perhaps independence, while the Wahhabis had a different agenda. It started with *perestroika* in 1986, when for the first time the local Muslims were given the ability “to be Muslims again,” and when travel to Russia became easier, it enabled Saudi missionaries to enter the country. Conditions also existed in the region that were in many ways congenial to the growth of extremist Islam, such as severe poverty and deep disillusionment among Muslims with their collaborationist establishment leaders.

Nonetheless, Alexiev argued, what made the rather dramatic spread of Wahhabism possible was money, and lots of it. The Saudis have said that they have spent over 80 billion dollars in assisting Islamic activities around the world since the mid-70s, of which a considerable amount went to the North Caucasus. Precisely how much is not known, but as a frame of reference, one could look at Bosnia. The Saudis spent 600 million dollars in Bosnia in the 1990s, which is \$300 per Muslim in that country. There are thus now 160 Wahhabi mosques, countless *madrassahs* and many other radical Islamic institutions in the heart of a formerly moderate Muslim region. The same thing has happened in the Northern Caucasus; although there are no precise figures, Wahhabi mosques and *madrassahs* are everywhere. Alexiev noted that virtually all Islamic newspapers and all Islamic organizations are of the extremist sort in this region. And virtually all of this growth was funded by Saudi money.

The Wahhabis thus established a small but very powerful community comprising roughly 5 percent of the North Caucasian population. Their entry into the region resulted in radicalization in the Chechen resistance to the degree that it became an armed advocate of Wahhabism. In addition to attacking the Russians, it also attacked the Sufis. They began destroying Sufi tombs, accusing Sufi shaykhs of apostasy, and declaring Sufis as “kafirs.” After the Wahhabi invasion of Dagestan was beaten back by the local population—with the aid of the Russian military—in August 2000, Wahhabism was banned. Now, the problem of open invasions seems to be under control, but, concluded Alexiev, it is very much an ongoing concern in the underground.

KEYNOTE LUNCH DISCUSSION

Bernard Lewis:

What I will say now is partly the result of what I have been listening to today, and partly the result of reflections on the purpose of today's meeting, that is, to discuss the relevance of these practical questions to foreign policy, national security and international relations. There are three points I would like to make. The first one is communication. We are talking about relations not just between countries, but between societies, cultures, religions and civilizations. Throughout all of human history, we see continuous misunderstanding and failures to read, to understand, and to appreciate what is happening "on the other side of the fence." We all, on both sides, come to the natural tendency to extrapolate from ourselves and to assume that they are doing what we would do, they are reacting as we would react, they are meaning by what they say what we would mean if we said the same thing. Sometimes it is right but often it is dangerously wrong.

Let me get down to some specifics on this. First, let me begin with the simplistic and basic question of communication: language and translation. I became keenly aware of this long time ago when I was doing a piece of research on the beginnings of Anglo-Turkish diplomatic relations in the late 16th century. There were lots of documents in the Turkish and British archives and many letters exchanged between Queen Elizabeth and Sultan Murad. In England there was not a single person who knew any Turkish and in Turkey there was not a single person who knew any English. So they proceeded with a two-stage translation. If anyone compares the original documents on both sides one sees a pattern of systematic, purposeful mistranslation. The Sultan—at the time the lord of the universe—writes to Queen in a purportedly a friendly letter: "You will continue to be firm-footed on the part of submission on loyalty to our world embracing throne." The English translation that would reach the Queen says, "We count on your continuing friendship and good will." The reply, no doubt was modified and adjusted in the same way.

About thirty years ago, I had occasion to compare monitoring reports of Arabic broadcasts. That was before memory was established and the only services available were monitoring reports prepared by various governments on some purposes. But usually they were made available in one form or another. The BBC Arabic Service prepared monitoring reports of Arabic Broadcast for official use. The Voice of America did similar things for American news and copies were available too. When I compared them, I discovered that in the British monitoring reports, the listeners and translators employed by the BBC systematically edited out anything likely to be offensive to a British reader while retaining all the anti-American material. In the reports prepared in America, exactly the opposite took place. The anti-American material was discreetly edited out, while the anti-British items remained. You can see it to the present day, if you look at the published versions of speeches. The late president Nasser's speech was published in book form and you can easily compare the Arabic originals and English translations. There is a pattern of mistranslation which certainly affects all forms of communication.

The answer of course is to learn languages. Unfortunately, we seem to be seeing regress rather than progress. When I was an undergraduate in the early 20th century, I was learning

Arabic. By the second year, we were expected to read classical Arabic prose and by the third year we would read the Quran and the Hadiths. Nowadays, we feel we are doing very well if by the end of the fourth year students can stumble through a newspaper article. This is part of a change in the pattern. It is a difficulty and I have no suggestion on what to do about that. The question is not just the translation simply from one language to another; instead, the question is one of understanding.

In Christian Europe, there was an attempt from a fairly early stage to understand something about Islam, about classical Arabic literature, Islamic religion and so forth. This goes back to the High Middle Ages and is based on good practical considerations. After all, armed Islam was invading Europe and Europeans felt that something needed to be done. The study of Islam continued even after the threat of invasion receded. From 16th-17th century onwards there were chairs of Arabic in European Universities. The first chair of Arabic in France was established at the *Collège de France* at the beginning of the 16th century. The first French “imperial” incursion into the Arab world took place in 1798 in Egypt. Either the French orientalist were extraordinarily prescient, or the French imperialists were extraordinarily dilatory. And more importantly, they learned Arabic and established chairs of Arabic because Arabic was a classical and scriptural language and therefore worthy to take its place beside Latin, Greek and Biblical Hebrew in universities. But they did not establish chairs of Persian and Turkish even though by the 15th-16th centuries Arabic did not matter anymore in public life. Rulers of the Arab world were all speakers and writers of Turkish and Persian. They did not have chairs in Persian and Turkish for the same reason they did not have chairs of English and French: vernacular languages were not suitable material for university study. They continued to try to understand Islam, its language and its theology, which we call “Orientalism.”

However, there was no corresponding “Occidentalism.” On the other side, we find a total lack of interest in Europe until attention was forced by conquest and domination. Even then, the attention paid was to the contemporary. While European orientalist learned Classical Arabic and studied the Quran, the Middle Easterners who studied European languages were only concerned with contemporary problems. There is, for example, by the 18th and 19th centuries a vast literature of serious scholarship about Islamic law and theology by European Christians (and Jews). I am not aware of any serious study of Christian doctrinal theology by Muslim scholars. It just did not seem to be of interest or importance. It is a difference of perception.

I grew up in a generation where it was still permitted to make critical observations of other societies and favorable ones about one’s own. I realize that neither one is permitted in the present day. This difference is certainly an important element in the difficulty of communication that we still find not only surviving but increasing in the present time.

Let me turn now to the second point I want to make, which is about Wahhabism. We heard a great deal about Wahhabis during this meeting, but one important point remains to be made: Wahhabism is about as central in Islam, about as relevant to what you might call the major Islamic traditions, as the Ku Klux Klan is to Christianity. The enormous difference in *impact* between the two groups is due to a confluence of circumstances which happily did not take place in the Christian world: the conversion of the house of Saud and local tribal shaykhs in Necd to the Wahhabi doctrine in the 18th century, the establishment of the Saudi Kingdom in the 1920’s

which included Mecca and Medina, and, worst of all, the discovery of oil. This meant that suddenly the Wahhabi monarchy was awash with oil money and controlled the two holiest places in Islam, with all its attendant prestige, manifested most of all in the control of the *Hajj*, the pilgrimage.

Westerners have great difficulty in understanding the importance of pilgrimage because it has no equivalency in Christian or Western history. Christians did make pilgrimages, but they were individual journeys taken at individually-convenient times. The Muslim pilgrimage was and is a corporate activity taking place at a certain time every year, drawing Muslims from every corner of the Muslim world. This experience established a level of communication within the Muslim world which has no parallel in the Christian world until the invention of modern mass media. Every year, Muslims come and participate in common ceremonies and rituals and naturally exchange thoughts and information. So there is a degree of intercommunication within the Muslim world through the pilgrimage, the importance of which is difficult to exaggerate. And once the House of Saud took control, this all came under the control of Wahhabi rulers. Add to this wealth arising due to oil, and the result is the transformation into a world force of something which would otherwise have been a lunatic sect on the fringes of a marginal country.

The third thing I would like to talk about is Sufism, and on this topic I wish to make one or two points. Nowadays, we talk a great deal about “tolerance,” and we hear a great deal of the legendary “tolerance” exhibited by Islamic Spain in the Middle Ages. Let me make clear what is meant by this. Tolerance is an essentially intolerant ideal. What do we mean when we say tolerance? Basically it means this: “I will allow you some, not all, of the rights of which I enjoy as long as you behave yourself according to rule which I will lay down.” I think this is fair definition of tolerance as practiced in Europe and other parts of the world. Now obviously it is a lot better than intolerance. If one compares the tolerance granted by the Ottoman Empire at its height with what was allowed in contemporaneous Europe, obviously the former was vastly better. Jews were able to find refuge in the Ottoman Empire and in the various Muslim states of North Africa. But it was still, what one would call in modern language, “second class citizenship.” This is clearly better than none at all.

But Sufism is remarkable. It offers something better than tolerance. The attitude to people of other religions exhibited in Sufi writings is without parallel. It is not just tolerance, it is acceptance. There are poems by Rumi, by Ibn Arabi in Persian and Turkish which indicate that all the religions are basically the same: All religions have the same purpose, the same message, the same communication, and they worship the same God. They may do so in different ways, but God is equally there in church, in mosque, and in synagogue. It seems to me that the notion of acceptance as distinct from mere tolerance is a profoundly important contribution and one which can still play a great role in establishing better relations between communities in the present time and in the future. If you look at the Ten Commandments you will see that most of them are concerned with the relationship between human beings. Only a small minority of commandments are concerned with relations between human beings and God. Most of them are what you should not do to your fellow human beings. In standard Islamic texts, it is the other way around: it is mostly concerned with relations with God rather than relations with other human beings. Sufism again brings significant change in this respect. It is also highly concerned with one’s actions towards other people, not just how you behave towards God. There is an Indian Sufi, Shaykh

Sarafaddin, who puts it dramatically. He says “Offenses against people are worse than offenses against God. If you commit an offense against God, you are not doing God any harm and God can, in his way, forgive you. If you do things against other people, you are doing them real harm which may be irreparable. The question of forgiveness then becomes much more complicated.” It seems to me that this is an interesting contribution to the moral debate of the highest value.

My final point is in relation to some aspects of American foreign policy, which is our ostensible major underlying theme. There is a well known tradition in the Middle East dating back to the Cold War. Everybody knew that if you did anything to annoy Russians, punishment would be swift and dire. On the other hand, if you did anything to Americans, not only would there be no punishments, there might even be some rewards as the anxious procession of diplomats, congressmen, journalists, and others, came one after another, saying “What have we done to offend you, and what can we do to put it right?” These two requests remain the basis for foreign policy and that is why people in official circles seem to have great difficulty in adjusting themselves to a friendly movement. Usually, the basic attitude is “We must not get too close to our friends, for fear of antagonizing our enemies.” I do not think that this is a good form of diplomacy.

Shaykh Hisham Kabbani:

Rumi said: “I am a Muslim, but I don’t know if I am; I don’t know if I am a Christian or a Jew or an Austrian or an Eastern or a Western or an upper or lower. I don’t know if I am from the four elements of the world. I don’t know if I am from heaven or from earth. I don’t know if I am an Indian or a Chinese or a Bulgarian. I don’t know if I am Iraqi or Syrian. I don’t know if I am from Roroshan or Aswohan. I don’t know if I am from this world or that – but I am a body and a soul. My ego is my soul. When I mention two it means me and God....”

Ibn Arabi said: “My heart became an image of every picture, it is the place for a Dervish to dance; it is a monastery for a monk to learn. It is a house for all or none to worship. It is a Ka’aba to make the pilgrimage. It is the ten commitments of Thora, it is the holy Quran—my religion is the religion of love. Wherever I direct my face it is love to God.”

From these poems we see that Sufism is a subject that works as a social power to bring people together. It is a bridge between different cultures, which, in part, explains Sufis’ success in almost all parts of the world. Sufis’ main goal was never to become the leaders of a country, but rather to become its social workers. They blend together with the people of the country and learn its languages. They facilitate communication among peoples, especially in times past when there were no visa requirements... They began relationships by intermarriage, and so in many ways built understanding between different kinds of peoples.

Allah mentions that you have to believe in the prophets and build communication with the Jews and the Christians. “Do not let them down,” because then social problems will multiply. He tells believers “to worship God as if you are seeing him. If you are not seeing him, he is seeing you.” That means “you cannot see Him but you can see His signs in this world.” Sufis read this in a different way: If you do not see yourself anymore—if you completely abolish your own desire, then you will see Him. Furthermore, it is sure that you will see Him in every individual—you have to see God in every individual and that is why Sufi teachings see every

person in God's creation as a person "engraved" by God. By acting in this way, the Sufis can never be reproached for irresponsibility or ill-mannered behavior.

One of the earliest Orientalists in Europe said that the Sufis have no need to spread their love of the heart with weapons. They have no army but use their spiritual tools in relationships with others. Accordingly, they brought grand numbers into their tradition in Central Asia, Indonesia, Southeast Asia, Turkey, and even Europe. Today, this does not happen because Islam has become closely identified with nationalism. At the beginning of the 20th century, during the uprising against European colonization in the Muslim world, Islamic scholars sought to interpret the Quran in such a way as to provide maximum support for this uprising. They entirely neglected spiritual (and Sufi) aspects of the religion in order to carry on this struggle. This Wahhabi resistance ultimately earned the right to speak for the Muslim world.

Another issue that I must raise is the distinction between Wahhabis and Salafis. There is no such term as Salafi in Islam. This term can only be applied for the first three centuries of Islam, called *a-Salafu-saleh*. After that, the term was not used until 1980, when, in an attempt to increase his religious legitimacy, King Fahd at the opening of a conference said, "We are not Wahhabis; we are Salafis." Now, this term is being used to describe all these new and different radical Muslim groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hizb ut-Tahrir.

I was in Indonesia recently and I met a person from China. He told me that the Chinese government is closing all Wahhabi mosques. I asked, "So, what type of Muslim are you?" He said, "I am of the Sufi of Uigur, and the government doesn't say anything to us as long as we do not interfere in politics. The only problem we are facing today in China is that caused by the pilgrimage. We used to go by the thousands to Saudi Arabia, and the pilgrims were met at Jeddah by Wahhabis who passed out literature. Soon they all received crash courses in Wahhabism, and returned to China to destroy our shrines and burn our manuscripts. Thus our 1400-year-old Chinese Muslim civilization is being destroyed by Wahhabism." If Wahhabism can penetrate the closed country of China, imagine what it's doing in the United States! Before 1960 there was no problem in the US; but then came the Wahhabi teaching, which is why most of you here think Sufism is a strange form of Islam. But in reality, when you travel to other parts of the world, you will find that Sufism is an integral part of the religion. In Indonesia there are 50 million Naqshbandi students and 20 million in other orders, with similar numbers in Malaysia, Brunei, and Turkey. Even in Saudi Arabia there are Sufis who practice in their homes because they cannot do so in public.

Accordingly, we are faced with the following question: are we as Americans going to support the Sufis, or work with the Wahhabis? If we do the latter, we run the risk that we work with terrorists, whereas there is no such risk with Sufis. It is very simple: the United States must reach out to non-Wahhabi Muslims if it wants to succeed in this battle. It's a no-lose proposition!

Discussion:

Shaykh Kabbani was asked whether, given that Sufis do not engage in terrorism, the United States should support Sufi orders in areas experiencing turmoil, especially in Chechnya. He suggested that the United States keep pressuring the Russian government to reach a solution, and convey to the Russians that the problem lies not with the Chechen people themselves, but

with the Wahhabis, who, using bribery and other forms of intrigue, encouraged hard-line elements of the Chechen population towards extremism. The Arab fighters who penetrated Chechnya via Dagestan wanted to bring down the Sufi Chechen leadership and establish their own Wahhabi-based government.

Lewis was then asked if he saw the future of the Middle East as an evolution toward a Western, secular democratic model, complete with the separation of church and state and the emergence of a middle class. He suggested that one has to be careful about definitions, especially the word “democracy.” So long as democracy is properly defined, he indeed sees it in the Middle East’s future; first in Iraq and then elsewhere.

Why is Lewis so optimistic? First, he answered, the notion that Baathism has made democracy impossible in Iraq and Syria is “quite false.” He explained that the party and Saddam Hussein-type regimes “have absolutely no roots in either the Arab or Islamic past. This is an importation from Europe. And we can date it precisely—1940.” Despite the French surrender, the collaborationist Vichy government retained control of the region, opening it up to Axis influence. The Baath movement arose “as an adaptation to local conditions of the Nazi model.” When the Soviets exercised influence over the region, the Baathists adjusted from the Nazi model to the communist model. Lewis stated that there is no reason for such models to be followed any longer in the Middle East.

Secondly, while the true local conditions in these countries “are not democratic in the sense of holding elections and having legislative assemblies,” there *is* a tradition of responsible, limited government. There is a recognition dating back to the very beginnings of Islam that the ruler has duties as well as responsibilities, and that his power is contractual. In fact, this contractual-consensual concept of government is enshrined in the *shariah*. So, Lewis said, “there is both a legal-cultural basis and a basis of experience” for the development of democracy in the Middle East. The type of despotic regimes that one sees at the present time in most of the Arab world is, said Lewis, “the result of Westernization, not by imperial powers, which are usually very cautious and conservative, but by over-eager Westernizers and modernizers in the region.” The resulting effects were twofold: on the one hand, Westernization greatly strengthened the sovereign power and, on the other, it weakened or removed all those elements in society that had previously limited the sovereign power. The result is that any present-day dictator has vastly greater powers than any of the great rulers of the past. This latter fact, said Lewis, “increases my optimism— that these despotic, aberrant regimes are not part of their cultural tradition. That was something imposed on them, brought in from outside. And if they look back to their own historical, cultural, religious traditions they will find much better elements.”

Thirdly, Lewis stated, Iraq had a decent education system and was remarkably progressive on women’s issues compared to the rest of the region. Women had access to education and many of them became doctors, lawyers, professors, scientists and business executives. This, in Lewis’ opinion, is another reason for hope in Iraq’s future.

Next the panelists were asked whether Sufism would be able to appeal to one of the abiding concerns of most Muslims, their inferior political, economic, and social status compared to the Western world; and, in so doing, counteract the spread of Wahhabism. Shaykh Kabbani

responded by comparing the two traditions' behavior at the beginning of the 20th century: "when the Wahhabis took the lead in order to interpret the holy Quran to motivate the Muslims against the British, they were also seeing the slow collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which would leave a vacuum that they wanted to fill. To do this, they wanted to control the House of Saud and, through it, the Muslim world." However, said Shaykh Kabbani, "Sufis see the world not in terms of political control, but rather in terms of social problems such as health and education." With the age of colonialism over, Shaykh Kabbani concluded, Sufis can "play a big role in establishing bridges between different cultures, different communities, and different countries. Most especially, they can allow Islam to flourish without the domination of particular countries. If Sufis are given the chance, and the encouragement, they will be able to achieve much in the way of peace."

For his part, Lewis commented on the very notions of "freedom" and "independence," which he characterized as "two different words, presenting two very different notions." When the Muslims were still under colonial rule, said Lewis, the two were seen as different words for the same thing. Now, virtually all these countries have gained their independence, but they have a little less freedom than before. What independence has usually meant, Lewis clarified, was that foreign overlords were replaced by domestic tyrants who are more skilled and less inhibited in their tyranny than imperialists. Regarding freedom, he mentioned the chaplain to the first Egyptian mission to France in 1828, who wrote a book about his observations and discussed how much the French talked about freedom. The chaplain found this puzzling, because in Arabic at that time freedom was a legal term, not a political term; one was free if not a slave. He then realized that what the French meant by freedom was what Arabs meant by "justice." Lewis underlined the importance of this distinction, as "in the Western world, we are accustomed to thinking of freedom and oppression, freedom and tyranny as opposite poles. In the traditional Islamic statement, it would be instead justice and oppression, and justice and tyranny, as opposite poles." A correct understanding of the concept of justice is crucially important, Lewis concluded, for the development of free institutions in the Muslim world.

The next question was whether Sufis could use violence against Westerners, given that Sufi Chechens have used violence against the Russians, as did Sufis against the French in North Africa and the Dutch in Indonesia. Lewis responded briefly by saying, "I think anyone who studied Sufism would agree that Sufism is peaceful but it is not pacifist; Sufi brotherhoods did play an important role in the anti-imperialist struggle in North Africa, India, and the Caucasus." However, Lewis asserted, "it is highly unlikely that such a need would arise in the future."

The last question panelists were asked was on suggestions to the US government for improved dialogue with the Muslim world. Lewis simply said, "I would suggest that they should talk to Shaykh Kabbani." For his part, Shaykh Kabbani cautioned that the US often ends up working with the Wahhabis all over the world. Instead, he suggested, the US should ask the right people to find individuals who are moderate Muslim scholars and seek their policy relevant suggestions.

Panel 3: Cultural Islam and Implications for US Policy

At this off-the-record panel, representatives from various US government agencies shared their views. Key points:

One panelist expressed frustration that most of America's foreign policy instruments are very blunt tools and not adaptable to today's needs. The Administration is reflexively throwing money at whichever problem that arises, and this is also how the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) came about in December 2002. The Congress put \$29 million into MEPI in 2002, and added another \$100 million in emergency supplemental funds in 2003; \$10 million was set aside for Islamic outreach. MEPI has four pillars, three of which are related to economic assistance. The economic programs are supposed to "reach out and bridge the knowledge gap" in political areas, to increase the "democratic voices" throughout the Middle East and build a "sense of governance and accountability to the rule of law." These are nice slogans, but the growing worldwide trend of anti-Americanism is not going to be stopped by these public diplomacy programs.

Another panelist quoted Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz, the former US Ambassador to Indonesia, in order to best describe US policy towards the Muslim world. Accordingly, the US "does not see this as a war of civilizations between the West and Islam. To the extent that it is a war, it is one of all the civilized world against extremists who are attacking the values that are shared by the most of the people of the world." The US recognizes that there is a dangerous gap between the West and the Muslim world and "we must bridge this gap and we must begin now. The gap is wide and there is no time for delay. Whether we are successful narrowing this critical divide between the East and the West will be a major factor in shaping the picture."

There is also a growing recognition that the US will win the war on terror, but the more difficult war is the "war of ideas." It is a struggle over modernity, secularism, pluralism, democracy and real economic development. To achieve victory in this larger conflict, the US understands that it "must work to understand the many facets of the Muslim world." Senior members of the US administration are convinced that the vast majority of the world's Muslims have no use for the extreme doctrines espoused by groups such as Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. As Wolfowitz said, "Very much to the contrary, they abhor terrorism, they abhor terrorists who have not only hijacked airplanes but who have attempted to hijack one of the world's great religions. They have no use for people who deny fundamental rights to women or who indoctrinate children with superstition and hatred. The ideals of democracy and freedom have been the most powerful engines of change in the last 50 years and should also give us hope for further development in the Muslim world." No other strategy, said the panelist, makes sense for the United States.

There are three main components of the war of terrorism. One is hunting down the terrorists, and it involves law enforcement, intelligence sharing, and crackdowns on the sources of funding. It also means confronting states that sponsor terrorism. The second component is homeland security. And the third one is the battle of ideas, which is in the first instance a civil war within the Muslim world between moderates and extremists. The US recognizes that it is not

a member of the Muslim world and acknowledges that it is not America's responsibility to make pronouncements on theology. At the same time, no one doubts that the United States has a very important role to play because it can affect what goes on. The US and other members of the international community can de-legitimize terrorism; forging an international consensus that terrorism is beyond the pale is a matter of international law and morality, no matter which political cause is invoked.

Strategically, the US can also support countries with moderate Muslim populations, such as Turkey, Jordan and Morocco. There are also important developments in the Persian Gulf, where serious discussions of political reforms are taking place. In Iran, too, people are fed up with the discredited clerical regime and want change, the panelist argued. While the US cannot interfere, it can identify itself with the aspirations of the people of Iran. Moreover, there would be huge psychological-political impact in the Muslim world if Iran, the fount of modern Islamic enthusiasm, would change course.

The panelist outlined four historical examples the US can draw on with respect to this battle of ideas. The first is again an ideological event, a kind of de-legitimizing terrorism, similar to the campaign against slavery. In the 19th century the British de-legitimized slavery in a variety of ways by first declaring war on this concept and then enforcing it with naval power as well as soft power—the intellectual, moral, diplomatic instruments of policy. Over a period of decades the British helped change the way respectable people thought about slavery.

A second example is the defeat of Marxism-Leninism. This is an ideology that some thought was the wave of the future as it generated enormous enthusiasm and greatly motivated people. But it fell apart when it failed to deliver the paradise that it promised. It fell apart when the crimes committed in its name reached such a volume that they clearly undermined its moral pretensions and it failed because it was confronted by strong, self-confident resistance. The lesson we learned is that ideologies can be defeated and discredited by failure.

The third example is the Cold War struggle over institutions. The communists throughout Europe were really good at taking them over but the West had the energy to fight back; it supported free labor unions, free media and free intellectual groups that prevented communists from taking over. This kind of struggle is another option for what we may need to undertake now: Together with our partners in the West and everywhere in the world, the US needs to help private institutions and foundations and all those who are on the front line of this struggle.

The fourth area that the US is targeting is that of reform: political, economic, and educational. New US initiatives aim to pull together more than \$1 billion of assistance that the United States provides to friendly Muslim countries annually. The US president has proposed a free trade initiative for the same reasons. The panelist asserted that the whole world has a huge stake in the outcome and in helping our friends who are out there vindicating the millions of people who reject extremism and who are in fact its first victims. History is on the side of freedom and tolerance, modernity and democracy. It requires courage, resoluteness, steadiness and stamina on the part of all of us. We can summon that kind of resolve, and decency shall prevail.

The final panelist focused on Central Asia as possibly the best region to begin the battle for ideas in this “existential struggle.” Democratic and economic reforms are essential for long term stability, since people with no opportunity to participate in civic life or the right to practice their religion openly and freely in their country will go underground. In fact, the panelist said, this is exactly what is happening in Central Asia today. While at first repression may have kept these underground movements at bay, and may have provided a space for these regimes to come up with constructive strategies, he asserted that this window has closed: “the regimes of Central Asia are becoming increasingly brutal.”

What can the US do to help at this point? First, Central Asian people need to be reacquainted with their own cultures and own traditional Islamic interpretations, instead of imported ideologies. The US cannot help train local imams, which is an important starting point, but it can provide assistance with basic (secular) education. The US can also help with preserving religious shrines and manuscripts. Perhaps the most important help the US can provide, however, is to create the political space for private organizations to take on these tasks.

Moreover, as one of the two democracies in the Middle East, and America’s only Muslim NATO ally, Turkey must be better understood so that lessons can be drawn for Central Asia. Turkish society has found a way to both allow for freedom of religion and to contain the more virulent strains. While the Kemalist model cannot be applied *in toto* to other countries, he argued, there are elements of the Turkish experience that may be quite applicable, such as the teaching of the basic principles of Islam in secular schools so that the people will be immune from extremist interpretations.