MUSLIM POLITICS AND U.S. POLICIES:
PROSPECTS FOR PLURALISM AND DEMOCRACY
IN THE MUSLIM WORLD

THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE
AND THE INSTITUTE ON RELIGION AND WORLD
AFFAIRS

Wednesday, September 17, 2003

SECOND SESSION:
“SCALING UP POLITICAL CAPITAL”

DIANE SINGERMAN, THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY:
“WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND ISLAM:
AN EXAMPLE OF REFORMIST SUCCESS IN EGYPT

DALE F. EICKELMAN, DARTMOUTH COLLEGE:
“NEW MEDIA AND POLITICAL REFORM:
MOROCCO AND BEYOND”

PETER MANDAVILLE, GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY:
“TRANSNATIONAL MUSLIM MOVEMENTS:
WHAT KIND OF POLITICS?”
ROBERT HEFNER: Our first speaker in this second panel is Diane Singerman with the American University, and she’ll be speaking about “Women’s Rights and Islam: An Example of Reformist Success in Egypt.”

DIANE SINGERMAN: Thank you. I want to start by saying that a few years ago I was at a meeting with the Egyptian ambassador about a human rights issue and he was complaining about academics who never say anything positive about Egyptian politics. So, unlike Richard Norton’s example on the case of the Wasat Party, the case I am discussing today is a pretty positive one. I do not mean to be naïve or too hopeful, but I think the coalition of forces that came together to give Egyptian women the right to divorce, via new legislative changes, is a very instructive case that reflects many of the possibilities for Muslim politics which we have been discussing today.

I want to start off with some basic lessons that can be learned from this example. First, I would like to say that despite the brilliance, the dedication and the commitment of many NGO activists in Egypt, I think one of the things that this case has told us is that the strategy of working within civil society, while crucial, is somewhat limited. The success of this coalition that I’m discussing today followed their eventual realization that they needed to play with the “big boys,” so to speak. They needed to engage the president, the law, parliament and, most importantly, religious authorities.

Second, I’d like to say that this case represents a great example of legal activism. Most importantly, this coalition depended upon female lawyers, who represent 23 percent of all lawyers in Egypt today, and on their highly-placed sympathetic (male) supporters in the Ministry of the Judiciary and in the legal community. This strategy of legal activism is not new: the human rights community and the Islamist movement have used legal activism to promote its agenda. I think we need to look to the courts a lot more as a positive force in political, lawful, change.

Third, I think political scientists and policymakers need to take parliamentary politics in the Middle East more seriously and direct our attention to this increasingly relevant arena of power. We need to recognize, as Jenny White has argued earlier in regard to the Turkish case, that meaningful change can only proceed if the powerful, organized interests of society have begun to assert themselves in national politics and in acceptable arenas of political contestation. I say this not because we have an interest within political science in studying familiar institutions such as legislatures, but because organized interests in Egypt and other places are starting to take these political spaces seriously. They are lobbying. They are encouraging local constituents to engage Parliamentarians. They are holding legislators accountable, and they are building a kind of constituent politics. Yes, Parliament has been constrained by authoritarian politics, the domination of the National Democratic Party, and questionable electoral practices. But despite these problems, we need to seriously consider Parliament as an arena of contestation and as an architect of public policy.

Fourth, I would like to say that women and the women’s movement have been at the forefront of what I would call legal, civil, “rightful resistance” (a term which I borrow from Kevin J. O’Brian). In this most recent chapter of trying to change personal status
laws, they have looked to Islam as a frame for positive social change and as a vehicle for promoting women’s rights.

The West does not need “to rescue women from Islam.” We need to avoid the colonial metaphor of rescuing women from Islam because women are already at the forefront of a very rich, complex, interpretive, and pluralist debate in the Muslim world. Movements that are grounded in everyday politics and social realities are creating pragmatic, concrete new kinds of praxis. And so we have to look to them to understand political change and how Muslim women are agents of change. We have to recognize what these movements are already doing.

The case study that I can only explain very briefly here centers around a new law (Law No. 1), passed in January 2000 by the Egyptian parliament, that altered procedures—and only procedures—surrounding personal status law. This new legislation gave women the right to initiate a divorce without the consent of her husband if she gave up some of her financial rights. The campaign to change the law was the consequence of a 15-year effort that was as but the most recent chapter of a century-long campaign. As you all know, personal status law regulates marriage, divorce, inheritance and child custody. It is at the heart of intimate life, of family life and public morality throughout the Muslim world.

As you also know, colonialism and Western influence largely altered legal codes in the Middle East, but Western and modernizing influences had only limited and minimal effects on personal status law. In fact, civil codes that were imported from Europe made religious authorities and their supporters and indigenous political elites guard even more jealously the terrain of personal status law. You could change civil law, criminal law, but because personal status law was very close to Islamic law (shari’a) it was a line in the sand. So even though President Gamal Abdel Nasser dismantled personal status courts in 1955, shari’a remained the source of law and the religious justification for personal status law. Presidents Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak, motivated by political reasons and competition with Islamist radicals, only strengthened the religious justification for personal status law (and Egyptian law in general) during their tenure.

Thus, the problem for the women’s movement was the following: Although they had pursued reformist efforts throughout the 20th century that were based on a liberal discourse of women’s rights, if they were going to make any progress in changing personal status law, they had to formulate their legal and ideological challenge on Islamic grounds. In that spirit, for the past 15 years, activists worked within civil society to make a case about the potential for Islam to be a source of positive social change. In particular, they smartly posed Islam against patriarchy, arguing that they were merely restoring the rights that Muslim women had enjoyed in earlier periods of history.

As one activist said, “People act like they understand Islam, or act like they don’t, but people don’t know Islam. They say we must do this and that, but they really are very selective in what they identify as Islamic.” A prominent attorney and key leader of the coalition, Mona Zulficar, suggested that each Egyptian man walks around with a little
pyramid inside of him; thinking that he is the pharaoh. But she and others believed that Islamic law could restore the balance in the Egyptian family, which has been unfairly tipped towards patriarchy.

This innovative, activist, strategic, pragmatic coalition used an Islamic frame to alter the logic of the women's movement. Creative activists turned religion into an asset rather than a liability, basically beating the religious traditionalists at their own game, while engaging in civil, legal, rightful, collective action. This campaign could not have succeeded without its Islamic frame.

The role of scholars in this coalition facilitated the rediscovery and reinterpretation of Egypt's historical past. These postcolonial scholars of history, law, sociology, religion, and philosophy, motivated by their professional identities and training, challenged the predominant religious discourse on women, as well as the historical record about women's status and capabilities. They re-imagined the past and the Islamic canon, reclaimed subjugated knowledge and envisioned new laws and alliances to seize whatever political opportunities they had before them.

They studied the historical record of shari'a courts, marriage contracts, and legal disputes and demonstrated that the historical record was diverse and complex. They suggested that if women might have fared better centuries ago and were able to divorce more easily, then surely, there was not a single, fixed, essentialist, religious or legal position on personal status law. At the very least, there was room to reinterpret their own traditions – to restore the rights that women had, in fact, enjoyed in earlier periods of Islamic history.

These activists, of course, are part of a much larger transnational movement of women who not only are reinterpreting Islam, but implementing their vision of a women's rightful place in society, in collaboration with lawyers and politicians.

These women themselves are product of state feminism, promoted by the Nasser regime and women activists in the 1950s and 1960s. These are professional women who finally were able to vote, even though they found that voting had lost its meaning in Egypt. They contributed to Egypt's development but there were, and still are, many patriarchal constraints in their daily lives. Women could become ambassadors, deans of Islamic philosophy, corporate lawyers, businesswomen, and politicians, yet they feared divorce, financial ruin, and losing the custody of their children if they worked, traveled or pursued an education without the consent of their husbands. It was these types of contradictions and their knowledge of horrendous divorces and tragic family situations which fueled their activism.

In short, these new legislative changes offered the option of a no-fault irrevocable divorce (khul') without the husband's consent. This coalition worked assiduously with many religious scholars and authorities in preparation of this law. The legal changes were religiously justified from Quranic verses on divorce and Hadith (the sayings of the Prophet). They held hundreds of meetings and conferences, preparing the groundwork for public acceptance of the idea. They also relied upon a new generation of women,
trained in religious law and religious philosophy, to defend a religious argument for reinstating khul’ in Egypt.

To understand the popularity of the law, it is important to note that segments of the international business community and legal community supported this law because divorce cases have paralyzed and overwhelmed the courts, making “judicial reform” impossible and harming Egypt’s desire to be a global economic player. Divorce disputes, according to some sources, produce five other cases and often take eight to 10 years to move slowly through the judicial system. Egypt is already an extremely litigious society and the business community and international actors were eager for the dockets to be cleared so other civil and criminal cases could be heard in a timely fashion.

The campaign to reform personal status laws was really two-part. During the first period activists worked with NGOs to alter the state-sponsored marriage contract that every Egyptian couple signs. The religious justification for the project was clear: throughout Islamic history, women have included specific conditions in their marriage contracts which enhanced their rights and power in the relationship (to retain the right to divorce, work, or travel without a husband’s permission, or to forbid a husband from taking a second wife). After several years, however, they abandoned that approach because they realized that social norms and familial pressure dissuaded women from using this voluntary “check-off” option. As one marriage registrar said, “No man who deserves to be called a man can accept this idea.”

At the same time, parts of the feminist movement did not want to give up their right to formal-legal equality that they argued were guaranteed under the constitution. Thus, during the second half of this campaign, the coalition turned to the parliamentary realm, working very carefully with seasoned female legislators. In other words, the first women who joined parliament in the 1970s were the people who maneuvered this new law through the legislature. When the legislation was finally presented to Parliament after several years of preparatory work, 70 percent of the Members of Parliament were present – a far higher attendance record than was common. The Grand Imam of Al Azhar was also noticeably in attendance, signaling his approval of the legislation and his involvement in its evolution.

At the same time, there was still great opposition from certain parts of the religious establishment who claimed it was un-Islamic, had not been properly vetted before qualified religious authorities, and would soon lead to the destruction of Egyptian family life. Opposition parties in Egypt, including the few Leftists in Parliament, also did very little to support the initiative. But in the end, though there was a lot of resistance even within the National Democratic Party and a troubling display of misogynist discourse in Parliamentary debates on the bill, the legislation finally was voted into law.

What does this case tell us? I would suggest it represents a learning curve within the women’s movement. The women’s movement itself has taken lobbying and Parliament more seriously. Because of the success with Law No. 1 of 2000 the women’s movement is now poised to launch more legislative and legal initiatives.
The coalition pursued a strategy of “rightful resistance” within the bounds of law that was promoted by well-respected, powerful sectors in Egyptian society, such as the First Lady, high-ranking judicial authorities and lawyers, many women activists, and NGO leaders. Their strategy of organizing “talking shows” and nadwaat (seminars and conferences) encouraged informal networking, politicking, and alliance-formation which can thrive under some circumstances, particularly the heavy-handed restrictions on association life in Egypt, which Richard Norton has described earlier.

Finally, the internal, Islamic, indigenous, lawful frame of the coalition was absolutely essential to gaining popular support for this legislation. This case demonstrates that Islam can offer multiple perspectives on controversial issues. U.S. policymakers should begin to recognize the pluralism of Islam and acknowledge the possibilities which these indigenous, internal debates and re-interpretive projects may provide for democratization and greater political participation, freedom, and equality in Muslim societies. The lessons of politics which direct activists to seize new opportunities and imagine a different order can be drawn from anywhere, but within the Islamic world, Egypt and the personal status law coalition may serve as a successful model, whose modest aims and innovative legitimating strategy to improve the power and position of women, finally prevailed.

Thank you.

(Applause.)

MR. HEFNER: Thank you very much, Diane. We’ll move directly to Dale F. Eickelman of Dartmouth College who is going to be speaking with us about “New Media and Political Reform: Morocco and Beyond.”

DALE EICKELMAN: I am going to add to some themes already invoked by some of the earlier speakers concerning the importance of understanding historical contexts and collective memory, especially the remarks of Bahman [Baktiari] on Iran. As he said, if you want to understand what’s going on in Iran now, don’t start with the 1979 revolution; but with the 1906 constitutional crisis, and look for the long-term changes that still weigh on people understanding of themselves and their history.

Having said that, my goal today is to focus on current trends and developments. All of us here were asked to contribute chapters to a book. Book projects have their own rhythm. In dealing with a subject such as this conference, between the conception and the publication of the book, issues and best examples can change dramatically. That’s one reason why the present forum is a welcome complement to the book project.

For example, my chapter for the book project was created in early April 2003, just over two weeks after coalition forces began the invasion of Iraq. I arrived in Morocco on March 20, just a day after the coalition forces began the invasion, and I remained in Morocco until early June, several weeks after the May 16, 2003, suicide bombings in Casablanca that left 44 dead and shook Morocco out of the complacent view that “it can’t happen here.” To play on the popular term, the Arab “street,” I was living on one in
the walled old city of Fez, some 12 minutes by fast walk from any automobile-accessible street. Residence in an old Arab quarter gave me a good sense of what was new and different about popular opinion. What CNN consistently called, when I was in Fez, “the war in Iraq,” the Arab media usually, with the exception of the London-based Arab-language transnational newspaper, al-Sharq al-Awsat (the Middle East), called “the war against Iraq.” The local newspapers were quite interesting in talking about the war against Iraq. For the first time in the Moroccan Arab media’s history – French, of course, is the main European language – the masthead of each page of war coverage added “no to war” in English, implying that the editors wanted the foreign embassies with limited local language abilities to understand their point of view.

Paradoxically, what the newspapers wrote made little difference to local opinion. In the old quarters of Fez as elsewhere in Morocco, new papers weren’t regularly read. In Egypt and Iraq in the 1960s, even in small towns and villages, a common sight was people gathered around a teacher or other literate person who read them the newspapers. A recent poll in Morocco indicated that only 2 percent of Moroccans regularly read newspapers, a rate that is half that in Algeria, which has a worse rate of adult literacy than Morocco.

Most people get their news from the broadcast media instead. It’s then necessary to ask, which broadcast media? People use the local, official broadcast media as seasoning, to see the “official” story was. The most trusted source, however, is Arab satellite television. I’ve often heard the argument in Washington: Well, you have to be rich to get satellite reception; the dishes cost a lot, so that satellite television is accessible only by the elite. I was living in a poor neighborhood. Households often joined together to share satellite dishes. This meant, of course, some collective decision-making on what to watch, but the system worked. Lots of people have satellite dishes now, and in the most humble cafes people would channel switch, looking at the available satellite reporting. And choices range well beyond Qatar’s al-Jazeera to include Al-Arabiya and a number of other satellite channels. As a result, people compare what is being said on different channels. Satellite television dominated what people saw and heard. Even the newspapers – the quality press, such as al-Sharq al-Awsat – reproduced grainy television photographs rather than photographs from agency photographers or their own.

This is a very different sort of situation than that prevailing even five years ago or at the time of the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The official story now just taken for what it is, and heard with considerable critical skepticism. “Let’s see what Rabat is saying.” And Rabat would usually say something a day or two after anything occurred. Thus on the death of Hassan II, the official media only reported his death nearly ten hours after it was reported by al-Jazeera and in the foreign media, further accentuating the difference between independent media and the “official” story.

Hence one important issue is to seek out public opinion, even if it is imperfectly reflected in local and official media. For example, in the spring of 2003 here were many ironic comments, but not uniformly hostile ones, concerning the so-called American “official” story in Arabic – which kept changing regarding the reasons America was in
Iraq and only intermittently buttressed by officials making themselves available to the Arab media. This “official” story was poorly communicated and poorly received.

Added to this difficulty were language problems. In Morocco there are three different Berber languages, colloquial Moroccan Arabic, and the “standard” Arabic of the classroom and the televised news casts. Thus if one knows colloquial Arabic only, one’s understanding of an al-Jazeera broadcast is limited. That requires education. Thus a woman in Fez lacking “newscast” Arabic could see an image of George W. Bush smiling and laughing at a press conference and say to an American guest, “He’s laughing because so many Arabs got killed today,” words and deeds improbably in practice.

In countries such as our own, images also dominate the news. In the mid-1990s, a network producer asked for my assistance in acquiring videotapes of demonstrations in an Arabian peninsula country, saying that the network recognized the significance of the then current demonstrations, but was unable to report on them without images. No picture, no story. Today is a different situation, as there are different audiences with different interests. Thus there was cheering in the streets of Fez, as for a soccer match, when al-Jazeera and the other channels broadcast images of Saddam Hussein alive on videotape. This was followed a few days later by a huge headline in al-Sharq al-Awsat, over a large photograph of a statue of Saddam being toppled (with, as it turns out, the U.S. army tank pulling the cable cropped out of the image) and the words, wa-yasqut nizam Saddam (and so Saddam’s regime falls).

After the collapse of the Iraqi regime, local Arab press commentators were slow to respond. Again, satellite television gave people the most crude, direct access to what was happening, confronting its audience with the fact that the Iraqi regime was finished and that people had to come to terms with this development. Satellite television shaped people opinions and reactions, not the “official” media or newspaper columnists. The questions in the modest cafés of Fez were sensible, practical ones. What’s going to happen next? What will be the Turkish reaction if Iraq’s Kurds are given a voice in government? Will America bring a better government? Sorry for any Britons in the room, but Britain was hardly mentioned, except as seasoning to the soup.

Few used the term often, demoqratiya, democracy, but not using the term does not mean that thoughts about more open and accessible governments were absent. And this is where Melissa’s comments at the very beginning of this conference become so important. Just because one does not say something in public – perhaps because a regime is repressive or discourages comment – does not mean that thinking about alternative social and political realities does not take place. With the new media and satellite television, one can have regular images of the West and of other places regularly in one’s sleeping room. You can see images of alternate social realities in private space. You can talk about French elections and how they’re not fixed or manipulated, even if there is still a price to pay for being too disparaging about current Moroccan elections, which, even those held a few days ago on September 12, 2003, continue to be carefully monitored and controlled by the government.
In the last few decades, however, many things have changed for the better, and many of these features are long-term change. First, no one can now monopolize the tools of literate culture. I remember my Egyptian colleague, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, recently released from an Egyptian prison, telling me how he experienced news of the June 1967 war when he was still a secondary school student in Cairo. He and his classmates knew, he said, that Israel was about to fall because he heard it on Cairo Radio – there was no doubt about it and all the high school students knew it was true. Nobody in the Arab world makes the mistake anymore of accepting uncritically the “official” story. You listen for the official story, and then you listen to everything else that you can learn. The alternate worlds and alternate stories are more accessible and better understood than they were before.

In recent years there has also been a major growth in mass higher education, even if access to schooling continues to lag behind the demand. This is a revolution that has come to pass since the mid-20th century, with different rates of improvement in different places. One consequence is that the “standard” Arabic of al-Jazeera and be understood by many more people than was the case several decades ago. In the 1960s in Morocco, I sometimes was asked in rural areas to translate newscasts from Radio Rabat into local colloquial Arabic. By the late 1970s, I was out of a job because enough people knew Arabic at the level needed to understand newscasts. This improved access to educated speech may seem like a small change, but it means that people share access to public opinion far beyond their immediate locality.

Finally, there is the proliferation of new media and the means of communication. This means that the top-down control represented by the old, expensive printing press or by state radio has disappeared. You get news now from many different sources. Even if not many people have Internet connections at home, and many youth spend more time at chat and porno sites than anything else at Internet cafés, they also are looking at news sites and getting information in ways that were impossible earlier. So this development is creating a fragmentation of audiences. It allows, as Bob Hefner has said, for militant or extremist groups to communicate much more freely among themselves or to stay one level ahead of the police. But it also opens the doors to transparency in governance and in civil society.

What’s happening, I would argue, is an emerging public sphere in which you are getting messages and images in face-to-face conversations, gossip, newspapers (for those who read them), books, magazines, anonymous leaflets, video and audio cassettes, satellite and regular television. These messages overlap and build on one another. When censored or suppressed in one medium, they appear elsewhere.

So what are the implications of these developments? Let me present the positive side first, and then raise cautions. Satellite television, the leader of the new media, tilts the balance of public argument in favor of ideas and practices that can be explained, defended and foregrounded. Colin Powell can go on al-Jazeera together with Jordan’s Prince Hassan bin Talal. Via phone-ins, people can ask live questions of him, including tough questions. Both men have to be prepared. To a more limited extent, this model for
responsiveness is now the standard to which local media outlets are held, even if they rarely attain it.

Such media openness and reflexivity sustains new forms of audience. Let us return to Morocco’s 12 September local and municipal elections. The elections were not entirely open, but were fixed much more gracefully than prior ones. The “Islamist” party, the PJD, feared by the authorities and the other parties because of its potential for winning in every circumscription where they fielded candidates, was widely reported as agreeing “voluntarily” with the Minister of the Interior to run candidates in only a few locales. In some cases, as in Tangier, where the PJD outdistanced the candidates from other parties in the September 2002 elections, they fielded no candidates, a point no lost on the general Moroccan electorate. Thus the PJD showed its “responsibility” à la marocaine.

The suicide bombings in Casablanca on May 16 evoked universal condemnation in the official media and local press, but more nuanced responses elsewhere. Everyone was shocked. The bombings came at the end of a week-long national celebration honoring the birth of the king’s first child—the state media was still showing scenes of the celebration when the blasts took place. By the next day, the state media ran grim special coverage of the carnage and the king visiting the scenes of destruction. Several days later, the official media began to be full of stories about how illiteracy would be eliminated in five years, shantytowns in two, and the universal concern of authorities for resolving local problems. The ministry of Pious Endowments and Islamic Affairs announced that all Friday sermons would now be written in Rabat and read word for word in mosques throughout the country.

In homes and coffee shops, the response to such claims was more ironic, as shantytowns have been around for a long time and are growing, and there have been several scandals associated with fraud in semi-public housing schemes. “Such announcements will please the World Bank,” some said. “Now they will think that everything is under control.” And in the King’s Speech of the throne, delivered July 30, he called for an end to local corruption. Yet by early September, a major drug scandal in northern Morocco (Tetouan) became public, and implicated national-level officials as well as local ones. As a result, few believe the “official” story, and many are concerned about the widening gap between the growing numbers of Morocco’s poor and those who live well, and the extent to which the government appears to have lost touch the means for monitoring, and anticipating, what takes place among those whose only hope for the future is to risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean as illegal immigrants, grilleurs in Moroccan French, to Europe.

The shock of the May 16 bombings may set basic, long-term changes in motion, if the government responds not just with improved repression and street-level intelligence, but begins implementing basic reforms, including finding ways of allowing more voices to be heard effectively in the political arena. Diane Singerman mentioned the reforms of personal status laws and rules governing the access of women to courts in Egypt. In Morocco, discussions concerning the reform of such laws w as begun a decade ago. Technically, to deflect the resistance of religious conservatives, the reforms concern the
mudawwana, the compendium of shari’a based laws used in Moroccan courts. The report of the decade-long study in Morocco, issued earlier this year, resolutely calls for several more years of study. Conclusions like this are now more public than they were earlier, and signal the limits of the government’s effectiveness in confronting new social and political conditions. As in the Yemen Arab Republic, where small, step-by-step reforms of the judicial system began in the 1970s and have often proved effective, the time has come in Morocco to announce the “total” elimination of bad past practices, but of small, practical, visible steps to restore a sense of competence and integrity to the fields of education, finance, law, and governance. Morocco has the talent in its government and in its public to accomplish such tasks.

Let me stop here. Thank you very much.

(Applause.)

**MR. HEFNER:** Thank you very much, Dale. We’ll now turn to a local gentleman: local in the sense that he’s at George Mason University. Peter Mandaville. But I should point out that he was raised in Saudi Arabia and spent a fair amount of time, I think, receiving an education in the United Kingdom. Perhaps that personal pilgrimage reflects something of his interest in his topic today, “Transnational Muslim Movements: What Kind of Politics?”

**PETER MANDAVILLE:** Thanks, Bob. Good morning. My contribution to our discussions today is somewhat disjunct from the other papers, insofar as rather than focusing on a specific national context, I am going to be riffing off Bob’s references to a global space of Muslim politics and trying to tease out some of the contours of what the transnational and global dimensions of Muslim politics look like. I’ll start by pointing out that I’m not in any way talking about the existence of a global space of political Islam that is wholly separate or disconnected from national and local contexts. Rather, what I’ll be trying to show is the ways in which national and local issues, conflicts, elements of everyday life, are structured through the agendas and organizations of groups that seek to put forward Muslim agendas within transnational contexts that reach beyond the confines of territorial borders.

My remarks will be structured generally along the three outcomes of our research that Bob outlined in his introductory remarks. First of all, the issue of diversity. I want to put forward the idea, first and foremost, that transnational Islam does not equal Al-Qaeda and it does not equal Wahhabism. Too often these days it seems to me that, specifically in policymaking circles, the very term “transnational Islam” raises the specter of something inherently malignant, that when Muslim ideas, people, monies, weapons cross borders, somehow intrinsically evil and bad is happening. What I’m going to be doing is showing the extent to which you have a wide range of idioms of transnational Islam at work, each of which contains within it a rather different conception of what politics is and a rather different normative agenda that isn’t premised, for example, on the destruction of the United States or the founding of a global Muslim polity.
Second, Bob pointed to the struggle to define the voices of Islam’s future. Often today talk about transnational Islam, as I said, focuses either on a militant variant, or to some extent, on a very pluralistic, progressive, liberal variant. Those are two extreme poles that, of course, are useful heuristic devices to get us to start thinking about this diversity, but which miss out the fact that the vast majority of Muslims today occupy a much more complicated gray space in terms of their own sense of identity and global affiliation. It’s not the case, then, that Muslim identity today is inherently anti-American or inherently in favor of some transnational Islamic polity, but is rather a complex, ambiguous and ambivalent thing.

The real space of Muslim politics is this complex gray area, and this pushes on to the third area: the policy implications that I’ll be addressing. Bob spoke about one of our outcomes being the need to work with pluralistic Islam in the many guises which it assumes. And several of the papers so far – Jenny White’s in particular – I think point to the need to understand religion and the role of religion in public life as potentially part of the fabric of civil society, and perhaps importantly as part of a burgeoning participatory politics in Muslim societies that have been less able to move rapidly towards various forms of democratic governance. What I’ll be trying to do is show the ways in which some of the transnational movements speak to and begin to articulate a global version of this.

There’s a lot of talk in the literature these days about global civil society, or transnational civil society, and there’s a sense in which some of the Muslim movements that I’ll be referring to can be seen as examples of this. I have before me a sampling menu of transnational Islam that has on it five examples, and depending on how time goes, I’ll adjust and truncate that list as necessary.

I’ll start with an example of the sort of transnational Islam that tends to match with how this phenomenon is most commonly talked about these days. Some of my research in recent years has focused on radical groups based in the United Kingdom: specifically, the movements al-Muhajiroun and Hizb ut-Tahrir. The first of these describes itself as a salafi movement, although I prefer to use the generic label of khalifist insofar as all these groups, despite coming from slightly different doctrinal bases, engaged in a project that seeks to reestablish khilafah, or the Caliphate – that is, the transhistorical, institutional structure of Muslim governance on a global scale.

What I’ve been particularly interested in is the question of how political sociology allows us to understand why it is that their message becomes attractive to a particular narrow section of diasporic and immigrant British culture: how is it, in other words, that they manage to put forward a message that resonates and attracts a minimal, although very vocal and active, slice of British Muslim society? In that sense, their recruitment methods, their “message box,” so to speak, has been of particular interest to me.

When you look at how they operate, you see very quickly that it’s a highly fluidic hybrid type of talk that mixes together all kinds of different languages. There’s a sense in which there is a foundational Muslim orientation that speaks in terms of scripture, refers
to the Qur'an, refers to the traditions of the Prophet in a rather literalist way, while at the same time mixing in the vernacular of British Muslim culture. Messages that are articulated in, for example, the kind of slang language of Pakistani youth that engages with elements of British popular culture within the South Asian community. Sporting team loyalties are a good example. They might berate young Muslims of Pakistani origin for their over-commitment to support for their family's former homeland Pakistan in cricket matches and try and to orient them towards a global vision of a Muslim political imperative. It's posed as a challenge: what are you doing spending your time supporting nation-states, which are an aberration to Islam? Why don't you see that your political imperatives lie with the global brotherhood of Muslims? You must get yourself to Chechnya, et cetera. And what they're preying on in a sense is a diasporic identity that is itself ambiguous, kind of adrift, cut off from mainstream British society; the flotsam and jetsam of post-Thatcherite England and the racial, ethnic and classist politics that that created. And it preys on the sort of fragmented identities that populate London and British Muslim culture.

The second sort of example that I'd want to point to — and it is a rather different one, quite the other side of the extreme — would be something like the Gülen movement in Turkey, which itself has a wide following nationally, but also has been involved in transnational education work. Fethullah Gülen and his movement, which has certain roots within a Turkish version of the mystical tradition in Islam, has set up hundreds of schools abroad in a wide variety of places ranging from Southeastern Europe across to the Central Asian republics.

And what's interesting is that these schools do not teach primarily a religious curriculum. It's a "modern curriculum," yet one that understands its Muslim identity to come from an emphasis on the pietist foundations that urge one to move towards the accumulation of knowledge: knowledge in itself as a good, education as an Islamic good. In that sense, as Jenny pointed out in her presentation, shari'a serves as a metaphor: it's a way of life, it's a style of living, a style of management, rather than a specific literal body of laws that must be adhered to in the same way in all contexts.

Interestingly enough, and as a further example of intra-Muslim politics, the Gülen schools, when they enter a situation such as Azerbaijan in Central Asia, run up against statist politics, insofar as they are perceived as threats to official state-funded education. The Gülen schools are very popular among parents, insofar as students in them tend to score much higher on the placement exams that allow students to get into the best universities. And in this sense, they are seen as a threat to state curriculums. The Gülen movement, ironically enough, gets dismissed by the Azeri government as "Wahhabi." When, of course, if you look at the sort of Islam it embraces, it's nothing of the sort.

The next example that I would point to is one that is a form of transnational Islam that is inherently about global advocacy of a normative agenda related to the role of women in Islam. I would point, for example, to groups such as Women Living Under Muslim Law or Sisters in Islam, based in Malaysia. Although locally based, they operate with a transnational orientation that links together nodal points in places such as New
York, Nigeria, Malaysia and certain locales in the Middle East. They leverage the collective social power of women in various settings articulating a disparate vision of Muslim identity – an avowedly Muslim position, but one that seeks to first and foremost challenge the tradition from within, and – again, with a Muslim voice – the history of patriarchal knowledge in Islam.

And I’ll wrap up by moving quickly towards my policy recommendations:

Number one: Don’t run screaming any time you see Islam held up as the basis of a particular grassroots social movement or NGO. There is a sense in which Muslim NGOs today are a vital element of the fabric of civil society.

Second, handle with care those movements that the United States does seek to support. Realize that these groups are themselves embroiled within a very complex intra-Muslim politics in which too close handling by those that are perceived to be the global hegemon sometimes undermines their ability to speak with a credible voice at home.

Third, address the global dimension. It’s not just about single-policy issues. You can’t simply eliminate U.S. support for Israel and, somehow as if by magic, all problems will be solved. U.S. support for Israel is itself seen as a symptom of a much wider global problem, in the sense that the United States is seen as the leader of a transnational hegemony of sorts. Whether that’s the case or not, it is the perception, and you can’t divorce the two.

Finally, be proactive in terms of where you orient your policies. Don’t be reactionary. Don’t simply seek to identify the dominant trend and then either destroy or co-opt it. Instead, be proactive in the sense of realizing that sometimes one of the minority trends of today can potentially be the majority trend in the future. There are certainly liberal, progressive trends in Islam. How many Muslims are part of this movement? In absolute numbers their adherents are a minority, but there is a sense in which they are positioned to be the sort of Islam that can be scaled up over time insofar as this trend expresses the aspirations of the next generation. Foreign policy policies in the Muslim world need to be proactive in recognizing this.

Thanks very much.

(Applause.)

MR. HEFNER: Thank you, Peter.

We have eight minutes, and the floor is open.

Q: My name’s Roger Connor from Search for Common Ground. I want to thank the Pew Forum, Professor Hefner and each of these speakers. For someone who is a regular consumer of Washington stuff, these are some of the most refreshing, richly
detailed descriptions, each one with a story that I can take back and attribute my own meaning instead of having listened to a sermon. It's really been a refreshing experience.

Professor, my question is to ask you a little bit more about the style of advocacy. A question was raised earlier about the fear of cultural change symbolized by a change in the role of women as a driving engine of this conflict. If that's so, and I think to some degree it surely is, somehow your advocates managed not to take perhaps an American style of baiting the lion. It wasn't attacking, I'm assuming. Was their style of advocacy self-conscious, instead of attacking these other forces that they may very well resent for their past misbehavior, but somehow finding a way that the structure of their campaign allowed others to join them without getting down on their knees and saying, I've been wrong for 2,000 years?

**MS. SINGERMAN:** Good question. One thing I didn't mention because of the lack of time is an instructive comparison to the role of the NAACP in the American civil rights movement. In other words, African Americans in this country in the 1950s didn't have a lot of economic capital, they didn't have a lot of political capital and they didn't have any political representation. (A similar comparison could be made with gay rights a bit later.) But what they did have was that they had been working for several decades with a very small, very committed, hyper-educated professional group to seize opportunities wherever they could. They used a strategy of legal activism to end racial discrimination, obviously supported by a larger movement engaged in more conventional resistance. Their strategy of “rightful resistance” gave them legitimacy among the power elite, as did their strategy of non-violence.

In other words, we should not forget the complications of authoritarian rule in Egypt, particularly for NGOs and activists. In 1979, women activists had tried and had successfully altered personal status law through the personal intervention of Anwar Sadat and his wife Jihan Sadat, but that took an illegal session of parliament to push forward very modest reforms, which themselves had been a product of 60 years of agitation. After Sadat's assassination, the Supreme Constitutional Court found the 1979 reforms unconstitutional.

So women activists and their supporters said, you know, we have to do this the most absolutely, rightful, legal way that we can do it. I would also argue that their strategy was not only a reaction to authoritarian politics and a commitment to democratic political activism, but Islam itself has a deep respect for law. People understand the importance of law and how cutting legal corners ultimately leads to troubles further down the road.

At the same time, I would point out that the style of advocacy was informal and characterized by fluid, weak coalitions, largely because it's very difficult to form regular organizations, if they are at all politically-motivated. Richard Norton’s example of the Wasat Party shows us how difficult it was for them to gain government permission to form a political party, and so seasoned activists opt for the informal path. Many of the people in the coalition were already linked to each other through family, professional, educational or political ties. They used their networks to “work” the state and at the
same time they cultivated the religious establishment. Their very long campaign demanded vision, pragmitism, and great patience. It was a mixture of NGO advocacy and taking parliament seriously. And they had the leaders in place who could realize their dreams.

**MR. HEFNER:** I think we have time for just one more question. There is one.

**Q:** My name is Miramal (ph), and I was on the Bosnia Support Committee. One of the speakers was mentioning I believe it was Dr. Singerman about how women in Islam had rights earlier, much earlier. And I was wondering, are the Imams educated, and the muftis, how has their education changed through the years? Because in my reading, I thought Islam, at least as Muslims have explained it to me, was a religion where the individual had a direct relationship with God, that they didn’t have intermediaries, like in the Catholic religion with priests who interpret the Bible, the Pope, and so forth. Islam was supposed to be different. So I’m questioning how these people—these imams and muftis—got so much power. And has that changed through the years?

**MR. HEFNER:** That’s a question that Dale may also want to address. But, Diane, please go ahead.

**MS. SINGERMAN:** I would just say that there is both a long-established center of religious authority in Egypt (Al-Azhar University has been around for about 1000 years) and newly emerging forces and constituencies that are constantly changing. At times the relationship between the state and religious authorities is cosier than at other times. The relations between the government and religious authorities under Nasser was not strong and Nasser tried to weaken their authority by “modernizing” religious education and Al-Azhar, but this had the unintentional consequence of expanding Al-Azhar’s reach throughout Egypt and broader fields of higher education (as Malika Zeghal discusses in her recent work). While Islam celebrates one’s individual relationship with God, a Muslim is also part of a larger community that is influenced by (largely) men of religion and religious traditions.

**MR. HEFNER:** Dale, you want to speak to that generally?

**MR. EICKELMAN:** Yes. I think in issues such as those concerning women, we have to keep in mind that history, for all of us, is something constantly being reinvented. The Koran in the 7th century Arabia made a very dramatic breakthrough, holding people directly responsible to God, men and women. But since then, as most Muslim historians acknowledge, it’s been a real struggle to maintain that idea of personal responsibility against all sorts of other challenges.

What one sees now in many places—and I would take Iran and Turkey as bellwethers; Jenny [White] has written on Turkey—it is not so much the formal contestation of authorities that has been the most important impetus for change, but what goes on informally, in local communities. Likewise in Iran, the widespread involvement of
women in trade and commerce, off the radar of state authorities and away from direct control by clerics and the government, is perhaps the major impetus for change.

The involvement of women in one of the most dynamic areas of commerce slowly undermines conventional ways of doing things, much more so than direct contest in the political arena. The effect is dramatic. The effect is cumulative. And by dramatic I don't mean change overnight. I don't think that's how major changes are going to come. But consider the guardianship rules, for instance: Women go where they want without getting the permission from their male guardians, although such a “guardianship” law is still on the books. However, state authorities no longer seriously enforce these laws. These sorts of changes are going to result in very profound shifts in the next few years to come.

**Ms. Singerman:** Can I just add that the Iranian example is really important because Iranian women have one of the highest rates of literacy in the region, and they also have very high enrollments at universities, with some faculties teaching more women than men. What that has meant is that for the first time, you have women who are gaining a sophisticated religious education which means that they are much more knowledgeable, they know the sources and they can contest conventional interpretations of Islam. That means they can engage religious discourse more effectively and hold religious leaders accountable. If knowledge is power, then women gain religious power as they gain more religious training.

**Mr. Hefner:** We'll pick up on several of these issues momentarily, although I think from a somewhat less positive or optimistic perspective in Gwenn Okruhlik's presentation on Saudi Arabia, where some of the same processes described this morning have had a somewhat different outcome.

(End of panel.)