Contextualizing Islam in Europe and North America: Challenges and Opportunities

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For the 11th annual U.S.-Islamic World Forum, we returned once again to the city of Doha. The Forum, co-convened annually by the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World and the State of Qatar, is the premier international gathering of leaders in government, civil society, academia, business, religion, and the media to discuss the most pressing issues facing the United States and global Muslim communities.

Each year, the Forum features a variety of platforms for thoughtful discussion and constructive engagement, including televised plenary sessions with prominent international figures addressing broad issues of global importance; sessions focused on a particular theme led by experts and policymakers; and working and action groups that bring together practitioners to develop initiatives and policy recommendations. The 2014 Forum continued its strong record of success.

Over three days together, we launched an initiative to return Mali's cultural heritage to Timbuktu after the city was taken over by jihadists. We also deliberated on expanding the capacity of Pakistan's civil society to counter violent extremism, discussed the application of Islamic values to achieve reconciliation in post-conflict Muslim societies, and examined the challenges faced by Muslim communities in Europe and North America to develop a contextualized understanding of their religion. These deliberations were captured in papers to be shared with policymakers and the broader public. (For detailed proceedings of the Forum, including photographs, video coverage, and transcripts, please visit our website at http://www.brookings.edu/about/projects/islamic-world.)

The opinions reflected in the papers and any recommendations contained therein are solely the views of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the participants of the working groups or of the Brookings Institution. Select working group papers will be available on our website.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the State of Qatar for its generous financial support and vision. In particular, we are grateful to His Highness the Emir for his leadership and generosity in enabling us to come together for these three days of candid discussion. We would also like to thank the Prime Minister and Minister of Interior, H.E. Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser bin Khalifa Al Thani, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Khalid bin Mohammad Al Attiyah, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their support. We would especially like to recognize H.E. Rashid Bin Khalifa Al Khalifa, the Minister's Assistant for Services and Follow-up, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani, the Minister's Assistant for International Cooperation Affairs, Ambassador Abdulla Fakhroo, the Permanent Committee for Organizing Conferences' Executive Director, Dr. Osman Majeed, and the Permanent Committee's entire staff for their support. In addition to Qatar's philanthropic generosity, all of these individuals helped our staff facilitate logistics, troubleshoot issues that arose and, as always, generally made us feel welcome.

Sincerely,

Dr. William F. McCants
Fellow and Director
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the Islamic World

Abstract

**Muslim Communities in Europe and North America:
A Transatlantic Dialogue on Contextualized Religion**

Conveners:
Peter Mandaville and Dilwar Hussain

This Working Group paper explains the nature and significance of a key problem facing Muslim communities in Europe and North America: the challenge of achieving a contextualized understanding of their religion that is suited to the unique circumstances, challenges, and opportunities that face religious minorities in contemporary Western societies. The first section of the paper provides a brief comparative overview of Muslim communities on both sides of the Atlantic, identifying both points of similarity and difference with respect to demographics as well as socioeconomic issues (employment, education) and political questions surrounding civic engagement, identity, and discrimination. The next part of the paper explains the impetus behind recent efforts to develop responses to these practical issues that are based on the Islamic tradition but specific to context, and identifies some of the key figures and major ideas that constitute this debate. An analysis is then offered of the major obstacles that have prevented such efforts from advancing—drawing, where appropriate, on the experiences of other faith communities, including Christians and Jews, that have met similar challenges. The issues covered here include questions of representation and legitimacy, the challenge of creating spaces for intra-Muslim discussion and understanding, intergenerational differences with respect to religious life and understanding, and the role of institutions and leaders. The final section of the paper outlines priority issues for moving the discussion forward; discusses the potential for building new partnerships and networks around this shared endeavor; and identifies appropriate contributions from governments and civil society to advancing the project of contextualizing Islam in Europe and North America.

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Executive Summary

The Working Group "Muslim Communities in Europe & North America: A Transatlantic Dialogue on Contextualized Religion" convened scholars, civil society actors, and community leaders from both sides of the Atlantic to discuss the nature and significance of key challenges in achieving a contextualized understanding of their religion that is suited to the unique circumstances, challenges, and opportunities that face religious minorities in contemporary Western societies.

Over the past decade, the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World has sought to understand the impact of Islamic reform on societies and politics in Muslim-majority countries. One way the project does this is by providing a venue for Muslims themselves to examine and explain religious, political, and social trends in their communities. It was in that spirit that we organized our Working Group for Muslim minorities in Europe and the United States.

The diverse participants in the group discussed numerous challenges facing Muslims in the United States and Europe and considered the ways of thinking more contextually about Islam would help tackle some of these challenges. This concept of "contextual" thinking generated many questions in and of itself: what does "contextualizing religion" mean, how far does it go, whose agenda is this, and how does it relate to and operate with and within Muslim traditions? How is this linked to existing notions of reform?

The purpose here was not to 'reform Islam,' but to think of how the reform (in the sense of *islah*—"restore," "renew") of Muslims' understanding and practice of Islam may play a role in answering some of the challenges that they face in the modern world. It was important to many in the group that such an agenda be led by American and European Muslim communities themselves, rather than by states or those with outside interests. However, it was recognized that a dialogue and discussion with others outside the community could be beneficial on issues of common concern.

A range of concrete topics and policy areas were introduced spanning issues such as education, employment, incarceration, gender relations, belonging, extremism and intolerance. The question of gender inequality generated both an enormous amount of discussion and particularly strong views. Challenges faced by Muslim men and women, including access of women to places of worship and the exclusion of women from religious spaces and leadership, were explored. The pain of such realities was obvious, even if there were differences expressed about how they should be resolved.

The observations of Jewish and Christian participants in the group reminded its members of lessons from similar debates in other faiths, and how thinking about continuity and change are an ongoing reality beyond the Muslim experience.

Questions of authority, confidence, outreach, and infrastructure were raised as key difficulties in developing a contextual approach. However, many felt that continuing to revive a more ethical framework of thinking, through a focus on the objectives (*maqasid*) of sharia and Islam, may help to avoid

some of the excessive legalism and literalism that can plague the practical application of Islamic values in the modern world.

The discussion served as a starting point for closer intra-Muslim dialogue across the Atlantic, and all participants indicated a desire that this meeting serve to inaugurate a larger, ongoing process of discussion, dialogue, and action around these issues.

Based on its discussions in Doha, the Working Group arrived at the following three conclusions, all of which can tangibly inform future endeavors at building transatlantic Muslim engagement around contextualized religion:

1. **Gender inequality is a fundamental challenge** to contextualizing Islam in Europe and North America.
2. Without **greater institutional support**, it will be difficult to unlock potential for contextual solutions to issues faced by Muslims. **Educational and research capacity, enabled by venture philanthropy** from both within and outside Muslim communities, is necessary for advancing strategic and intellectual visions.
3. Contextual approaches to Islam are often inaccessible to diverse Muslim publics. There is a lack of **innovative publications and multimedia formats** that combine theology, academic work, the arts, and community life, including online, social media, and other digital components.

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Introduction

Muslim communities in Europe and North America have long faced the challenge of adapting the teachings and practices of their faith to the specific issues and contexts they face as residents and citizens of western societies while maintaining a strong foothold in Islamic tradition. There have been a series of attempts over the past century to meet this challenge, and diverse approaches have been deployed to create a "reformist," "liberal," or "progressive" Islam more compatible with western values. Some of these have had limited success, where others have failed to gain traction or critical mass. On both sides of the Atlantic, there are a greater number of western-based Islamic scholars emerging who are attuned to the specific needs of Muslim communities in those regions. Some of these figures show a willingness and ability to articulate a traditional approach to their religion that is merged with a pragmatic understanding of the unique milieu of Muslim life in the West. Through extensive study at distinguished centers of religious learning in Muslim-majority countries, they provide a self-critical, though not dismissive, approach to Islamic scholarship. It is a long-term struggle, nothing short of creating a revitalized, Muslim intellectual paradigm that will allow for a contextual and normalized brand of Islamic practice suited to the particular circumstances of Muslim life in North American and European societies.

This U.S.-Islamic World Forum Working Group discussion paper represents an effort to explore the broader project of contextualizing Islam with reference to the very concrete and lived experience of Muslim communities in Europe and North America today. To this end, the Working Group brought together leading Muslim thinkers and scholars as well as community organizers, nongovernmental organizations, advocacy groups, and policy researchers whose work focuses on specific challenges and issues that Muslims face in the West. The group also included representatives from other faith traditions, such as Christianity and Judaism, that have experienced similar challenges associated with developing understandings of religion that are sensitive to diverse contexts and circumstances, including minority status. The group convened in Doha represents an effort to develop a distinctively transatlantic approach to these questions that recognizes Muslim communities on both sides of the Atlantic share many things in common while also exhibiting marked differences as a product of their unique histories and experiences. One of our goals was to facilitate a cross-fertilization of perspectives and ideas between these two communities such that they might learn from each other's distinctive circumstances while also identifying and developing new opportunities for dialogue and collaboration.

Muslim Communities and Contexts: Comparing the European and U.S. Experiences

Muslims in Europe and the United States differ significantly in demographic and socioeconomic terms. Estimates of the number of Muslims in the United States vary widely. The Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C. estimated in 2010 that the U.S. Muslim population was 2.6 million and that by 2030 it would more than double to 6.2 million.[1] Other groups, notably several major U.S. Muslim organizations, have claimed significantly higher figures for the current American Muslim population. According to the same Pew study, the Muslim population of Western Europe is estimated to be between 18–23 million.

There are stark socioeconomic differences between the two transatlantic communities. The average household income of immigrant Muslim families in the United States is just about, or even slightly above, the average U.S. national household income. Conversely, European Muslim households consistently report incomes in the lowest percentage quartile in all Western European countries. These same discrepancies extend to comparative levels of education between the two communities. The social geography of American and European Muslims is also very different. Muslim communities in Europe have tended to cluster in concentrated population zones (e.g. the old shipyards around London, Cardiff and the northeast; the suburbs of northern English industrial cities; or the *banlieues* of Paris) whereas the U.S. Muslim population is far more diffuse. Each community's experience also reflects the widely varying histories, norms, and expectations surrounding the possibility of social mobility for immigrants.

Because their experiences have been so different, Muslim communities on either side of the Atlantic have sometimes found it difficult to relate to each other despite their shared religious culture. However, the gradual emergence of a more rooted American and European religious practice toward has arguably allowed the two communities to grow closer together. The post-9/11 culture of public suspicion toward Muslim communities and the shared experiences of stigma, scrutiny, and hope have also furthered this process. Therefore, there is now great potential to open transatlantic lines of communication between European and American communities such that Muslims on both sides can benefit and learn from each other with respect to both the shared and specific contexts and issues facing their communities.

These issues, which formed the basis of our discussions in Doha, include:

- Ongoing **socioeconomic challenges** relating to unemployment, educational attainment, and absent or blocked avenues for social mobility.
- Debates about **Muslim identity, loyalty, and belonging** both within Muslim communities and in wider society.

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1. *The Future of the Global Muslim Population: Projections for 2010–2030*, Pew Research Center, January 2011, http://www.pewforum.org/files/2011/01/FutureGlobalMuslimPopulation-WebPDF-Feb10.pdf.

- Questions about whether and how Muslims should participate in the **civic and political life** of the countries in which they reside.
- Concerns about **media representations and broader societal misunderstanding** of Islam and Muslims.
- New waves and forms of **Islamophobia**.
- The **surveillance and scrutiny of Muslim communities** by law enforcement and government security services.
- **Inter-religious and intercultural relations**.
- And underpinning many of these, the search for **a more European or American expression of Islam**.

Changing Understandings of Religion and Its Significance

When we examine the demographic shifts associated with the development of Islam in the West, a number of issues arise, the most important of which are divides between the older and younger generations of Muslims in Europe and North America. Multiple generations of western Muslims have considerably reevaluated their parents' understandings of Islam and the role it should play in one's life. For their parents growing up in Pakistan, Syria, or another Muslim-majority country, Islam was taken for granted as part of the social fabric. But this 'Islam of the parents' does not necessarily speak to the problems faced by Muslims in the West today. Some writers, such as German sociologist Hanns Thomä-Venske, note that when Islam is "transplanted" in this way, "the religious symbols and rituals…are no longer affirmed by the social environment, and they thus lose [the] character of certainty which underpinned their existence [in the homeland]."[2] It is not only the social environment that fails to affirm them, but also the next generation that fails to find much of use in this Islam—and subsequently rejects it. Often, much of what the older generation regards as Islam is dismissed by younger Muslims as somehow tainted, or as a vestige of cultural practices specific to their parents' countries of origin.

Intergenerational debates heavily feature this question of isolationism. With most (particularly young) European Muslims actively seeking to establish themselves within mainstream society, the apparent ambivalence of their parents in this regard is an intense source of frustration. Younger Muslims have often sought an Islam that had something to say, for example, about how properly to live one's life in a non-Muslim society and the particular challenges posed by those circumstances. Mosque leaders tended to be of the older generation and, again, representative of "local" Islam from the villages of South Asia or Morocco. In Britain during the 1980s and 90s, for example, many religious organizations would even "import" imams and *ulama'* (religious scholars) from Pakistan and Bangladesh for regular tours of duty—thus preventing the first generation of Muslim immigrants from ever leaving the relative safety of Islam contextualized in their homelands. Young Muslims often found this religious leadership to be particularly dogmatic and narrow minded in its conception of Islam. Questions and challenges in the mosque were not encouraged and the younger generation grew increasingly frustrated at being told in effect, when querying certain aspects of Islam, "that's just the way it is."

It would, however, be erroneous to think in terms of a dichotomous generational divide whereby young Muslims hold and seek more pluralistic approaches to religion in contrast to the hardened conservatism of their parents. In some cases the search for a more 'universalist' approach pushes young Muslims toward highly conservative currents of thought such as Salafism, leading some to adopt positions that are considerably more rigid

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2. Hans Thomä-Venske, "The Religious Life of Muslims in Britain" in Thomas Gerholm and Yngve Georg Lithman (eds.), *The New Islamic Presence in Europe*, (London: Mansell, 1988), p. 80.

than that of their parents. It is also worth noting that the youth's rejection of religious practices associated with the religious culture of their immigrant parents does not always constitute a refutation of traditionalist Islam—for example when it comes to Sufism, the inward or mystical approach to Islam. This kind of neo-traditionalist Islam has flourished in the last decade among young Muslims in the West, although the approach adopted is often different from that of their parents.

There is a search for a renewal, reinterpretation, and reorientation of Islam, one that speaks directly to the circumstances of being Muslim in 21st century Berlin or Chicago. Turning to those who self-identify as Muslim, one finds a variety of trends. Overall, the more observant youth seek a universalist form of Islam that would transcend ethno-sectarian squabbling and factionalism. While ostensibly the search for a new Islamic universalism would trend toward a pluralistic and tolerant form of Islam, this is only one dimension of this movement. Muslim communities in the West have a range of socio-political responses to the circumstances they have faced in recent years and how these relate to wider geopolitical and transnational concerns. For some, universalism is understood as the compatibility of Islam with the common values and norms found in other moral systems and faith traditions, leading to greater pluralism and tolerance. For others, however, the search for Islamic universalism leads to a hardened and literalist emphasis on the core tenants of "true" Islam and, politically, toward global Muslim politics.

Why a Contextual Approach to Islam?

The cultural and political impetus of globalization and the post-migratory experience of the majority of Muslims in Europe and North America has helped nurture this drive toward universalism. However, the contrasting outcomes of universalism described above bear profoundly on Muslim communities in the trans-Atlantic space in the contextualization of Islam. A contextual approach to religion, pioneered in Christian theology,[3] emphasizes the importance (and even primacy) of the *contexts* in which people live as a fundamental aspect of how the *texts* of the religion are read and approached. The context could be *inter alia* geographical, cultural, about time, or specifically relating to conditions such as poverty, inequality, and powerlessness. A contextual approach to Islam in the West would build a stronger synergy with the norms of a Western environment while at the same time critiquing a universalism that creates a homogenized brand of literal and 'true' Islam that aims to stand above cultural contexts. Thus, contextualizing Islam in Europe and North America is not a project that aims to adapt Islamic theology to the requirements of Western norms. Rather, it begins from the recognition that as an evolving tradition of belief, thought, and practice, Islam has usually tried to reflect the circumstances and settings in which Muslims live and practice their religion. Moreover, a contextualized approach to religion recognizes that all believers are socially located—in other words, that faith is not professed in the absence of pre-existing identities and influences. Muslims engage with their religion not in the abstract, but rather from various positions of race, gender, social class, etc.

Discussions around the development of European and American Muslim identities are now commonplace. The notion of contextualizing Islam for a British environment has recently been advanced by reports from Cambridge University developed and endorsed by over 20 prominent Muslim scholars and activists.[4] The reports are a helpful contribution to this process, coming amidst the backdrop of a wider series of debates around how Muslims are challenged by and respond to the impact of modernity.

While all religions in the modern day face challenges in dealing with the transformation of traditions, continuity versus change, and engagement with modernity, particular attention has been focused on Muslim communities and the adaptation of religious authority therein. This may be due in part to their growing presence and visibility in Europe and United States, the socioeconomic challenges that many Muslim communities face, and the potential for enhancing positive encounters, meaningful dialogue, social cohesion, and integration.[5]

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3. See for example: Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (New York: Orbis Books, 1992).
4. The "Contextualising Islam in Britain" report was a result of deliberations of over 20 Muslim scholars and activists around contemporary issues and challenges facing Muslims, specifically focused on how Muslim could meet these modern challenges and what Islamic teachings mean in the modern context in light of such challenges. The project was funded by the UK Department for Communities and Local Government and run by the Cambridge Centre of Islamic Studies from 2008–2011. Two reports have been published.
5. Martin van Bruinessen, "Producing Islamic Knowledge in Western Europe: discipline, authority, and personal quest" in Martin van Bruinessen & Stefano Allievi (eds.), *Producing Islamic Knowledge: Transmission and dissemination in Western Europe* (London: Routledge, 2011).

There is also an important security dimension to debates around the importance of religious leadership and the threat of radicalization. This is not only because of the few imams that have been identified to promote violent and jihadist discourse but also because of the positive role that religious leaders are expected to play in protecting vulnerable groups and individuals from extremist messages.

Themes such as loyalty, identity, gender equality, human rights, democracy, and secularism have become "totemic" issues in the journey of contextualizing Islam in the West. The emergent discourse addressing such issues often engages with them through a prism of public reason, reform, and renewal, and is briefly covered here.

Some have argued for the value of procedural secularism as a fair way of managing diversity in a plural, multi-faith environment. They defend this position through a theological re-reading of the principles of governance according to Islam. In addition to this theological debate, Muslims' lived experience of the interaction between religion and politics over the last century has often been far from pleasant. European scholar Olivier Roy's thesis of the "failure of political Islam" seems to have wind in its sails if we are to consider the recent resurgence of authoritarianism in Egypt following the 2011 revolution and the persistence of despotism in the Muslim world, not exclusive to, but including, the various states that were supposedly created and fashioned in the name of Islam.[6] While some have strongly advocated a closer and stronger relationship between religion and politics, the journey for other Muslims has been a search for how to limit the power and influence of authoritarian religion. In this context, human rights have become an important and controversial debate in the Muslim world.

Some Muslim critiques of the human rights discourse have asserted that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) does not adequately reflect the cultural and religious needs of Muslims and Muslim states. A range of approaches can be found from strong criticism, (particularly from countries such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Sudan), to those such as Abu Ala Maududi's, that argue for a theoretical compatibility of Islam and universal human rights (though Maududi is criticized for adopting a narrow conception of equality and rights in his understanding of the human rights discourse). More recent intellectuals such as Abdullahi Na'im and Abdolkarim Soroush in the United States and Mashood Baderin in the United Kingdom have argued for the UDHR to be adopted and embraced by Muslims more fully, as opposed to others that have argued for "Islamic Declarations" of Human Rights. The key obstacles for UDHR application in Muslim nations seem to arise from a mixture of philosophical and practical/cultural positions. Related to the notion of *hakimiyah* (divine sovereignty), some Muslims have argued that rights are conferred upon human beings by God and that there are no a priori rights of man unless granted by God. This vision sees the world through a narrow religious lens and ultimately could undermine the very shared, common approach necessary to create a *universal* declaration of rights and an understanding of an empowered *demos* that can assert its will—central to the idea of democracy. Some of the practical issues include controversies around freedom of religion and apostasy and the rights of women as equals. Baderin has argued that Islamic law can be interpreted in ways that are compatible with the UDHR, while Na'im has controversially argued for a radical hermeneutics of the Qur'an based on earlier Qur'anic passages taking precedence over later ones. Soroush has emphasized collective human wisdom and the need for the common heritage and interests of humanity to be recognized by Muslims and Islamic thought.[7]

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6.   Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).
7.   See Abdullahi Ahmed An-Naim, *Toward an Islamic Reformation: Civil Liberties, Human Rights and International Law* (Ithaca: Syracuse University Press, 1996); Mashood Baderin, *International Human Rights and Islamic Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom & Democracy in Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Some critics of practices in Muslim states, including human rights activists, have viewed these "Islamic" objections with skepticism, seeing them instead as *political* objections presented as religion-based in order to mask authoritarian practices. In fact much of this human rights debate is reflective of changes in Muslim notions of the world, the role of the state, the rights of minorities and the issue of pluralism more generally over the last century. As notions of a dichotomous world, divided between *dar al-Islam* (house of Islam) and *dar al-harb* (house of war), have gradually given way to a more globalized vision of a plural world, Muslim thought has been playing catch-up. Intellectuals such as Mahmud Ayoub, Fathi Osman, and Khalid Abou El Fadl (see also Abdelwahhab El-Affendi) and Abdolkarim Soroush have asserted that the sources of Islam can be reread in more pluralistic terms to better accommodate the rights of minorities and freedom of conscience, religion, and belief in a modern setting, (both in legal and philosophical terms, including debates around the existence of relative and multiple truths and salvation of non-Muslims).[8]

The intellectual trends presented above exhibit slow evolution toward a more humanist reading of Islam that can be more at ease with its European and western cultural milieu. The science of hermeneutics is critical to how one reads ancient religious texts in emerging and new contexts. Already, debates on progressive positions on the rights of people with alternative sexual orientations have begun (as demonstrated in the aforementioned Cambridge reports), which also contain a very clear and robust line on another controversial subject, freedom of religion. Burgeoning debates on Islamic feminist critiques of patriarchy are another important arena of thought

Scholars such as Asma Barlas and Amina Wadud have argued for a rereading of Islamic sources to create a more nuanced and equal understanding of gender roles in Islam.[9] Debates concerning loyalty and belonging to the state (versus the *umma*, or "community") have also been at the cutting edge of contemporary Muslim thought. Tariq Ramadan was one of the first to articulate and argue for a legal/theological framework for a strongly rooted European Muslim identity. Others have also addressed a number of sociopolitical issues central to citizenship in a British minority context, including how Muslims could deal with disagreements with the state, how they conceptualize the territory they live in, and how they can relate to the people around them with a stronger sense of fraternity, as their people.[10] It is interesting to note that when the Prophet Muhammad migrated to Medina, he set forth a charter that described all the local residents (Muslims, Jews and Pagans) as one *umma*. Yet some Muslims today are at such pains to emphasize only the other dimension of this word that implies a global Muslim fraternity, often in quite exclusive terms. So, contemporary *fiqh* (jurisprudence) needs a much more sober, honest, and nuanced understanding of Islam itself. The Fiqh Council of North America and the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) have also considered a number of questions linked with citizenship and the role of Muslims in the United States and Europe. After 9/11, additional important questions have been raised. When asked about British Muslims who wanted to go to Afghanistan to fight against British troops, the U.K.-based scholar, Abdullah al-Judai, emphasized that the social contract of citizenship was to be considered a legally binding treaty under Islamic law and that Muslims are not allowed to take up arms against their own military forces.

8. Mahmud Ayoub, "Islam and Pluralism" in *Encounters: Journal of Inter-Cultural Perspectives*. Vol. 3, 1997; Fathi Osman, *The Children of Adam: An Islamic Perspective on Pluralism*. (Washington: Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, 1996); Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (San Francisco: Harper, 2007); Abdelwahhab El-Affendi, *Rethinking Islam and Modernity: Essays in Honour of Fathi Osman*. (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 2001).
9. Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
10. Dilwar Hussain, "Can Islam Make Us British?" in Madeleine Bunting (ed.), *Islam, Race and Being British* (London: Guardian Publications, 2005); Tariq Ramadan, *op.cit*.

Contextualizing Islam: The Key Challenges

The various debates of the scholars and *ulama'* outlined above demonstrate that the building blocks of a contextual approach to Islam in the West has started to emerge. However, it has been an episodic project that by its very nature often finds itself mired in controversy. One of the primary goals of our discussions in Doha was to identify and discuss some of the major challenges confronting such efforts.

These included but were not limited to:

- Challenges arising from **intergenerational differences** with respect to how religion is understood, interpreted, and made relevant to concrete issues in everyday life.
- Ongoing **debates about representation and legitimacy** in Muslim communities, i.e. who is permitted to speak on behalf of Islam in Western Muslim communities and the 'politics of authenticity' that surround such claims.
- The absence of spaces (physical & discursive) that can promote **intra-Muslim dialogue and unity**.
- The relatively underdeveloped state of **Muslim institutions and funding structures** in Western contexts.
- The importance of nurturing **religious leadership and expertise** that can provide contextually relevant services for an evolving and emerging Muslim audience.

Our discussions in Doha covered these and other challenges facing Muslim communities in Europe and North America in the pursuit of developing contextual approaches to religion. What does it take to build a transatlantic infrastructure and networks of collaboration around the effort to contextualize Islam in relation to the concrete challenges—and opportunities—that define Muslim life in the West?

Reflections of the Working Group

The discussions in the Working Group raised a number of points pertinent to the subject of contextualizing Islam. The discussion was focused on how Muslim practitioners and believers follow tradition as time and place challenge the religion. As Islam spread to different parts of the world, and as its presence evolved (in India, Africa, China, the United States and elsewhere), how have traditions evolved?

The Working Group participants initially raised a number of important questions around the meaning of, and expectations behind, the term 'contextualization'. For some, the problem does not sit with interpretations of Islam per se, but rather the absence of institutional authority and credibility of those interpretations. The challenge is to *credibly* contextualize Islam. Some questioned if an approach defined in terms of contextualization is likely to move too far away—and in an overly liberal direction—from the more traditional core of Islam. Others flagged the fact that the issue of reform primarily revolves around the legal basis of Islam and felt that the solutions sought are not going to be found through the law. Some participants problematized the notions of credibility and "authority" with respect to the question of adapting religious authority, particularly in light of the way younger people access religion and interact with each other through the online world. This raised the idea of a dichotomy between a "traditional"/theoretical Islam and a "lived" Islam. Even if no dichotomy exists, is there such a thing as a single Muslim constituency that either endorses or follows a scholarly view, or are constituencies far more fragmented and diverse? Some felt that religious scholarship often follows public practice (rather than vice-versa) and lends credibility, validation, or critique to what has already happened.

Another concern raised by participants was that the word "contextualization" might become a euphemism for the "domestication" of religion—particularly at the hands of Western governments keen to foster an understanding of Islam conducive to their policy preferences. If Islam can never challenge the state or speak "truth to power," does it have any value? In other words, who controls the process of "contextualization?" Whose agenda is this?

For other participants, contextualization through the use of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) and *tafsir* (exegesis) has been going on for centuries but it is the domain of religious scholars to undertake this exercise. There was a counter view that *tafsir* and *ijtihad* should not just be confined to the *ulama'* alone without feedback from the society. For them, the contemporary reality of Islamic thought is a collaborative process where those who have knowledge and expertise of the context need to work in partnership with those who have expertise in the realm of the text.

After some initial apprehensions were aired, the discussion evolved to emphasize the importance of interpretation. Islam can only be known through interpretation, as no human being can truly know the mind of God. Aside from the context and the text there is what comes before, the "pre" text or the lens through which humans interpret. Islam is read through a lens and the context affects the lens Muslims use to read Islam, so a complex set of hermeneutic interactions result between the reader, the context, and the text. Muslims do not engage their religion in the abstract. Rather, their interpretive work is always grounded in the positionality of the believer—in terms of race, gender, social class, culture, and/or other factors.

Another dimension to the process of interpretation is a consideration of the public good (*maslaha*)—a moral, ethical, and legal theory that is not just about the good of Muslims, but of the whole society. Some felt passionately that ethics were being ignored, that Muslims often have a conversation about law, *fiqh* (jurisprudence), but not ethics. One Working Group member remarked that, "If we had a true ethical criteria, we wouldn't come up with edicts that justify suicide bombing. You can read the scripture but if you come up with something stupid in the end, then what's the point?"

In looking at the range of challenges confronting Muslim communities in Europe and America, participants raised a number of concrete issues over the course of the discussions. These have been grouped here as "macro" and "micro" level issues, though this neat compartmentalization may not always apply.

Macro issues

- The strategic outlook for Muslim communities, i.e. how are issues prioritized (domestic/abroad, for example) and how are agendas determined? Other concerns included the lack of capacity in advocacy and the need to establish pro-active agendas rather than "fire-fighting" or being subsumed by the agenda of others.
- Perceptions of Muslims and the fear and mistrust surrounding the Muslim presence in Europe and North America.
- The nature of reform in Islamic thought and its relationship and interaction with tradition.
- Change in religious authority and the way this is shaped by the Internet and online engagement.

Micro issues

- Socio-political marginalization of Muslims (even in the United States where they are normally perceived to be more economically advanced than their European counterparts, perhaps due to lack of effective leveraging of wealth).
- Gender relations and inequality were a major issue of concern (see below).

- Incarceration of a disproportionate number of Muslims and the challenge of re-integration of these individuals into the community upon release.
- Educational underachievement at school level in places, but also a broader concern around religious education and the development of imams.
- Tensions in the realm of community and belonging—communitarianism vs. care for the whole society.
- Evolving identity of Muslims as citizens of the West.
- National/societal values and the values of Muslims—are they in synergy or in conflict?
- Disproportionate levels of unemployment in some locations.
- The emergence of extremism and violence in the name of Islam, and the challenge this poses to both Muslim communities as well as Western societies.

Participants critiqued some of the terms being used in the conversation, including even the very idea of a "Muslim community," arguing that Muslims cannot be regarded as an isolated group in a modern citizenry outside the realm of religion. However, others noted a rise in identity politics could be fuelling an exaggerated sense of victimhood and a reified notion of "Muslim community" as a response to this same predicament. The usage of "America," "Europe," and "Muslim world" are too general as terms, given the complexity of different locations, classes, economic conditions, ethnicities, and political variations. The reasons for marginalization may not be the same from one group to another, even within the Muslim experience, and Muslims need to think carefully about the intersection between economics, citizenship, and other factors. Some participants pointed out that a properly contextualized approach to Islam in Europe and North America would need to avoid over-privileging the immigrant experience. In most settings there is now at least one full generation of Muslims who have been born, raised, and lived exclusively in the West; Muslims are an increasingly post-immigrant community. In others, particularly the United States, there is a large African-American Muslim community whose history and experience is very distinctive.

One of the major discussion points focused on a set of gender issues regarding the lack of access to mosques, but also touching on dress, relationships, choice and autonomy in marriage, as well as masculinity. One participant saw the discussion around gender reflective of the importance of our Western location and a potential space for positive developments in contextualizing Islam. Overall, however, the discussion of gender was fraught with tension. Working Group participants shared stories of people that had simply given up hope on any progress in procuring better access to the mosque, and others where Muslim women felt more welcome and free to practice their religion in non-Muslim places of worship.

Some felt that gender issues were used as a political stick to beat Muslims with, and that Muslims needed to make room for conservative views just as other religious communities had. Other participants urged recognition of a diversity of perspectives—including conservative ones. The difficulty with the conservative view arises when it attempts to close down debate by claiming a monopoly over "the truth." Muslims should respect internal diversity and the right to believe in socially conservative values, but that practice cannot discriminate or take away the rights of others. Conservative voices are welcome so long as they don't undermine the basic social contract and equality of all citizens that is the basis of any modern society. Seen from the wider context of other religious experiences in the United States, there were significant changes in attitudes toward women as American culture began to change. For example, the ordination of female rabbis in the most liberal Jewish movements ultimately caused some of the more conservative movements to also ordain.

Some participants felt that without significant progress toward greater gender equality there are risks of alienating "half of our community," especially in contexts where Muslim women are often better educated than their male colleagues. Some felt that the contextualizing and re-interpretation

of Islamic thought had already happened in areas such as politics or modern banking and finance, while there has been a reluctance to rethink gender relations. One participant reminded the group starkly that this is not just about gender; this is about power and who has access to decision making. If these issues are not addressed, Muslim communities will find a "lot of angry, resentful women."

One participant also observed that although many Muslims perceived the state negatively, her own experience had led her to view the role of government in a more positive light: "(It is the state) that has fought for my rights and the people who continue to discriminate against me are not the state—I have to go to the government, to the court, to legislation. As a Muslim woman I have a far better perception of the state as something upholding my rights."

Nevertheless, discussion around the role of the state featured in another important issue area explored in the Working Group: extremism and security. For some, the whole conversation on contextualizing Islam would not be happening—at least not with the same level of intensity—if there were no concerns about security. Others disagreed and felt that while security measures and anti-extremism policies may be an important concern for Muslim communities, the discussions around the place of Islam in the modern world are of a more fundamental nature and predate the securitized approach to Islam so dominant today. Some questioned if such discussions on a contextualized approach to Islam and gender relations are most beneficial to the state, or to Muslim communities and others. If the latter is true, then Muslims should be proud to take ownership of the outcome of such conversations. Another voice suggested that such discussions may not actually be in the interest of the state, as a contextualized Islam may be more confident and willing to challenge the state and society. Muslims therefore need to step out of the security context and look at the subject from an ethical and religious framework. If values such as love and mercy are universal, timeless, and ethical considerations, they need to guide the way Muslims view context.

The Working Group concluded with a broad sense of agreement on three obstacles to contextualizing Islam:

1. **Gender inequality is a fundamental challenge** to contextualizing Islam in Europe and North America.
2. Without **greater institutional support**, it will be difficult to unlock potential for contextual solutions to issues faced by Muslims. **Educational and research capacity, enabled by venture philanthropy** from both within and outside Muslim communities, is necessary for advancing strategic and intellectual visions.
3. Contextual approaches to Islam are often inaccessible to diverse Muslim publics. There is a lack of **innovative publications and multimedia formats** that combine theology, academic work, the arts, and community life—including online, social media, and other digital components.

One of the ideas consistently present throughout Working Group discussions was that all religion is ultimately contextual if it is to be lived in the reality of a time and place; we need to be cognizant of the influence of different contexts, whether in the east or the west. The discussion provided a wide ranging and stimulating look at some of the challenges and opportunities facing Muslims across the United States and Europe and the potential value in thinking in a more systematic way about the impact of the evolving context of the Western presence of Islam. There seemed to be significant interest in investigating these issues further and developing practical collaborative ventures in pursuing the suggestions listed above.

There were also more existential concerns important in the framing and reframing of Western Muslim identity that require attention. As one Working Group participant asked, if the binary of "Islam vs. the West" did not exist, would Muslim identity be different across the world today? These will no doubt be ongoing concerns and questions that will feature in the pursuit of reaching a more contextual understanding of Islam in Europe and North America.

About the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World

The Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World is a research initiative housed in the Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The Project's mission is to engage and inform policymakers, practitioners, and the broader public on the changing dynamics in Muslim-majority countries and to advance relations between Americans and Muslim societies around the world.

To fulfill this mission, the Project sponsors a range of activities, research projects, and publications designed to educate, encourage frank dialogue, and build positive partnerships between the United States and Muslim communities all over the world. The broader goals of the Project include:

- Exploring the multi-faceted nature of the United States' relationship with Muslim-majority states, including issues related to mutual misperceptions;
- Analyzing the social, economic, and political dynamics underway in Muslim societies;
- Identifying areas for shared endeavors between the United States and Muslim communities around the world on issues of common concern.

To achieve these goals, the Project has several interlocking components:

- The U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which brings together leaders in politics, business, media, academia, and civil society from the United States and from Muslim societies in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. The Forum also serves as a focal point for the Project's ongoing research and initiatives, providing the foundation for a range of complementary activities designed to enhance dialogue and impact;
- An Analysis Paper Series that provides high-quality research and publications on key questions facing Muslim states and communities;
- Workshops, symposia, and public and private discussions with government officials and other key stakeholders focused on critical issues affecting the relationship;
- Special initiatives in targeted areas of demand. In the past these have included Arts and Culture, Science and Technology, and Religion and Diplomacy.

The Project's Steering Committee consists of Martin Indyk, Executive Vice President; Bruce Jones, Acting Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy Studies; Tamara Wittes, Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Middle East Policy; William McCants, Fellow and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World; Kenneth Pollack, Senior Fellow in the Center; Bruce Riedel, Senior Fellow in the Center; Shibley Telhami, Nonresident Senior Fellow of the Project and Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland; and Salman Shaikh, Fellow and Director of the Brookings Doha Center.

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Today's dramatic, dynamic and often violent Middle East presents unprecedented challenges for global security and United States foreign policy. Understanding and addressing these challenges is the work of the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings. Founded in 2002, the Center for Middle East Policy brings together the most experienced policy minds working on the region, and provides policymakers and the public with objective, in-depth and timely research and analysis. Our mission is to chart the path—political, economic and social—to a Middle East at peace with itself and the world.

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- Iran's Five Alternative Futures
- The Future of Counterterrorism
- Energy Security and Conflict in the Middle East

The Center was established on May 13, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The Center is part of the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings and upholds the Brookings values of Quality, Independence, and Impact. The Center is also home to the *Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World*, which convenes a major international conference and a range of activities each year to foster frank dialogue and build positive partnerships between the United States and Muslim communities around the world. The Center also houses the *Brookings Doha Center* in Doha, Qatar—home to three permanent scholars, visiting fellows, and a full range of policy-relevant conferences and meetings.