




- [Home](#)
- [About Us](#)
- [News](#)
- [Research Programs](#)
- [Publications](#)
- [Events](#)
- [Education Programs](#)
- [Contribute](#)
  
- [Books Orbis](#)
- [Bulletins](#)
- [Other Articles](#)
- [Transcripts](#)

## Footnotes

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# Islam, Islamism, and Democratic Values

## A History Institute Presentation

by Trudy Kuehner, rapporteur

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On May 6-7, FPRI's [Marvin Wachman Fund for International Education](#) hosted 44 teachers from 16 states across the country for a weekend of discussion on [teaching about Islam](#). Speakers were drawn from the disciplines of religious studies, anthropology, political science, history, law, and journalism. The institute, held in Bryn Mawr, Pa., was made possible by a grant from the Annenberg Foundation. Future history weekends include Understanding China, to be held in Kenosha, Wisconsin in cooperation with Carthage College, Oct. 21–22, 2006 and Teaching American Military History, to be held at the First Division Museum in Wheaton, Illinois in cooperation with the Cantigny First Division Foundation, Mar, 24-25, 2007. The History Institute for Teachers is chaired by [David Eisenhower](#) and [Walter A. McDougall](#).

## Welcoming Remarks

**Walter McDougall** opened the conference with remarks on the U.S. democratization effort in Iraq, noting similarities to Reconstruction in the Confederate South. Then, too, U.S. troops crushed an oppressive regime and occupied its land, the federal government pledged to restore democracy and expand human rights, and a free-for-all erupted among rival factions. If Americans had difficulty nation-building on their own soil among people who had been fellow citizens for a century, and then required another century to realize civil rights on the people they came to liberate, can we be optimistic today about democratizing the whole Middle East?

## Islam vs. Islamism

**S. Abdallah Schleifer**, director of the Washington news bureau of Al Arabiya, discussed how as a religion, Islam's transitional epic is not unlike that of Christianity as it moved from the great Age of Faith of medieval and late

Romanesque times through the Renaissance, Reformation, Counterreformation, the 100 Years' War, and the Enlightenment. But Islam's transition differs in the profound impact of modern colonialism. The Arabist-Berber Islamic occupation of Spain did not undermine the Christian faith, and the Crusades occupied large portions of Palestine without undermining Islam. Foreign occupation changed with the rise of the nation-state and international law. Modern colonialism undermined Muslim elites' confidence in their own heritage and disrupted the social fabric. It is no coincidence that Algeria, the country that underwent the greatest destruction of its traditional Islamic fabric in colonialism, produced the first and most vicious Islamist movements.

Islamic civilization flourished as the civilization of its time from about the 8th to the 14th centuries, and was still dynamic in its final, brilliant form as the Ottoman Empire. At its peak, it was a haven for the arts and sciences and an exemplar of religious tolerance and pluralism. One can think of the last, Ottoman caliphate as a Muslim Holy Roman Empire in which political rule is sacralized—not religious in the Western sense of religion, but resting nevertheless on traditional religious legitimacy.

While Islamists have recently defined their goals in terms of the caliphate, it was the last caliphate that went to war against the first manifestation of Wahhabism, nearly crushing it in Saudi Arabia around 1820, destroying its power base and exiling the ibn Saud family to Kuwait (they made a comeback some hundred years later). But the extraordinary amount of money available to the Saudi Wahhabs from the 1970s on because of the oil boom permitted the propagation of a Wahhabi Islam throughout the Muslim world that displaced traditional Islam.

Mohammed was viewed by the Jews of Palestine as a prophetic mercy by the one God for the children of Ismail, the Arabs. Indeed, the hajj pilgrimage is marked by a sense of biblical, Abrahamic identity. The hajj and umrah commemorate not the Prophet, but what happened when Abraham took Ismail and Hagar away to Mecca. But fundamentalism, because of its political objectives, must deny this tradition.

In the 1970s, Islam was out of fashion politically, supplanted by Arab nationalism, socialism, and Marxism. Islamism derives not from the 20th century, but from Islamic civilization at its greatness. In the poetic sense, the Muslim Brotherhood began not in the 1920s but after Napoleon's troops defeated the Mamluk army. Other than adopting the dress of the Taliban, Islamism is violently antitraditional. There was no Islamic state in traditional Islam, just rule and authority. Medina was based on a compact signed by Jewish tribes as well. Some Islamist groups can be seen as a virulent, rightwing form of liberation theology, others have or had a message not unlike communists', and the most extreme are lay-clerical fascism.

Islamism is no more a monolithic force than was Marxism, which spawned not just Marxism-Leninism, but also Social Democrats or Democratic Socialists, some of whom, as they moved into a democratic sphere, were enrolled in the struggle against Stalinism. So that window should be left open.

## Islam and Politics in Historical Perspective

**David Cook**, assistant professor of Religious Studies, Rice University, and author of *Understanding Jihad* (University of California Press, 2005) explained that the Prophet preached that Islam was God's final revelation to mankind, but left no agreed-upon successor. Muslims have been challenged since his death by the problem of achieving political and religious legitimacy for a given ruler. The three basic breakdowns of Islam—Sunnism, Shiism, and Kharijism—each handle this differently.

The Sunnis, the majority group worldwide, believe that the prophecy that died out with Mohammed is communicated through the authority of the elected caliph. (As the prophet lay dying, he nominated his closest friend, Abu Bakr, to lead the prayers after his death, which was interpreted as a nomination for leadership.) Sunnis take their name from being custodians of the Sunna of the Prophet, which is the way the Prophet lived his life. The idea is to recreate the Prophet's life as closely as possible. The Sunna is related in the Hadith, a vast quantity of traditions that relate what the Prophet did and said. Classical Islam codified these Hadith into the Sharia, the divine law.

Shia means a political party. The Shiites held that the charismatic authority of the Prophet passed down through his genealogical descendants. Their traditions usually come from the imam, that descendant who's agreed upon as the legitimate descendant of the Prophet. The last of those imams passed away in 873, but they've maintained themselves

by transferring their authority into the traditions that were accumulated from these first 12 descendant imams.

Kharijism is a more radical and egalitarian form of Islam that essentially died out after the first couple of centuries, although it still maintains itself in Oman's Ibadī Muslims. The Kharijites were scripture oriented, not focusing upon the traditions of the Prophet or on a given leader, and elected leaders who were not genealogically related to the Prophet.

After around 661 Muslims moved away from elected caliphs into what are effectively dynasties. The ideal that the caliph should be elected remained, but not the reality. The two dynasties that took power, the Umayyads from about 661-747 and then the Abbasids, both descended from an uncle of the Prophet, but each took its legitimacy from different aspects of early Islam. The Umayyads focused on conquest; the Abbasids on the claim that the caliph should be agreed upon by the whole community. This was an effective revolutionary slogan. The Abbasids created a vast underground of missionaries and eventually warriors in what is now Iran and Afghanistan, toppled the Umayyads, and held onto the caliph title for almost five hundred years.

Since the Prophet's family were butchered, tortured, and imprisoned for centuries, Shiism did not develop with a sense of rule. It wasn't until the 16th century that the Safavids acquired power in Persia, which they converted to Shiism. In the early 18th century, when the dynasty collapsed, their functions were taken over by the ulama, the religious leadership. Over the past few hundred years they have achieved a dominance that led eventually to the rise of Khomeini and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

For Sunnis, there's been a lack of religious authority since the last Ottoman caliph was deposed in 1924. It's therefore unsurprising that radical Muslims press for the reinstatement of a caliph, an authority figure that could be elected within Islam. This has profound implications for various Muslim states, each of which as it emerged from the colonial period over the 1950s through 1970s had to face this legitimacy problem. Some chose democracy, some chose military rule, some chose various forms of religious rule. But there is no accepted method of authority, and the basic tension remains over the right to rule.

## Asian and Arab Islam

**Robert Hefner**, professor of anthropology at Boston University and editor of *Remaking Muslim Politics* (Princeton, 2005), noted that ethnic Arabs comprise only about 15-18 percent of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims. More than 60 percent of Muslims live in Asia.

By the early Muslim middle ages (11-12th centuries CE), the Turkic peoples of Central Asia had become rulers across much of the Middle East; their descendants, the Ottomans, created the most expansive empire the Muslim world has ever seen. Trade and travel helped spread Islam to the coastal peoples of what is today Indonesia, Malaysia, and the southern Philippines. Islamic civilization after its first century was a multiethnic and transregional religion in which Asian Muslims played a central role.

Islam has no formal ecclesiastical organization; rather, it has scholars. In Shiism the scholars are better organized and have greater power; in most of the Sunni world there is just a network of scholars. Responding to the acephalous and non-ecclesiastical nature of Islam, its scholars came to emphasize rituals and canons promoting unity. Of course, Muslim communities sometimes dissolve into fractious sects, but when the battle is over, they affirm that they are a single community.

Asian Muslims' legal views on women's issues tend to converge with those of the Middle East states, but their culture and politics differ. South and Southeast Asian Islam share a long tradition of mysticism, or Sufism. Also, beginning in the early 19th century, both regions saw the rise of Islamic reform movements that sought to bring practices into conformity with Arabia's. These movements were both a response to Western colonialism and a reflection of the diffusion of new methods of printing and education pioneered in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Southeast Asians traditionally accorded women a significantly higher social standing than South Asians or even premodern Europe. While Southeast Asian women have still not achieved equality with men, girls participate in education at a rate comparable to boys', and many women work outside the home. Kinship is the "cognatic," individualistic/familistic type found in the West, with almost no tribal or clan associations, which is one reason they

have adopted modern notions of citizenship and human rights.

In India, the Muslim minority has been an enthusiastic participant in democratic government, while in Pakistan the Muslim population has proved far less skilled at making democracy work. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq may yet push the tradition of democratic Islam over the edge there.

Southeast Asia, where the Muslim minorities of the southern Philippines and southern Thailand have been treated badly by the non-Muslim governments, has witnessed the rise of Muslim-led secessionist movements since the 1970s. But Muslims there would pass on independence if instead they could share in economic prosperity like that of neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia.

Malaysia and Indonesia remain two of the most politically promising countries in the Muslim world. Plagued by ethno-religious tensions between the Malay-Muslim majority and a prosperous Chinese minority, Malaysia in the 1960s worked out a prosperity-sharing deal between the agricultural Malays and the urban Chinese minority that has yielded a prosperous Malay-Muslim middle class and a Malay-dominated leadership that is outspoken in its opposition to radical Islamism and terrorism.

Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority country in the world, also has the world's broadest tradition of democratic Islam. It still has the small but determined Jemaah Islamiyah, the group responsible for the Bali bombings of 2002 and 2005. But the longer the country continues to move toward democracy, the weaker will be this group's appeal.

In short, a democratic Islam is emerging, and its first achievement may well be not in the Arab heartland, but Muslim Southeast Asia.

## Islam in Europe: Integration and Counterterrorism

**Jytte Klausen**, associate professor of politics at Brandeis University and author of *The Islamic Challenge: Politics and Religion in Western Europe* (Oxford University Press, 2005), discussed Europe's problems assimilating its Islamic minorities. Recent conflicts there have reopened old debates about the position of religion in society, as was seen with the French headscarf debate. Religious pluralism, an unintended consequence of labor immigration, has raised difficult questions about the requirements of religious toleration. The March 2004 Madrid train bombings and the July 2005 London transportation system bombings, which reinforced the perception of Islam as a threat, also induced governments to reconsider how Islam might become a European religion.

There are more Muslims than Roman Catholics in Europe's Protestant north, and more Muslims than Protestants in the Catholic countries. Of the 15 million Muslims in Western Europe, only about 25 have been elected to European parliaments. Indeed, given restrictive citizenship policies, few are even entitled to vote.

The early waves of immigrants to Europe held on to the "myth of return" and organized networks to retain contact with the home country. Restrictive citizenship barred their participation in mainstream political organizations, forcing them to organize in "Muslims-only" organizations.

There are perhaps 5,000 mosques and 10,000 imams in Western Europe, but most countries do not know the exact number of mosques, who preaches in them, where the imams come from, or their source of funding. Imams are mostly recruited by local mosque councils through kinship networks in the home country. These imams, many of whom were educated in madrassas, are often out of touch with the European-born Muslims.

In northern Europe, when Turkish "guest workers" first started to come in large numbers, both host and sender governments sought to prevent integration, wanting the migrants to return home eventually. Today, integration is the goal, and the issue is what kind of government funding should be given to European mosques.

European Muslims are often poor, disenfranchised permanent residents, with no prospects of naturalization for themselves or their children. Large numbers live in highly segregated neighborhoods, with no access to work or transportation and sub-par schools. If there are problems with Muslims in Europe now, when earlier generations of them lived there quietly for decades, it's because European Muslims have now decided to integrate, and to do so they

seek reforms that will enable them to both practice their faith and be European.

\* \* \*

**Michael Radu**, co-chair of FPRI's Center on Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Homeland Security and author of *Dilemmas of Democracy and Dictatorship* (Transaction, 2006), noted that even today, after the assassinations of Pim Fortuyn and Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands, the Madrid and London bombings, and the Danish cartoon controversy, ideologues of the most radical Islamist organizations continue to spread their message from Europe. They are often UK citizens and/or receive welfare in Britain.

The radicalization of Muslims in Europe owes more to Islamist activists within Europe than to outside influence from Pakistan or Saudi Arabia, though these do play a role in training and funding. Many imams are trained in or come from countries known for a very radical form of Islam (e.g. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan). Others are freelancers (one of the London imams, Abu Hamza, was an engineer and bar bouncer).

Some countries have begun to understand the problem of radical Islam. Denmark, the Netherlands, and France have all introduced legislation limiting immigration. But fueling the problem is the fact that many ethnic Europeans don't feel they are Dutch or English or French anymore, either. The EU tried to make "Europeans" but only succeeded in weakening national identity. With Europeans feeling like they are losing their own identity and religion and Muslims becoming more religious and in many cases more radical, the Europeans have nothing with which to fight this.

## Iraq's Democratic Prospects

**Kanan Makiya**, the Sylvia K. Hassenfeld Professor of Islamic and Middle East Studies, Brandeis University and author of *The Republic of Fear* (1989, rev. 1998) assessed the prospects for democracy in Iraq and the greater Middle East. The postwar insurgency targeting Shiites and Kurds has the clear intention of fomenting civil war. One problem in fighting it is that the regimes on Iraq's borders—the ones that would be most undermined by a success story in Iraq—are sustaining the insurgents. Real success in Iraq remains hostage to events occurring elsewhere in the Middle East.

Despite the high levels of violence, Makiya believes that history will record favorably the U.S. democratization project in the region. Sanctions alone were unworkable, but removing them short of overthrow would relegitimize Saddam's human-rights violating regime. Removing his regime remains a good thing, however bad the situation today.

The Coalition underestimated the social base upon which the Baath system rested, the consequences of thirty years of dictatorship, and the wounds left by the betrayal of the 1991 intifada. Inadequate troop strength led to the breakdown of authority following liberation. And yet, despite these miscalculations, the war ushered in the January and December 2005 elections and the October constitutional referendum. The large turnout in those elections alone were defining moments for Iraq and the Middle East.

The Shiites, now the majority in the Iraqi National Assembly, have inherited a deeply atomized country. The idea of a pluralist Iraq is at odds with their sense of political entitlement given their previous suffering. Yet only the Shiites can prevent the legacy of dictatorship from snatching victory from the jaws of defeat in the shape of escalating violence. The insurgency will ultimately be defeated not by the U.S. army but by Iraqis. In considering the U.S. sacrifice, it should be remembered that the malaise in Arab politics represented by Saddam's regime was a long time in the making; that regime change may have been the only solution for the sanctions problem; that the failings of the Middle East have already brought 9/11; and that ultimately this is not a civilizational divide, but a war of ideas and values.

## Islam, Law, and Human Rights

**David Forte**, Charles R. Emrick Jr.-Calfee, Halter & Griswold Endowed Professor of Law, Cleveland State University and author of *Studies in Islamic Law* (Austin & Winfield, 1999), observed that while President Bush has proclaimed Islam "a religion of peace," many Americans have become concerned by cases like that of Abdul Rahman, the Afghan who was sentenced to execution for converting to Christianity. In March 2006, under international pressure, the judge

dismissed the case, and Rahman is now safe in Italy, but with his identity hidden for fear of assassination. Indeed, from parliament members to the public, many Afghans had sworn to kill him to avenge the insult to Islam.

Afghanistan's constitution stipulates that it shall abide by the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which protects religious freedom including the freedom to change one's religion, but also states that no law can be contrary to the provisions of Islam. This exemplifies the great mystery in Islam, which historically should have been against slavery and for religious liberty, women's equality, and the laws of war, but was not. Its followers deflected the trajectory of the founder's message. In the Quran, Christians and Jews are respected as Abrahamic brothers in faith. There is no compulsion in faith. But tolerance became intolerance, protection became persecution, and limited war became massacre.

Three factors—law, tribes, and empire—transformed Islam into a tool of oppression. Taking apostasy as an example, the Quran condemns the apostate to damnation but imposes no earthly penalty. The death penalty arose later, in the law, which relied on a statement attributed to Mohammed, "Whoever changes his Islamic religion, kill him." In the early days of Islam, apostasy and treason were synonymous. War was perennial in Arabia. To reject the leader of another tribe was to wage war against him. After the death of Mohammed, many tribes apostatized, rebelling against Muslim rule. The first caliph, Abu Bakr, ordered that such apostates be killed. Thus the tradition of killing apostates had its origin during these wars of rebellion, not during Mohammed's time.

Under most schools of Islamic law, the apostate is an outlaw. The Hanafis are explicit: any person killing an apostate is immune from prosecution and retaliation. The apostate loses all civil entitlement, his marriage becomes a nullity, and he has no rights to inherit. Here is where the religious law becomes pernicious. One of the most signal reforms of Mohammed was to stop vengeance between the tribes. In seventh-century Arabia, if a member of one tribe was harmed by a member of another, the victim's tribe could retaliate, which led to unending feuds. Mohammed decreed that retaliation would no longer be allowed until the guilt of the malefactor were proven, and even then only in the most egregious circumstances. In turning apostasy from an act of treason to an act of unbelief, the legal jurists undid one of the most important reforms. The act of apostasy became an offense against the honor of the clan or the family.

Islam has not developed a theory of interpretive hermeneutics of their original sources as sophisticated as those of Christianity and Judaism; instead, there has arisen a Draconian fundamentalist interpretation. By the ninth century sharia was centuries ahead of common law in property and commercial law, but the criminal code (which is being brought back in the Sudan and northern Nigeria) is a collection of harsh, undeveloped rules. This is because the caliphs in the early Umayyad empire removed criminal affairs from the jurisdiction of the religious judges. Criminal matters were left to the police and courts, and the police became both prosecutors and punishers.

Islam had its greatest flowering during the Abbasid period of the 7th-9th centuries, its most pluralistic period. The legalists became the dominant ideology and developed their legal theory through the practice of *ijtihad*, or jurisprudential reasoning. But after about 1000 this was supplanted by *taqlid*, which means following the example of pious forefathers. This closed the gate of *ijtihad*; the sharia closed in on itself and stopped its development. There needs to be a new *ijtihad*, a rethinking of those rules that came up in the 9th-10th centuries. The Iraqi constitution may be an invitation for a new *ijtihad* within sharia, toward more humane and humanistic laws.

## Islam, Democracy, and the West

**Fawaz Gerges**, Christian A. Johnson Chairholder in International Affairs and Middle Eastern Studies at Sarah Lawrence College and author of *Journey of the Jihadist* (Harcourt, 2006), discussed the social and political turmoil now wracking the Muslim Middle East, from Egypt to Iran and Lebanon to Algeria, as ethnic and religious communities rise up and demand a voice in the social and political place. In Egypt, the largest Arab state, even the judges and police are essentially rising up against the oppressive authoritarian system that has existed since 1952. The Lebanese ousted their Syrian oppressors, but their political system itself is unravelling under the strains of the new situation. The same thing is happening in the Palestinian Territories, in Saudi Arabia, and of course Iraq. In the eyes of Arab and Muslim majorities, the ruling elite has lost legitimacy and is unable to deliver the social goods.

In elections in Pakistan, Morocco, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon, the Islamists have emerged as the dominant political force. They have largely given up on the use of force in the service of politics. If free elections took

place in Egypt tomorrow, the Muslim Brotherhood would win.

The Islamists are filling a huge vacuum of legitimate authority. Osama bin Laden and the jihadists claim to have a vision and the means to deliver on it. For thirty years, authoritarian political voices have silenced any kind of secular progressive voices, almost devouring civil societies. It was easy to crack down against progressive, democratic voices, but one cannot do so with Islamists. They have the mosque.

Singapore and Malaysia are authoritarian but do have economic development. In contrast, in Egypt, Yemen, and Lebanon, nearly half live in poverty. The Islamists claim not just a spiritual alternative but that they will provide bread and butter, schools, clinics.

Because globalization is associated with economic and social instability, to Arabs and Muslims, the process is seen as part of a Western onslaught against the Arab identity. One cannot understand Arab politics of last thirty years without understanding the politics of identity. Finally, the war on terror has played into the hands of Islamists, who can cast themselves as the only authentic resister.

Iraq could go either way. The sectarian divide has hardened and is wider and deeper. The population is flowing from mixed areas into the safety of own tribal/ethnic areas. It will take decades to build the institutions, civil society, cultural practices, middle class and tolerance needed to consolidate democracy, and it is doubtful the U.S. public will have the will or ability to continue to pay for this. That is why the U.S. needs to find an orderly way to extricate itself. The war on Al Qaeda cannot be won on the battlefield, but through internal encirclement. The West needs to build bridges to Arab and Muslim societies. Finally, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains the most important obstacle to transformation.

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**Barry Rubin**, editor of *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, and Director, Global Research in International Affairs Center (GLORIA), and author of *The Long War for Freedom* (John Wiley, 2005) was less sanguine that resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would pacify the Middle East. He spoke of the tension between political debate and violence in the Middle East, where violence usually wins out because of Islam's interpretation.

In the 1930s, there were more democratic states proportionately in the Middle East than in Europe, which then had the USSR, Third Reich, fascist Italy, and a whole range of dictatorships in east. Of course, the Arab democracies were oligarchical, but nevertheless the system was in place. The 1950s brought the takeover, politically and intellectually, of Arab nationalism. People who had formerly supported democracy deserted to support nationalism, which said it was going to unite the Arab world, expel Western influence, destroy Israel, and bring rapid socioeconomic advancement.

Today, setting aside the special case of Iran, the struggle over the future of the Arab world is among Arab nationalism, Islamism, and what we can call liberalism. One should not underestimate Arab nationalism's sway even today. It governs almost every Arab country. In virtually every case except Iraq (which was external intervention), the same regimes govern in the Arab world who governed. In that sense, notwithstanding the turmoil and violence, there has also been real stability. Even though these regimes have not delivered the goods, they have not been replaced, by elections, coup, or even by decision of ruling group itself. This contradiction between the staying power of the regimes and their inability to produce creates enormous tension.

The regimes' resilience owes to several factors. First, they had studied the Soviet Union and understood the importance of controlling institutions. They can only indirectly control the mosques, but they fully control the media, economy, and institutions. This lets them coopt the main groups that usually push for democracy or change: intellectuals and students, journalists, business people, labor, and the military. They also control the ideology, putting forth a worldview that any failures are due to the West. Ironically, the opposition Islamists do the regimes service: the two mutually reinforce each other's worldview (which is the same, they just each see themselves as the answer), while fear of Islamists pushes citizens back to the regime. Jihadism was in part born out of the radical Islamists' failure to overthrow the regime, after which some decided to instead focus on fighting the West. The struggle will go on, but the regimes have the stronger position.

The pluralism of ethnic communities is at the same time a positive and a negative. On the one hand, it has spawned terrible violence over who will control in future. However, it means blocks of people who, if they see an opportunity through elections to gain significant power and are willing to make deals with other communities to do so, then there could be stable democratic states based on groups with stakes. This is both hopeful and problematic.

## Notes

See Bernard Lewis, ed., *Cambridge History of Islam* inter alia; Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam and Islam: Religion, History, and Civilization*, inter alia; the early work of H. A. R. Gibb, editor of the *History of Islam*; Martin Lings, *The Life of the Prophet Mohammed*; and Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, inter alia.

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