



Article

Achieving Coexistence After Colonialism

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A workshop focused on moving from conflict to coexistence in the postcolonial Middle East

In societies where many different peoples, cultures, religions, and histories occupy the same space, conflict is not simply a possibility. It is all but inevitable. How, then, do societies address conflicts as they arise such that they can be brought to a fair and peaceful resolution for everyone involved?

From October 27 to 29, 2011, the Harvard Initiative on Contemporary Islamic Societies (ICIS) and the Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) convened various experts in the study of Islam to address this issue. This workshop, “Pluralism, Coexistence, and Conflict in Muslim Societies,” was divided into five sessions.

Session 1, “Between the Nation and the Transnational,” explored the contrasts between Islam’s global reach as a religion and its nationalist political manifestations. Session 2, “Pluralist and Sectarian Movements,” compared the impact of popular movements inspired by Islam and traditional Islamist institutions. Session 3, “Political and Legal Institutions and Minority Communities,” investigated the different state structures found in the Muslim world. Session 4, “Secular States and Minority Communities,” examined the role of secular institutions in protecting minority groups in Islamic-majority countries. Session 5, “Policy

Implications and Challenges for State Secularism, State Religion, and 21st-Century Values,” interrogated current policy approaches to major concerns in the Muslim world.

[Watch the workshop](#)

As indicated in [the workshop abstracts](#), the three-day event covered a broad range of topics, histories and geographical areas. Despite this diversity, overarching principles emerged to guide future research. An essential throughline connecting all of the sessions was the importance of contending with the legacy of colonialism and its continuing impacts throughout the Muslim world.

Samina Ahmed, project director of the International Crisis Group (South Asia, Islamabad), was one of the experts featured in session 5, “Policy Implications and Challenges for State Secularism, State Religion, and 21st-Century Values.” In her Policy Summary of the workshop, she began with the following observation:

In almost all the Muslim societies examined in the workshop, colonial legacies played a significant role in shaping ethno-religious identities as also post-colonial political structures that then managed, in many cases mismanaged, ethnic and religious diversity.

In Ahmed’s analysis, colonial structures and postcolonial systems have led to a gamut of problems, such as the imposition of authoritarian regimes that manipulate political

divisions; arbitrary geographical boundaries that pit groups against each other in competition for limited space and resources; and exacerbated sectarian and ethnic rifts. In each case, the interests of the colonial powers that created these boundaries diverge sharply from those of local populations living in these regions today, actively searching for alternative definitions of religious and political identity.



In the narrative report for the workshop, two foci were identified for future research. First, participants agreed that further research was needed into how institutions offer stability amid pluralism in the Muslim world and how they should be adapted. Second, race, nationality, and ethnicity in Islamic societies are an area where further examination is needed.

[Read the Narrative Report](#)

[Read the Policy Summary](#)

In addition to the abstracts, policy summary, and narrative report detailed above, you can also read about the workshop in the [2012 CMES newsletter](#).