Article

Islamic Authority and US Foreign Policy

January 11, 2024

A conference on findings from the study on religious authority in the Islamic World

The Baker Institute's *New Guardians of Religion* report led by A. Kadir Yildirim provides a comprehensive account of how the citizens of twelve countries in the Middle East perceive major religious figures. In March 2019, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace hosted a conference in Washington, DC that explored the implications of the study's findings for US foreign policy.

This conference included experts in US foreign policy and Islamic studies scholars, most of whom were members of Yildirim's research team.

Opening remarks by Kadir Yildirim and Shaun Casey. Source: Baker Institute.

Yildirim, principal investigator of the two-year study on religious authority in the Middle East, opened the conference. The morning's keynote address was offered by Shaun Casey, who spoke from his experience as US Special Representative for Religion and Global Affairs at the State Department during John Kerry's tenure as Secretary of State under the Obama administration.

The Panel Discussions

The first panel discussion. Source: Baker Institute.

The first panel of the conference was “The State, Religious Authority, and Legitimacy.” The discussion included three members of the *New Guardians of the Religion* research team: Courtney Freer (who focused on Saudi Arabia), Annelle Sheline (who focused on Morocco), and Scott Williamson (who discussed Jordan). The panel was moderated by Nathan Brown, a nonresident Senior Fellow of the Carnegie Endowment.

The second panel discussion. Source: Baker Institute.

The conference’s second panel, “Non-State Religious Actors and Authority,” included Sharan Grewal, Miriam Künkler, Tarek Masoud, and A. Kadir Yildirim. The panel was moderated by Sarah Yerkes of the Carnegie Endowment. The panelists spoke as experts on Tunisia, Iran, Egypt, and Turkey, respectively.

Warnings to the US Foreign Policy Establishment

Many of the findings from this study ran counter to the prevailing wisdom about Islam in the Middle East and North Africa. For example, while the study confirmed significant appeal for religious figures who engaged in anti-Western rhetoric, it did not equate to respondents directly endorsing fundamentalist religious leaders. Given that one aspect of the study was an “endorsement experiment” (in which some respondents were asked to assess statements made by Islamic leaders without necessarily knowing the source) the researchers were able to disentangle support for particular ideas (such as a critique of US foreign policy and Western institutions) from direct support for particular leaders.

In light of this, one of the themes of the latter part of the conference involved making critical assessments of US interventions in Muslim-majority countries. At the end of the second panel discussion, Yildirim argued that the findings of the study illuminated many of the missteps the United States has made, and continues to make, in pursuit of its geopolitical goals. Pointedly, he warned about how the religious illiteracy of many US diplomatic officials could have grave consequences for their engagement in the Middle East.

> ***The sloppy use of religious discourse by the West, by the US—or the non-careful use of religious discourse or ideas—is going to come back to hound US policy in the Middle East…Any and all US policies that's run afoul of religion, whether intentional or unintentional, is going to come back to haunt US policy. That's why it's very important to take this seriously, this very deep-seated anti-Western sentiment, and how that overlaps largely with the religious inclinations of the people.***

Yildirim's admonitions were echoed by Peter Mandaville, who offered the afternoon keynote address.

Keynote by Peter Mandaville.

In his address, Mandaville discussed the history of the United States' foreign policy in the Islamic world, beginning with the Cold War and continuing to the present day. Among his

many observations, Mandaville critiqued the policies of the Obama administration. Although many geopolitical commentators had been optimistic about Obama's engagement with Muslim-majority countries in 2009 (particularly in light of the disastrous decisions of the George W. Bush administration), Mandaville argued that Obama was been guilty of the same essentialization of Muslims that undergirded the policies of his predecessor:

> ***What gave me disquiet was the fact that, for the first time, the United States was essentially constituting an entire world religion as a subject (or an object) of its foreign policymaking. So, one of the things that the US government did later that same year in 2009, was to create in the State Department a new position called the Special Representative to Muslim Communities. This was weird. This is bizarre. This is the first time in the history of US foreign policy that the US has appeared to appoint something like an ambassador to an entire world religion. Consider for a moment the message that is being sent by that gesture. The United States government is saying that, at some level, there is a sense in which 1.7 billion people in the world are to be viewed, are to be engaged, are to be thought of primarily in relation to their religious identity. That it is somehow their religion that defines them . . . . This is essentially the US government projecting "Muslim-ness" of some***

> ***sort onto a billion-plus people who, yes—if asked about their religious affiliation, might identify as Muslim—but the US government is telling them—for all intents and purposes in our policymaking and programmatic initiatives—you are a Muslim first and foremost . . . . Senegalese, Indonesians, Turkish people, Jordanians, have all become "Muslim," have been turned into "Muslims" in the US foreign policy gaze.***

The Baker Institute's findings provide scholars and governmental officials ample tools to understand the mistakes made by and misconceptions of the previous generation of foreign policy experts. In general, the experts present at the conference agreed that more research is needed to assess how religious authority operates in the Middle East and North Africa—from the perspective of the residents of this region rather than the assumptions of Western government officials.