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INTRODUCTION:

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The Brookings Institution

MODERATOR:

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PANELISTS:

AMBASSADOR H.E. MAHMUD ALI DURRANI

Ambassador to the United States, Embassy of Pakistan

AMBASSADOR CYNTHIA P. SCHNEIDER

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## P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. GRAND: To comment on this fascinating documentary, we have the honor of a very, very distinguished panel with us this evening. I have the honor of introducing Ambassador Ahmed, our narrator for the evening, and I will leave to him the honor of introducing the rest of our panel.

Ambassador Ahmed is the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University. He is a former High Commissioner of Pakistan to Great Britain. Ambassador Ahmed is the Principal Investigator for the Islam in the Age of Globalization Project sponsored by Brookings, the American University, and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life with a book forthcoming shortly from that project. He is currently a Non-resident Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution in addition to a 10-year appointment at American University.

Ambassador Ahmed has worked extensively on issues related to Islam and its impact on contemporary society, and has organized many, many interfaith dialogues throughout the world. He received his Ph.D. from the University of London, where I gather he learned the visual trick of multiplying himself in three on film, which I hope he will share with us this evening.

Ambassador Ahmed.

(Applause)

AMB. AHMED: Thank you, Steve. I would like to thank several people for organizing this wonderful event; to Brookings, all our colleagues and friends

at Brookings, especially to Steve Grand and April (?).

I would like to thank all of you for coming. I know it is a cold, cold evening and you have traveled distances. I would especially like to thank those people who have come from out of town. Bill Bescher (?) coming from San Francisco, is the Head of the Parliament of World Religions; my friend, Stephen Glassman (?) coming all the way from Pennsylvania; and then a group of friends coming from Kansas, Dr. Osan Hedry (?), Omar, Nadia, and Sofraskan (?) from Los Angeles. We have some strong commitment to learning of this kind.

I would like to thank the panel, a very distinguished panel. His Excellency, the Pakistan Ambassador H.E. Mahmud Ali Durrani, one of the very distinguished officers of the Pakistan Army. He served as Military Secretary to the President of Pakistan. He was in Washington in the embassy many, many years ago. Of course, he and I go back many, many years to school together, so a bit of nepotism here.

Ambassador Cynthia Schneider, again, an Ambassador who served for the United States and has a Ph.D. in Fine Arts from Harvard University and presently a professor at Georgetown; and Hady Amr who is a public intellectual, writer, commentator on Islam and heading Doha where he will be taking charge of the new Brookings Center at Doha.

A brief comment on the film, just a few minutes, and then I will request the panel to comment, give their reactions, and then I hope we will have some time

for some questions.

The film you saw was really a Channel 5 film production, a marvelous team of committed, British technicians. I had no say in it, so I am not taking any credit. The credit goes entirely to the producers and director of the film itself. They are hoping to have a sequel. It was a great hit in the United Kingdom when it was shown last month, terrific reviews. Most of the papers picked it up as the pick of the day or pick of the week, and we are hoping that the next series will take us to our part of the world, represented by both the Ambassador and the Deputy Chief here, Assam Hahn (?).

The focus was on three big cities – Istanbul, Damascus, and Cairo – and through these cities to tell the story and bring in the culture of Islam and also to emphasize – you may have seen and picked up the two or three themes in this film – the importance of learning in Islam, and that theme comes up again and again.

I think one of the most significant sayings of the Prophet, and I hope you will pick it up because there are so many scholars here this evening, is that the ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr. I cannot over-emphasize this. If you can convince the youth of the Muslim World of this saying – perhaps they don't even know about it – you could change the direction of the thinking of the coming generation. If you don't, you are stuck with a lot of people who see the world in reverse; they see the blood of the martyr as more important than the ink of the scholar.

Secondly, you see the history of Islam itself glimpsed through the architecture, the synthesis, the inclusiveness, the periods where Jews and Christians and Muslims could live together and work together.

I have been, as Steve mentioned, part of a project with Brookings. I traveled the Muslim world on a project sponsored by Brookings, American, and Pew, and some of the godfathers of the project are here. Dean Louis Goodman is here from American University. Peter Singer is here from Brookings and [*joking*] has been promoted to bigger and grander things after he sponsored our project, I am glad to say. And of course, the marvelous team that accompanied me on this travel, this rather epic journey, the young generation of Americans, I believe there lots of them: Haley is over here. Jonathan, where is Jonathan? He is somewhere at the back. Yes, there he is. Frankie and Herb, and who else? Who else is here, Frankie, from the team? Badesh (?) from India heading this way soon from Delhi. So we do have members of the team.

Now, we discovered on this journey how Muslims think, react, live and feel about the world today, and we did see high levels of anti-Americanism, high levels of anti-Semitism, but we also came away with hope because we were able to engage with people, talk to people, give them the respect that they wanted, just to be heard, to go to their homes, to the madrassas, to the mosques. You will see this journey reflected in the book called *Journey into Islam*, being published by the Brookings Press. Bob Faherty, the head of the press, is here this evening, and

he has been a marvelous friend of the book itself, again part of the need to understand Islam.

I will end by reminding you why it is important to understand Islam. It is important because it has a population of 1.4 billion people, 57 states, one nuclear for the time being and other countries very rapidly wanting to go nuclear. So we may be soon in the next decade or so, seeing a dozen or half a dozen Muslim countries having become nuclear. There is also the Muslim population here in the United States, six, seven, eight million people estimated. We also have the key allies of the War on Terror that are Muslim – nations like Pakistan, Afghanistan, the Presidents of both countries personal friends of the United States of America. For all these reasons, we really cannot afford to be ignorant of Islam.

I don't want to over-hammer this point, but when you are living in an atmosphere and a climate of an undercurrent of Islamophobia, then understanding Islam really becomes a challenge. Each of you needs to promote the understanding between the U.S. and the world of Islam.

For me as a scholar, there can be nothing more important than this particular exercise, and this is the exercise that took me on first the journey to make this film and then the journey write this book, *Journey into Islam*, just to simply understand what is going on.

So with that, I will request His Excellency Mahmud Ali Durrani to open the panel with his comments. Thank you very much.

AMB. DURRANI: Good evening, everybody. [*Arabic*] Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure for me to be here and to be speaking on this particular occasion.

I compliment my friend, Akbar, for his great sense of timing. Since a little boy, I knew Akbar had a great sense of timing. I think this presentation is in time, particular the way people feel about Islam in the West, and there is a need to build bridges. I think this has presented a nobler facet of Islam because the predominant image of Islam in the West is the frightening, fire-breathing terrorist who in my view is an ugly scar on the fair face of Islam.

Simply put, Islam is essentially a way of life, and I think Akbar mentioned that in his film, which rests on the foundation of the unity of God, love of mankind, a strong moral code, acceptance of other Abrahamic faiths and their prophets, respect for humanity irrespective of color, creed, religion or race. Basically, it is a religion of simplicity, co-existence and harmony with nature.

In many ways, Islamic art also represents simplicity, harmony, yet great depth. By and large, Islamic art reflects the ethos of people who live within countries inhabited mainly by Muslims. However it has evolved, and continues to evolve, from interaction between Islamic societies and other nations and peoples. I would like to give an example of my own region, that is, South Asia where the Muslims dominated the subcontinent. They and the artisans who had accompanied them from afar drank deeply from the existing culture of the areas.

Thus, the beauty of the Taj Mahal, an icon of Islamic art, is a result of fusion of arts that already existed, and what the Muslims brought in.

Islamic art manifests in many forms. I think today we have seen mostly architecture, but I am sure many, if not most, of you are aware that it has many facets – woven tapestries, carpets; glassware, we saw, which has gone to great heights in Iran, I know; jewelry and calligraphy. But I think Islamic art, by and large, reflects the beauty of nature, like the grandeur and scale of nature and its large spaces, harmony and vibrant colors.

I would like to invite you to the International Court, which is where our embassy is located – our embassy, the UAE Embassy, the Brunei Embassy – and you will see a glimpse of how the old is blended with the modern, how we have picked up something from the Mughal period for the Pakistan Embassy and our other sister embassies have picked up from the Middle East. We have harmonized it, and that reflects the art form as it is evolving and developing today. There is a lot of blending going on.

Thank you very much.

(Applause)

AMB. SCHNEIDER: Congratulations to you, Professor Ahmed, for a beautiful and inspiring film. I think it is so wonderful to see this great crowd here, and I congratulate all of you for coming, and also the Brookings Institution for hosting this event.



As an art historian-turned-diplomat-turned-professor, I have been able to benefit from the Brookings Institution's clarity of vision, I think, in understanding and recognizing the importance of arts and culture in understanding each other. I am not exactly sure what type of audience this is, but if you are mostly political scientists, you will understand that is a pretty rare thing.

The Brookings Institution has, in the context of its U.S.-Islamic World Forum, allowed me the privilege of putting together a group of arts and cultural leaders from the United States and from the Islamic World to speak together. We did this for the first time in 2006, and we will do it again in 2007. Out of this, hopefully, will come some good strategies on how to better use – or best use – the power of arts and culture to understand each other better, because we are both dealing, in the United States, with the image of Islam that we have which you so correctly characterize as so often only one-sided and misses so much, and the same is true I think with the image of the United States in many parts of the Islamic World. We are looking at stereotypes.

Arts and culture, in the broad and specific sense, offers the opportunity both to find common ground with each other but also to see each in all our diversity, not to see this monolithic, one type of person. I was struck in seeing the film by the many commonalities with Western art. At the same age as the great domes in Istanbul were being built, of course, Brunelleschi and Michaelangelo were building domes in Florence and Rome, struggling with exactly the same

challenges. The artist that I wrote on, Rembrandt, drew inspiration from Mughal miniatures when he wanted to change his drawing style. There are so many common strands that exist that we seem to have forgotten today.

The theme at the end of the film – of the burst of contemporary knowledge coming out of the library in Alexandria, which I have been fortunate to visit twice even before it opened at biotechnology conferences and have been to witness the whirl of energy that is Ismael Serageldin. Each time I have been there, I have seen the increase in the audience of young people, really a conference with literally 1,000 young people attending, each time more women also.

There is tremendous potential in that library, and it is grappling with a theme, as I understand it from artists that I have gotten to know – this theme of modernity and tradition. Contemporary artists in various and different parts of the Islamic world today are struggling with how to develop their own contemporary language, just like American artists, but at the same time how to learn their own tradition again which hasn't always been the visual arts tradition, hasn't always been part of education in certain parts of the Islamic world. So these artists today, some of whom will be coming to Doha, are both discovering their own tradition and interpreting it in a contemporary way, something if we can find ways, and I encourage all of you to help us think about this. This is happening in the visual arts, in design, in film, in literature. We in this country, I think, need to figure out ways to expose ourselves more to these new trends in the Islamic world. To bring

them here and to have more exchanges might be something we might consider spending a little bit on.

This is something that applies also to our country. I am going to close with a quotation from a Dutch historian looking at America to give an idea of how our country can present itself and be seen which is analogous, I think, to the beautiful vision we have had in the film. Johan Huizinga, a famous Dutch historian, said this about America in the 1970s:

“Anyone who wishes to understand America must first carry over his concept of democracy from the political and social field to the cultural and generally human. The best way to do this continues to be reading Walt Whitman. There is no stronger promoter of democracy in this sense than the cinema. It accustoms the Nation from high to low, to a single common view of life.”

Professor Ahmed, you have given us a good sense of how to see each other through culture. Let us hope we can build on it.

AMB. AHMED: Thank you.

(Applause)

MR. AMR: Thank you, Doctor, Professor and Ambassador Ahmed for this great film.

You all have sat through a long time, and so I will keep my remarks very brief. Being the last of four speakers, speaking after three distinguished Ambassadors, the benefit of that is I have had more time to make my notes. The

downside is that a lot of what I want to say has already been said.

But I would like to remind us all that one of the essential reasons that we are here is actually because of 9/11, America's reaction to that and the whole process that has gone along with that. I remind us of that because it really underscores the importance, I think, of what the film is getting at. What I want to say, I say as an American of Muslim heritage.

I think the central question that this film inspires us to look at is: How can we in America embrace what is our common Abrahamic heritage stemming from Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad?

How can we, be we folks who focus on art, folks who focus on spirituality, folks who focus on politics – we are here at the Brookings Institution after all – how can we embrace our common Abrahamic heritage in building an America that is inclusive, tolerant and part of the world?

I think what this film poses is an opportunity and a challenge for three parties. I think there is a message there for the American Muslim community that at least in this domain – in arts – the American Muslim community needs to get more involved in the American arts scene and be more a part and parcel of the American arts scene. I think it is a challenge for the broader American community to be more inclusive of the American Muslim community and also more looking at arts and culture from the Muslim world as important and part of its own heritage, America's own heritage. I think the third challenge, which is

probably not the responsibility of people in this room, is that the Muslim world also looks at its own heritage and see it as stemming from a Christian tradition, a Jewish tradition, a Hindu tradition and that fusion that we talked about in the film.

So I will limit my comments just to that. I want to congratulate the film crew, all of whom are here, for starting this conversation.

I believe we will now have some room for questions and answers from the audience. I don't know how that is going to proceed.

(Applause)

AMB. AHMED: Thank you. Thank you for the comments from the panel, very illuminating. We do have some time. We want to squeeze in some questions and hopefully have some good answers from the panel.

I notice there are several Ambassadors here. We have His Excellency here, and we have Ambassador Tokada (?). So can I, in fact, start with asking His Excellency to make a comment and then open it to the floor, please?

AMB. HASSOUNA: My name is Hussein Hassouna. I am from Egypt, and I am the Ambassador of the Arab League in Washington.

I think we all have to congratulate you for this beautiful film. If I make some comments, it is not for the sake of being trivial, but I would have loved to see a bit more about Damascus. I think Damascus has some beautiful mosques, and it was just that we saw maybe some of the beautiful monuments there.

My second comment is about Egypt. I am a Muslim from Egypt. I am very

proud of what you have shown. But Egypt has also a lot of history and art belonging to Christianity and to Judaism. I think it would have been appropriate maybe to show some of that in the film, to show that Muslims, Christians and Jews have always lived together in harmony in Egypt and in the rest of the Arab World. Their history, their art has interacted in a way.

Of course, it is easy to make comments and to ask for more, but in general I think it is a beautiful film. It shows the role art can play in bridging the gap between people today and promoting understanding in the world, and this is what we really need.

Thank you, Ambassador, for your presence and your comments.

AMB. AHMED: Thank you, Your Excellency. All criticisms and congratulations will simply be passed on to Channel 5.

(Laughter)

AMB. AHMED: However, I do want to point out, Excellency, that we have got Damascus. It is in the next part. So if you are patient and you see it, you will see all the glory of Damascus. We haven't overlooked it.

We have overlooked something quite deliberately. This is, if you recall, the title, *The Glories of Islamic Art*. We are very much focusing on Islamic art. We bring in Judaism and Christianity where necessary, but my other work very consciously brings in all three religions. This just doesn't have the space. If you have got 30 minutes or 35 minutes, you have really got to focus as you know.

What do you select? What don't you select? Blissfully, these choices have not been made by me.

Would you like to make a comment? Yes, please. Could you also introduce yourself, please?

QUESTIONER: My name is Kasi Musev (?), working for Voice of America.

Being a Sunni Muslim, I heard very frequently in this documentary: don't you think you are going to widen the gap between the Shia and Sunni Muslims instead of bridging it, making an already complicated Islam, more complicated instead of understandable? Thank you.

AMB. AHMED: I don't think we should duck or hide from hard issues. We should not feel embarrassed about identities. The first thing, if you want serious dialogue, is to tell us who you are. I had to be up front. Otherwise, the viewer may ask: Is this man a Shia, Sunni, Muslim, not Muslim? It is imperative for any scholar to tell us exactly where he or she stands.

So, no, I don't agree with you. I think every Muslim or non-Muslim who is involved or engaged with serious scholarship or dialogue must put his cards on the table. He must not disguise them unless he has something to hide. I have nothing to hide.

Imam Bichel (?) is here, I notice. I hope, Imam, you will make a comment.

QUESTIONER: Congratulations for trying to make Islam look good.

How much of this garrulous Islam art borrowing from infidels was done by Muslims which means subjugated workers and slaves, also built from other cultures under the threat of mutilation and death? After centuries, slavery is still practiced widely in many Muslim-dominated lands. How much of it was done by slaves in all that?

AMB. AHMED: Imam Bichel, how much of it was done by slaves? Did you make the slaves make all your great mosques and monuments? Imam Bichel is from Syria, from Damascus, so maybe he can answer that.

(Laughter)

AMB. AHMED: The question is: How much of this work was done by slaves and subjugated people? Well, I mean in Damascus, I will just start by telling you about Damascus, the portion of the movie which I didn't see, done by the people of the city who looked at themselves as citizens of the same town and the same city. They did not make distinction.

Plus, if there were Christians and Jews, they were well-treated. I wish if there will be another documentary to see the Christian churches, for example, in Damascus. You will be amazed to see the same art and the same reverence given to them also. Actually, one of the churches in Damascus was given by the Rakelef (?), I mean the land was given by the Rakelef Amir Abdel Aziz (?). So I don't think at that time, people would make a distinction the way we emphasize so much on different religions.



AMB. AHMED: As far as the historical records are concerned, I think all of them recorded the workers were paid whatever the standard wages were, whether Christians, Jews or Muslims. So I don't think people saw it. Dynasties don't tend to see things like you and I see in terms of Christians, Muslims and Jews. They really see things in terms of dynasties. Invariably, you will see if there is a strong king in Gledda (?) or Cordoba, his chief minister very often is Jewish.

Yes, please.

QUESTIONER: I too want to simply express my thanks for delivering a superb tool to the interfaith movement. I am here as a friend but also as the President of the Board of Trustees of the Parliament of the Worlds Religions.

My wife continually assures me that the way to real harmony among religions of the world is to begin to understand their art, and this is just a wonderful tool that you have given us. I am sure that just the inspiration of this evening leads me to think that we need, in the spirit of the last speaker, a serious grappling with the art of our various traditions as a way of entry into their curiosa. The pictures were of buildings, but the spirit of the event, the spirit of the tour was the heart of Islam. I think that is a real accomplishment that will be cherished among the interfaith community.

AMB. AHMED: Thank you, and all strength to your interfaith movement. Questions? Yes, a question over here and one over there.

QUESTIONER: Keeping in view, the current situation in Iraq and also the resurgence of Iran, do you believe that the Muslim World is heading for a much greater internal conflict?

AMB. AHMED: I think we are wandering slightly from art and architecture, so I will save that for the next time we meet. I am not ducking the question. I will be happy to talk to you, but let us restrict it to art and architecture.

Yes, over here.

QUESTIONER: I think this is directed to the Professor. Maybe you know from an art historian point of view. Why do the Persians in their art show portraits whereas in other forms of Islamic art it is not allowed, or not part of the tradition?

AMB. SCHNEIDER: Well, I am very happy to defer to the other professor, being a professor of Renaissance and Baroque art from the other tradition where there are lots of portraits. But this is a hugely controversial topic, so I am very happy to hand it over to you.

AMB. AHMED: Well, I am shy to make a comment on this. [*Arabic*]

This is a very good question. Mainstream Islam discourages any imagery, particularly of the Prophet. So a lot of the images of the famous ascent, the mirage to heaven, simply have a curtain over his face. We know the reasons. Idolatry is completely prohibited in Islam, and people have carried it to the point that they do not want to depict any images at all.

However, having said that, there have been images. In Iranian Persian culture, there has been a tradition of images, particularly of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet because he is the great iconic figure there, of Hussein too. Calligraphy, carpets will have pictures of this very noble-looking powerful man with a kind of light around him to depict holiness and saintliness. That is not mainstream Islam.

Mainstream Islam, even now, frowns upon images, and it goes back to the idea that going back to Abraham, that idol worship distracts from worship of God. Muslims, by and large, are very much restricted by this.

AMB. DURRANI: I think I agree with Akbar when he says that images, that relates to mosques, but otherwise images in Islam, Islamic art, it is very common.

AMB. AHMED: We are talking about the Prophet.

AMB. DURRANI: Yes, but otherwise, I wanted to clarify, so that it is not misunderstood. That of the Prophet, even in the mosques, images are not allowed, but otherwise miniatures, modern Islamic art, there are a lot of images, a lot of figures. Thank you.

AMB. AHMED: Yes, paintings, miniatures, art, men, women, animals, they were a rich contribution.

AMB. SCHNEIDER: A quick point or comment also with Western art, in 17<sup>th</sup>-century Holland where they fostered very much the idea of a personal

relationship with God through the Bible, there are no images in those churches either. It wasn't forbidden, but the practice was not to have images in the churches.

AMB. AHMED: We keep talking of Islam as though it were some strange exotic alien creature. We all very much know that it is part of the Abrahamic tradition. So many, many things that are common to Judaism and Christianity are also common to Islam. We need to be clear about that. The traditions are the same. Muslims very much feel consciously that they have inherited that legacy.

We are running out of time. I know that Steve has arranged some kind of reception. So, Ibran, do you want to have the last question?

QUESTIONER: Yes, sir, hello. Ibran Sadiki, (?) Voice of America.

A beautiful film; the biggest question that comes to my mind is: Would you or the executive producers be planning to air this film in the Islamic World, in Pakistan, in Iraq, in Iran, so that the Muslims would actually learn about their tradition and culture? Thank you.

AMB. AHMED: Ibran, we very much want that, and I am told that at the Cannes Film Festival, this was a very popular film. It was picked up all over the world. I believe there is some kind of discussion about the United States, but it will be. It is being picked up all over.

Can we end now with Sofraskan (?) from Los Angeles making a last comment? He is one of our guests who has flown in for this occasion.

QUESTIONER: First of all, Dr. Ahmed, thank you very much and congratulations. You show us this great knowledge. I would say a road to knowledge, this movie was. Being a Muslim, I learned a lot today. These mosques or architecture, we have seen; we read in books. The way you portrayed today, it was great, first of all.

Second thing, my question is: do you think we can achieve the goals that you have in your mind to bridge the gap between all the religions to bring the peace to this world?

AMB. AHMED: I think, practically, it is an impossible task because when you forget Jews and Muslims and Christians, you get two Muslims or two Jews or two Christians together and ask them to define, and you immediately have a problem. We need to understand that.

Again, as my friend said, Shia, Sunni and we should not be talking about identities. We need to understand that diversity is at the core of human society. We need to understand that, and then try to bridge it. We need to say I am me; I am different from you, but I still am your brother. Then there is hope.

But if we are trying to bland out, and even out, and marginalize all differences, that doesn't happen and that cannot happen. That is one of the problems you are seeing here, the global domination, that dominant cultures tend to flatten out other cultures, whether it is from the West or from the East. We need to respect local people, local cultures, local ideas, local traditions. That only

comes through tolerance, through dialogue, what Bill is doing, interfaith dialogue, interfaith respect, bridge-building. That is why I go back to my point: That is the crucial debate and challenge of the 21st Century.

I really am grateful to Brookings because they took this marvelous initiative. I know that Peter Singer launched this several years back. It was an experiment. In the heart of the Arab World, he actually organizes these huge conferences, generating a lot of intellectual activity, and in a sense you are seeing this is one of the spin-offs of that activity. That is the only hope for the future.

So, with that, let us proceed and join us at the reception. Any questions or answers you have the panel, I am sure they would be happy to answer them.

Thank you.

(Applause)

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