



School of International Service Working Paper

Good Anthropology, Bad Islam? The Pitfalls of Steamrolling the Muslim World

By Frankie Martin and Hailey Woldt

March 3, 2008

School of International Service
American University
Washington, DC 20016

© 2008 Frankie Martin and Hailey Woldt. All rights reserved.

Deep in the forbidding mountains of Waziristan, the militant leader Baitullah Mashud is taunting the United States and the Pakistani government. Mashud, the accused mastermind of Benazir Bhutto's assassination, has emerged as the head of Tehreek-e-Taliban, the most serious regrouping yet of the Taliban on the Pakistan side of the Afghan border. The new group unites over 40 previously separate entities under one banner, dedicated to bringing down President Pervez Musharraf's government and lashing out against Western targets. Militancy in Pakistan has spiraled out of control over the past year, spilling from the tribal areas to urban centers. Suicide bombings have increased exponentially. Washington security "experts" have so far pressured Musharraf to more fully assert his military power in the region, prompting him to send tanks and troops to crush tribesmen housed in caves and huts. No strategy, however, has proved successful in stemming the tide of extremism now threatening to engulf Pakistan and the region. Newly elected Pakistani politicians are urging engagement with the militants, but Washington has not budged from its "Musharraf policy."

So how should the United States understand the situation in Waziristan? What should US policy be towards the Muslim world? There are many different theories that attempt to explain the Muslim world's instability and anger, why they "hate us" in Pakistan and around the world, and the phenomenon of terrorism. There are many in policy circles who are now recognizing the need for a more nuanced understanding of the cultures and tribes within the Muslim world, but we still seem to be stuck in the outmoded and failed "shock and awe" approach of force and cultural or religious reformation. Muslim scholars who attempt to explain alternative approaches are often rejected out of hand for being Muslims themselves and thus not to be trusted. The case of Waziristan and the debate on how to control it reflects the macro debate between the West and the Muslim world, the so-called clash of civilizations, and how to resolve it. Through their failure to understand Islam, whether by inability or lack of desire, US policymakers and think-tankers have created military disasters of epic proportions, plummeted opinions of the United States worldwide, and, perhaps most seriously, jeopardized the ideals on which the United States was founded.

We would like to pick up one particular case study which is of great interest and relevance. Because of its wider implications, the detailed study of the acclaimed works of the Muslim anthropologist Akbar Ahmed by the noted scholar Stanley Kurtz ("Tribes of Terror", Claremont Review of Books, Volume VII, No. 4, Winter 2007) presents us an opportunity to reexamine some of the most important issues facing the relationship between Islam and the West. Kurtz's review essay of three books by Akbar Ahmed, *Resistance and Control in Pakistan*, *Islam Under Siege*, and *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization* does an admirable job of bringing to the fore works of considerable scholarship that have, quite incredibly we believe, been ignored by American policymakers. On one level, Kurtz's analysis goes so beyond the accepted discourse on Islam that any number of Washington "experts" would become dizzy reading his penetrating analysis of tribalism in Pakistan. On another level, however, the essay is misleading and dangerous in its discussion of Islam which is surprising given his approach. Although Kurtz recognizes cultural nuances, he unfortunately ends up using his own scholarship to contradict his conclusions, a mistake we attribute to ideology. At

best, Kurtz is missing the core features of the debate; at worst, he is doing so deliberately. Through another deeper look into Ahmed's work and through experiences in the field, we provide an alternative to this black and white, but mostly black, view of relations with the Muslim world.

Good Anthropology, Bad Islam?

The Waziristan Revolt

Kurtz writes his most detailed study of Ahmed's 1983 book *Religion and Politics in Muslim Society*, which was reissued in 1991 as *Resistance and Control in Pakistan* before being revised and released again in 2004. From 1978-1980 Ahmed was the Political Agent in South Waziristan, the lawless border area of Pakistan where Osama bin Laden is said to be hiding. He took over at a time of immense hostility. A charismatic mullah—in a pattern familiar to anyone who's been watching figures like Maulana Fazullah and Baitullah Mashud in Pakistan today—had emerged to challenge the authority of both tribal chiefs and the central government. The mullah, Noor Muhammad, opened conservative madrassas and assailed the Pakistani government for being “un-Islamic.” He also chastised the Mahsud, the other dominant tribe in South Waziristan, for selling out to modernity and being too close to the Pakistani government. Before Ahmed's arrival, the Pakistani government had responded to this challenge with overwhelming force, bombing the Wazir's main market and sending the Wazirs fleeing across the border to their kin in Afghanistan. The government then targeted the homes of the mullah's supporters for destruction. In a matter of months the mullah had surrendered, but the Wazirs were in a full state of revolt.

It was in this environment that Ahmed, a British-trained anthropologist, took up his post as the government's man in Waziristan. Ahmed employed an approach in dealing with the tribes of the area that differed markedly from many of his predecessors. Instead of antagonizing the Wazirs as uncivilized rebels who needed to be pacified and dominated, he reached out to them in an effort to calm tensions. Using their own tribal codes of honor and respect as well as their mutual faith in Islam, he risked his life to show that he personally, and by extension the Pakistani government, wanted to understand and work with the Wazirs. He often put himself in a considerable amount of danger in the field accomplishing this task. The Wazirs reciprocated these gestures of respect and Ahmed was able to restore law and order.

Kurtz is sympathetic to the dangers Ahmed faced in Waziristan and commends him for his efforts in reaching out to the tribes. Surprisingly, however, Kurtz concludes that it was ultimately not Ahmed's inclusive policy toward the tribes that resolved the situation in the tribal areas but Pakistan's use of overwhelming military force before Ahmed's tenure began, the only policy in fact that Kurtz believes can work. Kurtz draws his inspiration from Lord Curzon, the British viceroy of India in the early twentieth century, who advocated the idea that “No patchwork scheme—and all our present recent schemes...are mere patchwork—will settle the Waziristan problem. Not until the military steam-roller has passed over the country from end to end, will there be peace...” Ahmed,

Kurtz believes, merely reaped the benefits of the steamroller which had already done its job. Thus Ahmed was the “good cop” the Wazirs followed because they were terrified by two more frightening “bad cops”: the Pakistani army, which had bombed them and killed their popular mullah, and the Soviet Union and which had launched an invasion of neighboring Afghanistan in 1979. But this is misleading.

Most importantly Kurtz’s timeline is wrong, as the Wazirs were responding to Ahmed’s outreach initiatives in 1978 and 1979 well before the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December of 1979. As for the Pakistanis, saying that the strong-arm tactics of the government led the Wazir to defeat, that they simply rolled over and allowed Ahmed’s “gentle” tactics to work, is absurd. The Wazir were not defeated in 1978—they were furious. The entire region was in flames. The Wazirs were killing, kidnapping, and blowing up telephone lines in retaliation. Ahmed calmed the situation precisely because he understood how dangerous using the military can be in the tribal areas and sought to bring down high levels of anger rather than escalate them.

This is in stark contrast to the approach taken by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, who, at the urging of the United States, sent around 100,000 troops into Waziristan three times to absolutely zero success. In 2007 the Wazirs actually captured 300 Pakistani soldiers, including officers, who simply “disappeared” from the battlefield. Far from being flattened into submission, the tribes, invoking their codes of revenge and counter revenge, fought back. Musharraf’s “bad cop” strategies have failed miserably. Today consequently, militants have spread out across the country, even to settled areas like Swat and to urban centers like Islamabad, shutting down girls schools and calling for a jihad against the Pakistani government and the West, as a direct result of Musharraf’s policies. In July of 2007, Musharraf sent troops into Islamabad’s Red Mosque and killed, according to some reports, over 1,000 people, crossing a red line in Pakistani society that unleashed wave after wave of suicide bombings around the nation, actions that increased with Musharraf’s recent declaration of emergency rule. Ahmed’s former position, the political agent, was long ago sidelined by Musharraf along with the rest of the civil service in favor of the military, leaving a political vacuum. The military, having little expertise in tribal matters and often from different ethnicities, have antagonized and enraged the alien tribes.

Today, the government presence in Waziristan is absent, the traditional tribal leadership sidelined, and into the vacuum created charged the Taliban. There has been an explosion of support for Taliban mullahs like Maulana Fazlullah in Swat or Baitullah Mashud himself, who, with their fire and brimstone speeches, arouse the passions of a populous who have lost all faith in the Pakistani government to ever understand their concerns. And because the bombs falling on them come from the United States, they have become fiercely anti-American and more likely to support figures like Osama bin Laden.

Kurtz’s False Dichotomy

The Mahsud situation, an echo of the past, has confounded analysts like Kurtz who seem to stubbornly repeat the one-track policy—partly because they have no other answers and

partly because they see a false dichotomy. According to this common misperception, there are only two options available to handle the situation in Waziristan and in the Muslim world: to “surrender” which would result in the beginning of a nightmare scenario of a world caliphate with nuclear weapons and daily stonings, or to crush them before what Kurtz calls the “Islamist revolution” succeeds. Kurtz frames his review of Ahmed’s work with this worldview and decides that Ahmed represents the former, and he the latter.

Yet this dichotomy never existed on the ground. In Waziristan, Ahmed was the iron fist in the velvet glove and through this method was able to implement effective policy. In *Resistance and Control in Pakistan* it is evident that Ahmed had the full power of the state and military behind him should he choose to use it, and the tribal leaders he was dealing with knew it. Whenever he met with tribal leaders, snipers and thirty-three armed bodyguards surrounded him. But he always went personally unarmed to build trust with the leaders. Ahmed, you could say “spoke softly but carried a big stick.” It was his ability to use this “gentle, honor-based rule,” as Kurtz calls it, that he was able to control the situation and ultimately be successful. This policy is so far removed from the discourse on Islam today that it almost is inconceivable. Instead, US policymakers have embraced an irrelevant paradigm perpetuated by ignorance of the Muslim world that is the main cause of so many American foreign policy failures worldwide. It must be revised.

Ahmed reinforced, through his effectiveness, the authority of the state. For the first time in history Ahmed extended the Pakistani government’s authority all the way to Birmal on the Afghan border. He built schools and medical clinics which were greatly appreciated by the people and enhanced the effectiveness of negotiation. Ahmed faced a full-on rebellion from the Wazir and could have easily unleashed the full force of the Pakistani military, but instead he used the threat of force combined with efforts to gain the respect of the tribes by reaching out to them and working within their cultural framework. Threats to law and order were dealt with strictly by the political authority. This patronizingly called “gentle” method worked.

Global experts on Islam agreed. When *Resistance and Control in Pakistan* was first published the noted American expert on Pakistani tribal society Dr. Stephen Pastner declared Ahmed “quite simply one of the most extraordinary anthropologists alive today.” Professor Francis Robinson, Britain’s leading authority on South Asian Islam, wrote in the foreword to the 1991 edition of the book that it should be read wherever the modern state confronts restive tribal societies. “Thus one man using the incisive key of knowledge unlocks the barriers of another culture without bloodshed and in circumstances where regiments of soldiers might have failed.”

Indeed using simple knowledge of the tribes to transcend this false dichotomy would make the American project in Pakistan and Afghanistan much easier. When the US and NATO invaded Afghanistan in 2001, they allied themselves with the Northern Alliance—composed mainly of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazara—the historic enemies of the Pashtuns of southern Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan, including the Wazirs and Mahsuds. Instead of the Americans being impartial actors and reaching out to the Pashtun who

viewed the Taliban in their midst to be an alien entity—and there were many—the US revived and became an actor in a fierce tribal war. For many Pashtuns to work with the United States or the governments of Pakistan and Afghanistan now would be a violation of their tribal honor and a betrayal to their families. The Pashtun tribesmen feel under siege on multiple fronts, attacked, they think, simply because of their ethnicity. Because they are Muslim, they also feel Islam is under attack and seek to defend it. This ethnic component has been frequently neglected by policymakers and analysts of the region, to disastrous effect.

Kurtz calls Ahmed's conclusion that Islamic tribal groups can be brought into the fray and engaged without Kurtz's "bad cop" presence of shock-and-awe military force "dangerously misleading and incomplete." But it is Kurtz who is dangerously misleading. The US reliance on what Kurtz approvingly calls the "steamroller" has led to disaster, not only in Waziristan but also Iraq, Afghanistan—and beyond.

Competing Legacies

But Ahmed's approach was not altogether new. In his quoting of Lord Curzon, Kurtz gives the impression that the British ruled India with a brutal iron fist, but this is not accurate. In *Resistance and Control in Pakistan*, and later books like *Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society*, which Kurtz does not review, Ahmed pays tribute to several British officials from whom he inherited a legacy of innovative and culturally sensitive administration. After the 1857 rebellion in India, where Muslims and Hindus rose up en masse against colonial authority, the British decided that another strategy was needed. Instead of antagonizing the tribes and brutally suppressing them, the British began to send elite officers who dressed like the tribes, spoke their language, and understood their culture. Many of these political officers had great success and were loved by the tribes. The tribal areas were still dangerous, however, and at times political agents were killed, as Kurtz correctly notes. After one such killing in 1905 Sir Evelyn Howell, a twenty-seven-year-old officer began his post in Waziristan. He would go on to become one of the most well-liked political agents and translate some of the great Pashtun poets into English, along with Sir Olaf Caroe, another political officer who wrote the classic *The Pathans*. In *Resistance and Control in Pakistan* and again in *Discovering Islam: Making Sense of Muslim History and Society*, Ahmed relates an exchange between Howell and a typical Mahsud elder. In response to a statement from Howell where he speaks of the political agent as "custodians of civilization dealing with barbarians," the elder replies

A civilization has no other end than to produce a fine type of man. Judged by this standard the social system in which the Mahsud have been evolved must be allowed immeasurably to surpass all others. Therefore let us keep our independence and have none of your law and your other institutions which have wrought such havoc in British India, but stick to our own custom and be men like our fathers before us.

“After prolonged and intimate dealings with the Mahsuds,” writes Howell, “I am not at all sure that, with reservations, I do not subscribe to their plea.” It was clear to Howell, who was able to get to know the tribes well enough to begin to empathize with them that one way of life was not going to win over the other. So, if the tribes of Waziristan were not going to freely accept Western civilization and the British were not going to permit disorder and challenges to their rule in strategic Waziristan, where was the middle ground? It is clear from the statement that the tribes would not respond to shows of overwhelming force, which they would interpret as a government effort to ram “Western civilization” down their throats at the barrel of a gun, a strategy that was as ineffective in 1905 as it is now. The only answer, then, is the approach favored by Howell and Ahmed after him. Coexistence is possible, but only if there is mutual respect and competent administration. If the tribes do not respect, honor, and trust the political agent, and by extension the government of Pakistan and today the United States, there is next to nothing any of these parties can accomplish in the tribal areas.

A Terrorist Gene?

Kurtz makes other perplexing claims in his essay. Kurtz accuses Ahmed of being an “apologist” for Islam in his later work, including in the reviewed books *Islam Under Siege: Living Dangerously in a Post-Honor World*, and *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization*. In contrast to his earlier work like *Resistance and Control in Pakistan* where Kurtz believes Ahmed to examine the role of violence in Muslim society adequately, it is Kurtz’s contention that Ahmed then went soft and sanitized Islam’s dirty laundry for Western audiences, coining terms like “Islamophobia” and appealing for Western tolerance of certain practices which Kurtz implies should not be tolerated.

To illustrate this, Kurtz uses an example from *Islam Under Siege* in which Ahmed argues that contrary to common American beliefs that Afghan tribesmen fire rifles into the sky because they are violent terrorists, firing into the sky is simply a mark of celebration at birth and marriage. Kurtz sees this as contradicting Ahmed’s earlier discussion of the violent political culture of Waziristan in *Resistance and Control in Pakistan*, and darkly wonders if there is “not some connection between the resort to terror tactics, on the one hand, and societies characterized by violent tribal rivalry and demonstrative gunfire, on the other?” This is sloppy scholarship. Any decent study of the area will show that the prevalence of guns and their use in celebration has less to do with terrorism and more to do with terrain and the necessity in living in such foreboding environment.

Kurtz is in effect saying that the violence that often occurs between and within tribal groups in Waziristan naturally compels people in the area to resort to terrorism, which would explain how Al-Qaeda gained such a foothold in the area. Kurtz thus implies that terrorism has nothing to do with the failure of Muslim leadership or US foreign policy, but an inherent violent tendency and with it a total incompatibility with modernity. This phrenological approach to foreign policy reflects the widely discredited and outdated view of Muslim tribesmen simply as violent and savage “natives.”

If Kurtz is right in his assessment that the entire Muslim world is now Waziristan and the West has been reduced to Wana, the old British administrative headquarters in Waziristan, what does this say about the world's 1.3 billion Muslims and the religion of Islam itself? Even Kurtz's title "Tribes of Terror" condemns the entire Wazir and Mahsud tribes, and by extension all the world's Muslims, as being terrorists. What appears at first glance a penetrating analysis of an anthropologist's work is actually a thinly veiled condemnation of a religion practiced by 1.3 billion people around the world.

The Failure of Muslim Leadership

Kurtz also accuses Ahmed of not being critical enough of Muslim societies and the religion of Islam itself. "Muslim society will have to reform far more profoundly than Akbar Ahmed concedes if the worst is to be avoided." This is a stunning statement because Ahmed has been relentless in his criticism of Muslim leaders for years. Kurtz seems to have missed the chapter in *Islam Under Siege* titled "The Failure of Muslim Leadership." Ahmed chastises Muslim leaders for failing to tackle corruption, poverty, and public health issues, for using Israel as a crutch to justify repression, and for stifling democracy in favor of wielding dictatorial power in places like Egypt, Sudan, Uzbekistan, and Pakistan. Many of the problems of the Muslim world, Ahmed commonly notes, are being caused by rapid urbanization, lack of resources like food and water, disease like malaria and AIDS, tribal and ethnic conflicts, and challenges to traditional cultures brought by globalization.

What Ahmed didn't do in either *Islam Under Siege* or *Journey into Islam* is call for a reform of the religion of Islam itself, which Kurtz seems to be demanding. This begs the question, is Kurtz demanding a reform of Islam, or another word, the kind of "reformation" so often demanded by commentators in the West of Islam? If so, who will do this? In Islam followers have a text they see as divine. Besides, to reject religion would be to reject one's identity, and there will never be a neat split between church and state because in Islam the two are intertwined. Who will be the Muslim to stand up and say that this passage or that from the Quran should be discarded? What is needed instead is a kind of Islamic renaissance. Islam must rediscover its own traditions of knowledge, wisdom, and compassion. There must be a debate within Islam about how to proceed in the twenty-first century, not reforms pushed by the West which have no meaning in an Islamic context.

Islam vs. Tribalism

There is indeed a tension in the Muslim world between tribal, cultural beliefs and Islam, which Kurtz rightly notes in his essay. Customs like honor killings and female circumcision so often blamed on Islam in the Western media, are tribal beliefs common in Asia and Africa that pre-date the coming of Islam; indeed many Christian tribes practice the same customs.

Islam emphasizes total equality, in contrast to tribalism which defines itself on the basis of common lineage and opposition to the “other.” “An Arab has no superiority over a non-Arab nor a non-Arab has any superiority over an Arab; also a white has no superiority over black nor a black has any superiority over white except by piety and good action” said the prophet Muhammad in his final sermon, as recorded in the Quran. God created people in different nations and tribes, the Quran also says, so that they may “know one another.” The Prophet began his political career as a peacemaker in tribal disputes and reached out to other tribes, including Jews in Medina, and stressed knowledge and compassion over violence. “The ink of the scholar,” he said, “is more sacred than the blood of the martyr.”

Kurtz accuses Ahmed of putting what seems “war-like and problematic” in Islam in the “tribal basket,” separating out a supposed “pure and peaceful Islam.” This is true to a degree; Ahmed does isolate many cultural customs that he doesn’t believe have a textual basis in Islam, but he is doing so speaking as an Islamic scholar, a Muslim the BBC has dubbed the “world’s leading authority on contemporary Islam.” He is a scholar whose work on both Muslim tribes in Pakistan and the religion of Islam worldwide should be seen as constituting a whole. For Kurtz to say that as an anthropologist Ahmed is okay but as an Islamic scholar he is nothing more than an “apologist” who doesn’t understand his own religion is absurd. If we can’t turn to the “world’s leading authority on contemporary Islam” for insight into the religion and the people who practice it who should we turn to? Stanley Kurtz?

Kurtz’s analysis also smacks of a kind of smug Orientalist paternalism. According to Kurtz, apparently, Ahmed’s anthropology is the work of a great scholar but as soon as he discusses Islam he is somehow tainted by being a Muslim himself. Would Kurtz apply the same principle to European academics like C.S. Lewis, a scholar of medieval and renaissance literature, or Max Weber, a sociologist, who commented with authority on their own Christian traditions? Indian scholars and statesmen like the philosopher and first president of India Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Jawaharlal Nehru wrote extensively on their own Hindu religion and culture while scientists like Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud wrote of their own Jewish culture and traditions. Did anyone accuse Einstein, who many Jews wanted to be the first president of Israel, of distorting Judaism?

Religion of Peace?

In his discussion of Islam, Kurtz falls into a familiar pattern. Commentators in the West, who have seen Islam as an existential military threat for a thousand years, have focused not on Islam’s emphasis on knowledge which gave the world great advances in math, science, and medicine, making possible the European renaissance, but instead on quotations from the Quran extolling violence, including the oft cited “kill the infidel” lines. However, these passages come in the context not of pre-emptive war but of defending Muslims from attack. The Prophet of Islam, unlike Jesus Christ, was a head of state, and all states must have a policy to defend their citizens in case of war and conduct affairs of state. The Prophet clearly led armies into battle. But Christianity too had to look seriously at the just war when it was named the official religion of Rome by Emperor

Constantine. In this, Islam is no different from Christianity—where major church figures like St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and St. Bernard of Clairvoix have all justified holy war in self-defense, to fight evil, or to restore justice to society—or Judaism, in which God calls upon Jews to slaughter the men, women, and children of the Amalekites, a rival tribe who frequently attacked them. In fact Islam explicitly lays down precise and in many ways remarkable rules of war including protection for prisoners of war and a total prohibition on killing women, children and all vegetation in battle. Judaism and Christianity, like Islam, have a core of compassion and faith in God which will lead to self betterment. But a concept of a “just war” exists in all three, and can even be found in non-Abrahamic religions like Hinduism and Buddhism.

American commentators including Daniel Pipes and Robert Spencer, author of *Religion of Peace? Why Christianity is and Islam Isn't*, insist on ringing alarm bells about the imposition of a new Islamic caliphate imposed by hostile Muslim hoards. Independent of all other factors or motivation, this line of thinking goes, terrorism will not cease until Islam itself is eradicated or radically transformed because it inherently predisposes its adherents to violence. The Quran thus becomes a blueprint for terror and hatred, as Bill O'Reilly stated when he compared the Quran to *Mien Kampf* on his television show as examples of books which compel their followers to pursue an evil ideology. With this as their source material all good Muslims, to echo Pat Robertson, should be inclined to terrorism because slaying non-believers is in the Muslim DNA. In truth this is amusing because in contrast to St. Augustine's dictum of *cognite intrare* ('lead them in' — i.e. 'force them to convert'), the Quran says precisely the opposite: “there is no compulsion in religion.” This is not to say that Christianity is an intolerant religion, but simply that a more nuanced, knowledgeable approach is needed when writing about Islam.

This presupposition that Islam is an inherently violent religion still underlies much of our debate in the United States after 9/11, a position that Kurtz also seems to embrace. Under this simplistic analysis it is the Islamic religion itself that is, and always has been, the problem. It is the violence inherent in Islam, extended here by Kurtz to include a synthesis of tribal beliefs and Islam, that is to blame for terrorism and predestines Islam to clash with the West. It is this implicit assumption that has informed the work of Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis, two of the biggest influences on US foreign policy after 9/11. To writers like Lewis, who Kurtz lauds in his essay, the inherently violent nature of Arabs and other Muslims meant that Americans had to speak to them in a language they understood—which turned out to be the mixture of intense violence, humiliation, and torture—that has characterized our disastrous policies toward the Muslim world in Iraq and elsewhere.

Journey into Islam

Dismissing the simplistic theory that the religion of Islam itself is to blame, we are left wondering, what is the cause of the instability and violence in the Muslim world? Why are young Muslims today so angry, and what can the United States do about it? Seeking answers to these questions the authors of this piece joined Ahmed, currently the Ibn

Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University, on a tour of the Muslim world, which culminated in the book *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization*, the third book Kurtz examines in his review essay. The study was sponsored by the Brookings Institution, American University, and the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. We traveled to eight countries in the Middle East, South Asia, and Far East Asia. We met, interviewed, and distributed surveys to over a thousand Muslims from a full range of society from students to merchants to politicians like Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf. As field assistants, we also had spontaneous encounters in homes, colleges, and in markets and street corners.

During our field research in the Muslim world we identified three models of Islamic expression, based on towns in India we visited. These models have been in play not since 9/11 but since the nineteenth century. Ajmer, the mystic Sufi form of Islam characterized by an inclusiveness and tolerance of other belief systems, Aligarh, a university built in the nineteenth century designed to synthesize Islam and the West, and Deoband, the most orthodox center of South Asia, akin to the Wahabbis of Saudi Arabia and the ideological center of the Taliban movement.

We observed these models in the field wherever we looked, and classifying the Muslim world as such helped us make sense of it. The models form the thesis of *Journey into Islam*, a book to which we both contributed essays and research after we returned. It is our conclusion that it is the Deoband model that is currently ascendant to the exclusion of the other models because people feel Islam is under attack. They are going back to a “pure” form of the religion that provides what they believe to be a blueprint for a just society—seventh century Islam under the Prophet Muhammad and shariah law. It should be noted that only a tiny percentage of Deoband followers are violent, but almost all feel Islam is under attack. For the vast majority of Muslims this does not mean that the solution is the imposition of a worldwide caliphate, as hysterical media commentators and politicians often say in the West, but a desire to live their lives in peace in a religious way without interference from both the West and restrictive local governments.

The Real “Muslim Street”

The reasons for this ascendancy of Deoband were not difficult to see. We encountered the Muslim world awash in turmoil. Muslims we spoke to were extremely angry and confused. They feel humiliated, disgraced, and dishonored. They see many problems in their societies from foreign occupation to poverty and sectarianism, and feel powerless to solve them. “We see injustice everywhere,” a high school student told us in Karachi, Pakistan, “we just don’t know what to do about it.”

When we would first enter mosques and madrassas there was a tangible tension. People questioned us sharply, “Why did *you* invade Iraq? Why are *you* torturing prisoners in secret prisons and at Guantánamo Bay?” At first the atmosphere would be tense and cold. I know many wondered if we were not college students but CIA operatives. At first we attempted to answer their questions, but before long we realized that what they wanted us to do more than anything else was listen to them. They feel Americans don’t listen and

don't care about the problems of the Muslims. They think America is engaged in a war not against terrorism but against the whole religion of Islam. Some professed allegiance to Osama bin Laden or told us of their desire to join the insurgency in Iraq—and others emphatically had the opposite view, saying that bin Laden didn't speak for them. Although many Muslims were enraged by US foreign policy and wanted political solutions to festering problems such as Palestine, Kashmir, and Chechnya what angered them the most, we were surprised to discover, was their belief that Americans hated Islam and thought it was an evil religion.

Their “proof” was not necessarily the wars in Muslim nations in which the US was engaged but media images coming from the West which they said confirmed for them the hatred Americans supposedly had for Muslims. In this age of global media, Muslims see themselves depicted as fanatics, terrorists, and extremists, and are outraged. In surveys distributed to hundreds of Muslims during our trip a strong majority of respondents named “Western negative perceptions of Islam” as the number one threat to the Muslim world.

Once we began to listen to Muslims we met, however, and leant an empathetic ear to their grievances, there was a perceptible warming of tensions, even amongst the most conservative Muslims. This was repeated, again and again over eight countries. Muslims, especially the youth, were thrilled we had taken the time to visit them and learn from them. We were asked for our autograph numerous times and have remained in email contact with some of the people we met on the trip. Pictures in *Journey into Islam* showing both of us embracing smiling Muslim students reflect accurately the mood after nearly all of our meetings. Some of the most prominent pictures in the book come from the seminary at Deoband itself.

One of our most difficult encounters came in our interaction with Aijaz Qasmi, the head web editor of Deoband's website and a key ideologue. He served as our guide for the day in Deoband and told us of his most recent book, *Jihad and Terrorism*, which argued that *jihad* was justified as self-defense against “Israeli and American barbarism” in mainly Iraq, Afghanistan, and Palestine. He also professed to us his belief that killing innocent Americans and Israelis was justified in Islam as self defense. After spending a day in Deoband talking and debating the issues, he joined us for the week in Delhi. Through showing respect to him in his own village and framing the political discussion within his own culture and ideas, he began to approach the situation from a very different perspective. He did not suddenly begin to agree with American policies, but he acknowledged that violent jihad was not the best approach. He also offered to translate into Urdu *Islam Under Siege*, another book reviewed by Kurtz, whose main thesis involves dialogue among civilizations. His translation will finally be distributed to hundreds of madrassas in South Asia, a major step in changing “hearts and minds” in the key area for the war on terror. Yet Kurtz fails to mention this incident, despite its centrality to *Journey into Islam* and as a key point of our defense of Ahmed's approach to the war on terror. If terrorism is encouraged by some Muslim leaders, surely changing the minds or presenting alternative perspectives to such influential Muslims should be at the forefront of US policies.

In February 2008 scholars from over 6,000 madrassas gathered at Deoband to condemn terrorism. At a speech convening the conference, the head of the Deoband school said that the killing of innocent people of any religion was prohibited by the Quran. This is exactly the kind of discussion within Islam that we should seek to promote.

Our journey demonstrated to us the need to go beneath the surface, to dispense with stereotypes, and have an open mind in order to understand what was actually going on. We back from our fieldwork with Ahmed and wrote *Journey into Islam* aware of the enormity of the problem but also optimistic that the United States could have better relations with the Muslim world if it only reached out more to Muslims in public diplomacy efforts, consulted more anthropologists and social scientists to better explain Muslim tribal dynamics, and launched substantial initiatives like allocating more money for aid and education.

Duped by the Muslims?

To Kurtz, however, our photographs in *Journey into Islam* were not an indication that Muslims wanted dialogue with the West but the exact opposite. In Kurtz's analysis we are painted as naïve college students who had the wool pulled over our eyes, tricked by clever Muslims intent on convincing us, and in effect the United States, that everything was amicable and they were not a threat to America. It is ironic that we, who dealt with hundreds of Muslims and were involved in heated and frank discussions, should be mistaken in our experiences gathered in over eight nations. We who traveled through the length and breadth of the Muslim world and conducted our research in the field, are being challenged by a scholar who writes from the safety and comfort of his own office. We visited places American diplomats would not dream of going. We find the suggestion that we were somehow duped by being greeted so warmly as patronizing and fatuous. We may have been students but we were above all field workers with questionnaires and surveys to conduct. Because he has no idea of conditions in the field, Kurtz seems to think having hundreds of bearded orthodox Muslims smile for the camera is a task easily accomplished by two American college students. When was the last time Kurtz was in a rural madrassa?

Kurtz writes that Muslims we talked to were “gentled” by constant coverage of our trip in Middle Eastern media—which was not so constant, we turned up at most places quite anonymously—and at any rate also traveled outside the Middle East to Indonesia, Pakistan, and many other countries. Kurtz also accuses *Journey into Islam* of having a “Panglossian façade” with assurances that “fall flat.” In *Candide*, you might recall, Pangloss is the blindingly optimistic tutor to Voltaire's cynical protagonist, whose optimism is contradicted by his own horrific life experiences. Although we are impressed with Kurtz's use of words like “Panglossian,” this insinuation that we are idiots for believing—based on extensive research in the field—that dialogue with the Islamic world can reap more benefits for the United States than incessantly bombing Muslims is incredibly short-sighted and ill-informed. Letting loose the steamroller in the Muslim world is not “realism,” it is bad policy.

The Incident at Aligarh

Kurtz, quite elatedly it seems, believes he discovered a crack in our “Panglossian façade” and a glimpse into the “true” Muslim world in an incident that occurred at India’s Aligarh University, a nineteenth century school modeled on Cambridge in the United Kingdom. In the context of our three models, Aligarh stands for an Islam that respects the West and its culture but retains its Muslim identity. It stands for democracy, integrated economies, trade, women’s rights, and human rights. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who founded the country of Pakistan working within the law, is emblematic of this model, as is Ahmed himself. Early Muslim leaders after the first waves of colonial independence, from Sukarno in Indonesia to Nasser in Egypt, also represent this kind of Islam.

During our trip to Aligarh we attempted to distribute our questionnaires in the usual way but were surrounded by a mob of hostile students, who railed against President Bush as a “terrorist” and yelled their support for Muslims like Ahmadinejad of Iran and Osama bin Laden. Their intensity took us aback because we had just come from Deoband where we were greeted very hospitably. In contrast to the orthodox Deoband students, the students who confronted us were mostly dressed in Western clothes and studying not shariah law but engineering and economics. One moment the conversation surrounded Thomas Friedman’s *The World is Flat* and the next the students were praising bin Laden and condemning Western culture and globalization, the very phenomenon they were studying to be a part of. We encountered anger everywhere we went but that calmed down after listening and engaging with the people we met. This encounter was different because emotions did not diminish, and the students here did not seem at all interested in filling out our questionnaires, literally the only time on the entire trip where this happened. This real experience, enough even for Kurtz, saddened us deeply. Ahmed’s belief in Aligarh’s viability and message seemed to be withering at the roots. “I felt like a warrior in the midst of the fray,” he writes in *Journey into Islam*, “who knew the odds were against him but never quite realized that his side had already lost the war.”

Aligarh vs. Deoband

The incident at Aligarh tells us much about the present state of the Muslim world. Deoband is gaining ground in part because Aligarh has failed. Reaching out to the West, Muslims believe, has compromised Islam and given them nothing but corruption, poverty, repressive governments, and foreign occupation. Even the modernist leaders we just mentioned, Sukarno and Nasser, had quite dubious credentials when it came to democracy and human rights. The Aligarh students themselves—a few were actually dressed traditionally as to resemble Deoband—complained that however well they learned the language of Western economics and high finance they could never get jobs because no one would hire them because of their Muslim names in India and around the world. They feel persecuted and discriminated against by Hindus, many of whom see Muslims, they told us, as lower than the untouchable caste in Indian society. The students said they had no leaders to look up to and, as if things weren’t bad enough inside India, they believed the United States was waging a war to eradicate Muslims all over the world. They felt that the “doors of globalization were slammed shut in their faces.”

Kurtz correctly connects the Aligarh model to the problems Muslims are having integrating in Europe. The West could be seen, actually, as the “front line” of the Aligarh model. But as we have seen from recent terror plots, including the British attempt by doctors to launch a wave of suicide attacks in London and Glasgow, there are major problems associated with integration. More and more Muslims are following Deoband and attempting to isolate themselves from Western influences, even inside of the West itself. Ajmer, the other town in India we visited and our third model, that of mystic humanism and inclusiveness, is also being sidelined by Deoband.

Again, the reasons are not hard to see, and are covered by Ahmed expertly in *Islam Under Siege*. When Muslims are faced with humiliation, dishonor, poverty, instability, corruption, and anarchy they may not pray for God to put compassion in men’s souls, as a Sufi might, or write letters of complaint to newspapers or wait for the next free and fair election, as someone from Aligarh might. They want to take action and restore justice to society. They do not want to work within the system, which they see as contaminated. They want a new system. More and more this need is being expressed in conservative terms that have disturbed the West, which generally likes their Muslims to be in suits, not beards. The trend of “political Islam” can also be explained by this phenomenon. Conservative movements are gaining ground among tribal peoples in Pakistan, Nigeria, and Middle Eastern countries like Jordan as well as in cosmopolitan cities like Istanbul, New Dehli, and Jakarta. This helps explain why historically Sufi areas like Somalia and Afghanistan, the birthplace of the great mystic poet Rumi, are today the backyard of Deoband.

Despite his picking up the pessimism in Ahmed’s discussion of the Aligarh model, Kurtz’s use of this tense incident in our journey does not constitute the “gotcha” moment he believes it to be. Far from contradicting our supposed “Panglossian façade,” the incident at Aligarh, and the position in which the Aligarh model now finds itself worldwide, actually strengthens our position as tested authorities on the subject. In the context of our models, we need to reach out to Deoband while also strengthening Aligarh and Ajmer. The modernists and Sufis are still around—we met many on our trip and their stories are presented in *Journey into Islam*—but they are on the ropes.

The Road Ahead

At what point, we wonder, will proponents of the steamroller in Pakistan and elsewhere realize how wrong they have been and attempt a change? It is precisely this line of thinking that has gotten the United States bogged down in Iraq and Afghanistan and stifled in Lebanon and Palestine with its support of the Israeli bombardment in 2006, which greatly strengthened Hezbollah. It has also led the United States to support the disastrous Ethiopian invasion and occupation of Somalia. That invasion, which the US supported with naval bombardments, airstrikes, and Special Forces ground troops, has been an unmitigated disaster, as an Iraq-style insurgency has arisen to challenge the US-backed government. America’s decision to support the steamroller over a more effective and nuanced policy toward the tribal Islamic group that had taken control of much of the

country—providing the first glimmer of stability in 15 years of anarchy—has unleashed a humanitarian catastrophe that has recently surpassed Darfur as the worst in Africa. It is also this mentality that led the US to push for a war with Iran, a drumbeat that has lessened substantially with the recent NIE intelligence assessment that Iran concluded its efforts to build a nuclear bomb in 2003. Still, incredibly given the above catastrophic failures, it appears that some Bush Administration officials are still pushing for war, which would radicalize the world's Shia inciting wave after wave of suicide martyr attacks—including in neighboring Pakistan, a nuclear power—and further bleed the United States of lives and resources.

The next president of the United States will have to take urgent steps to repair this kind of damage. They can start by shifting a great deal of American aid from military expenditures, which only exacerbates the problem, to development projects and educational aid. For an example take Pakistan, which has received over \$10 billion from the United States to fight the war on terrorism, which it has used to buy tanks, planes, and helicopter gunships used to subjugate tribes like the Wazir and Mahsud without success. If half that money, lets say, were put toward educational programs, especially curriculums that stressed the place of knowledge, or *ilm*, in Islam and provided an alternative to narrow minded madrassas, which are often the only choice for parents wanting to give their children an education, Muslims would applaud America. This would be tangible proof, in addition to symbolic efforts, that Americans do not hate Islam and wish to engage with its followers. This may just counter the harmful effects of the global Western media, or push coverage in a more positive direction and in turn influence Muslim media, which tends to mirror, in reverse, Western media.

To combat anti-Americanism and to further our interests abroad Americans must become more engaged with the Islamic world. There is willingness on the part of even the most conservative Muslims, as we wrote about in *Journey into Islam*, to engage with the United States. There exists a great unsatisfied demand for dialogue. American diplomats need to be in the markets, mosques, and madrassas of Islamic countries making connections with political and religious leaders, showing respect for local cultures, and lending an empathetic ear to Muslim grievances. The United States has been unable to meet that demand, or, perhaps even worse, realize that it even exists.

In tribal societies we operate in we need to play the part of administrator and mediator, not choosing sides in tribal wars, or “transcend the game” as Kurtz rightly calls it. A State Department official just back from Iraq recently told us that in dealing with the tribes in Iraq two things were required: the ability to drink massive amounts of tea and the ability to listen. Whether our very late policy of acknowledging and working with tribal leaders and embedding anthropologists with US military units—which has itself provoked a storm of controversy—will pay off is unclear. But this path of reconciliation is one we must pursue. We must not lose the masses of the Muslim world.

Bringing Back Aligarh

So how does Kurtz think the US should fight the war on terror? His essay reaches an appropriately convoluted conclusion. To fight Muslim extremism, he suggests, the United States must “reintroduce somehow the Aligarh University tradition of liberal learning and merit-based employment (independent of kinship ties) to the Muslim world.” This makes total sense and supports our conclusion in *Journey into Islam*, but his use of the word “somehow” illustrates he has no idea how to do it, which means he either didn’t read *Journey into Islam* closely enough or disagreed with its conclusions.

Kurtz is right to note that there are “simmering tensions between modernity and Muslim social life.” Globalization has hit traditional societies worldwide like a freight train, and there is a considerable backlash against it. There needs to be a way to temper some of the shocking changes that globalization and modernity has brought to the Muslim world so Muslims may reap the benefits of globalization without giving up who they are. Far from being predisposed to reject anything coming from the West including education and development with terrorism as Kurtz implies, Islam has a rich history of synthesis with the West, as exemplified in the Aligarh model. If all Aligarh represented was pure Westernization, Muslims would not have initially embraced it so warmly. That globalization gurus like Thomas Friedman identify globalization so intensely with Americanization could help explain the resistance it has met in the Muslim world.

It was because Aligarh represented an equal synthesis between East and West that it had success. There were always more conservative Muslims who opposed Aligarh, but they were in the minority. The majority of Muslims took pride in Aligarh, as it meant that Islam could go toe to toe with the West, learn from it, and still retain its identity. “Philosophy will be in our right hand and Natural Science in our left: and the crown of ‘there is no God but Allah’ will adorn our head,” said Sir Sayyed Ahmed Khan, who founded Aligarh University in 1875. “I want you to dive deep into European literature and science,” he once told his students, “but at the same time I expect you to be true to your faith.”

It is ironic that Kurtz seeks to promote the very same Islamic model that he is helping to eradicate with his views on Islam. Kurtz does not seem to envision this synthesis but a total supremacy of Western culture over Islam. It is this position that puts Muslims in a purely defensive mode and strengthens not Aligarh but Deoband, which preaches that Islam is under attack and in danger of being eradicated by the West.

Today, Aligarh has failed, driven in part by those in the West like Kurtz, who actually says in his essay that the West’s goal should be to “assimilate Muslims to Western values.” In this, Kurtz is echoing not Sir Evelyn Howell, who translated the great literature of the Pashtun tribes, but Lord Thomas Macaulay, a Secretary of Education in the colonial administration of British India. In 1835 he wrote in an infamous minute that a “single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.” In the same minute he also saw no problem in admitting that he had “no

knowledge of either Sanskrit or Arabic. But I have done what I could to form a correct estimate of their value.”

Muslims in the twenty-first century do not want to be assimilated to Western values as Kurtz desires; they want to retain their Muslim values, which often overlap with Western values in any case, and be modern. Any trace of Lord Macaulay, which Muslims constantly see in the Western media, will be stiffly resisted. This balance is possible as we have seen recently in Malaysia, which has seen great economic growth and developed internally with markets restricted for a time to the West. Indeed Mahatir Mohammed, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia was cited to us as a top role model by Muslims all over the world for being modern without surrendering Muslim values. Muslims living in Europe—and also the United States, Canada, and Australia—should be welcomed as much as possible by Westerners in an effort to show that their culture is respected. This would lessen their sense of besiegement in their new home and would enable them to more effectively embrace life in the West.

Kurtz is right that the best hope for the United States may be to strengthen the Aligarh model. But we do that by showing Muslims that we respect them and at the same time funding primary schools, universities, and economic development programs in the Muslim world, not by bombing Muslims into submission or forcing them to submit to our ways. It is imperative that we also reach out to the Deoband model. Conducting ourselves smartly as Ahmed did in Waziristan in tribal societies like Iraq doesn't necessarily have to mean giving up American hopes of democracy as Kurtz believes. But we have to start from square one, and first we have to learn about Muslim culture on its own terms, administer intelligently and compassionately using the best lessons from the British Empire when we must and permit the debate over the future of Islam to continue internally. We must also reevaluate our policy towards decidedly non-democratic leaders like President Musharraf and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, the second largest recipient of US aid. It is only then that democracy will have any hope of flourishing in the Muslim world.

Kurtz dismisses educational and developmental assistance to the Muslim world, saying that it is precisely this assistance that has driven what he dubiously dubs the “Islamist revolution.” During the colonial period, he says, many Muslims saw education as an ‘infidel plot.’” A blanket statement like this, although true in some cases, is a distortion of the facts. Many Muslims, and other colonized peoples throughout the European empires including Christians and Buddhists, resented education and developmental assistance if it was seen to not be helping them but be actively working to destroy their way of life. An example of this would be the more hard-line European missionary schools and hospitals, popular especially in Africa, whereby people who benefited from the services had to totally renounce all native custom and become European Christians. If education was seen to be improving their lives and was not a threat to their way of life, the people largely embraced educational initiatives. The Muslim world does desire developmental assistance, but it has to be done properly with respect for local culture and religion.

This kind of developmental assistance to the Muslim world would allow the debate to continue within Islam, which is where it needs to take place. Notice that none of the models we have discussed wants to transform Islam, drop passages from the Quran, or secularize the religion like critics of Islam in the West like Kurtz, seemingly, or former Muslims like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, desire. Adherents of Aligarh, Deoband, and Ajmer read the same holy book and receive guidance from the same Islamic figures like the Prophet Muhammad. In this context it is not hard to see how attacks from the West on the Prophet and the religion of Islam harm American efforts to win the “hearts and minds” of all Muslims no matter their philosophy. Muslims must internally counter their own extremists, and we should create the conditions whereby that becomes more plausible.

The Challenge of Our Generation

Throughout the journey, we gained through Ahmed an unprecedented insight into the Muslim world. Though we went into many dangerous environments—our hotel in Karachi was bombed and a US diplomat killed immediately before our arrival—we put our trust in Ahmed to keep us safe and he reciprocated, putting his trust in us. He never tried to influence us or convert us to Islam. In reality we spoke much more about the problems in Islam and the weaknesses of the Muslim world than its strengths. Ahmed actually called on us repeatedly to better understand our own American tradition and the wisdom of the founding fathers more than anything else. It allowed us to rediscover our own tradition at a time when we believe it is in danger of being compromised.

What we found when we viewed America from the outside was a country that was in danger of losing sight of the ideals that made it great in the first place. For many of the Muslims we spoke to the perception they had once had of a open, free America with democracy, human rights, and the best medicine and education in the world had been transformed into a dark fortress that builds walls around itself, tortures people, incarcerates people indefinitely without trial, spies on its citizens, and launches one disastrous war after another. These Muslims were angry about many problems in their societies, but they were also angry this horrific vision of America had replaced their prior belief that America was a beacon of hope and democracy to be emulated in a dangerous world. Our conclusions in *Journey into Islam* are focused on ways to improve US relations toward the Muslim world but are also prescriptions for America to rediscover its own ideals, which will actually greatly assist its ability to deal with the world of Islam.

In this paper we hope we have established that ultimately knowledge and scholarship based on integrity and research should be judged on its own merits and not by the religion of the author or the color of his skin. How to deal with Islam is the most defining issue of our times, and we, as young Americans, are disturbed that writers as influential and knowledgeable as Kurtz—who has a Ph.D. from Harvard, writes for the *National Review*, and is ironically a Senior Fellow at the Center for Ethics and Public Policy—could be getting it so wrong. In our trip to the Muslim world the perception that in the West Islam is seen as a hateful, violent religion was cited by a majority of Muslims as the number one threat to the Muslim world. In this environment, Kurtz’s views on the religion, which

are the same, actually endanger Americans because Muslims see supposed evidence that that their worst fears about Americans and Western culture are realized.

Instead of taking practical steps to strengthen the Aligarh model, in the end Kurtz advocates the steamroller which he figures may just well be needed in Waziristan, and by extension the entire Muslim world, to settle the “problem once and for all.” Kurtz, like his namesake in *Heart of Darkness*, wants to have it both ways. You cannot call for reform in Islam and at the same time exterminate the brutes. That he does this using Ahmed’s own data from *Resistance and Control in Pakistan* is the height of hypocrisy and demonstrates how dangerous preexisting prejudices and ideology can be in their ability to twist and distort serious scholarship. “I love your anthropology,” Kurtz seems to say to Ahmed, “but it’s a shame about your religion.”

We have shown that a different approach to Waziristan, leaders like Baitullah Masud, and indeed the entire Muslim world, is necessary if the United States is to emerge from the global quagmire in which it is currently engaged. We are living in dangerous times and we must understand these issues rather than slip back into what we believe to be old-fashioned prejudice. Our generation simply cannot afford this. Policies like those ascribed by Kurtz have devastated the reputation of America today and if continued they will devastate our very future. As young Americans concerned about the future we cannot allow failed policies with dubious origins to continue to blight the coming century.

Frankie Martin is a 2006 graduate of American University and Dr. Ahmed’s research assistant at American University.

Hailey Woldt is a senior at Georgetown University and research assistant to Dr. Ahmed.

Both Martin and Woldt accompanied Ahmed to the Muslim world on a trip which resulted in Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization (Brookings Press, 2007).