FOR THE LOVE OF ISLAM: US FOREIGN POLICY, ISLAMOPHILIA, AND THE ISLAM CENTENNIAL 14

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Abstract: This article explores the historical and lingering effects of US government involvement in defining Islam as public and foreign policy. It focuses on the Islam Centennial 14, a US program to celebrate the fourteenth centennial of Islam – and manage the US’s global image – which was active in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The Islam Centennial 14 organized a nationally touring museum exhibit, distributed information on Islam to partners and public schools, produced a newsletter, documentaries, and speaker series on Islam. It also culminated in one of the first academic centers in the US devoted to the study of Islam. The Islam Centennial 14’s activities provided a counter-narrative to rising Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiment, while the discourses that swirled around them – including their own press reports, outside conspiracy theories, and academic analyses – foreshadowed more contemporary xenophobic politics. This article presents the Islam Centennial 14 specifically as a case study through which to consider the workings and ramifications of American Islamophilia. It examines how such celebrations of Islam as part and parcel of international and national governance reinscribe both racialized representations of Islam and, however inadvertently, anti-Muslim sentiments. It argues that Islamophilia is an undertheorized corollary to more explicit anti-Muslim positions, and one whose deployment and effects more than merit sustained attention.

Keywords: Islamophilia, Islamophobia, racism, foreign policy, cultural diplomacy

Introduction

In 1978, a leaked presidential memo caused an international media sensation, put pressure on US diplomatic relationships in Muslim-majority areas, and caused chaos for American government officials seeking to contain the fallout. A solution, however unlikely, was the Committee to Honor the Fourteenth Centennial of Islam, or the Islam Centennial Fourteen – a celebration of Islam’s fourteen centuries. The Islam Centennial Fourteen was not a simple celebration of Islam’s historical presence; instead, it was an attempt to solidify the US’s international position in Muslim
communities and contain the damage done by the leaked memo. At the same time, it reflects how such celebrations of Islam as part and parcel of international and national governance – as Islamophilia – reinscribe both racialized representations of Islam and, however inadvertently, anti-Muslim sentiments. Here, Islamophilia is an under-theorized corollary to more obvious anti-Muslim positions, but its deployment and effects more than merit sustained attention.

During the Iranian Revolution, President Jimmy Carter sent a memo to his staff “asking what Islam was all about and why hadn’t the US been able to cope with Islamic issues. He asked whether there were other situations such as Iran’s and the Shah’s; whether fundamentalism in the Islamic world was or would be a problem for us” (Battle et al. 1991). The memo was leaked to US papers and then published under headlines such as “C.I.A. to Survey World Moslems”. Articles announced that the “White House has ordered U.S. intelligence agencies to produce a worldwide study of Moslem religious movements in the wake of the Islamic revolt that [had] helped drive the shah of Iran from his country” (Hoagl 1979). The White House and State Department were both concerned about diplomatic fallout with Muslim-majority countries given the leaked memo (Battle et al. 1991). One cable from the US Embassy in Cairo in January 1979 bluntly assessed the situation: “There has been marked increase in latent animosity of orthodox Egyptian Muslims toward [the] U.S … [The] [i]mpression exists that United States is hostile to Islam. Some positive actions on our part are needed to show sympathetic understanding for Islam and overcome innate Egyptian Muslim distrust of our motives. Press reports of intelligence studies, however needed such a study may be, do not help” (US Embassy 1979). Hoping to limit the fallout, the State Department and White House contacted Lucius Battle, a recently retired diplomat and member of the US Foreign Service who had spent his career in the Middle East and Mediterranean. Battle’s task was simple: to “head a national committee to observe the 14th Century of Islam” (Battle et al. 1991). The 1980 fourteenth centennial was fast approaching, thus the timing was perfect.

The Islam Centennial Fourteen (hereafter, the ICF) provides a window into US representations of Islam during a liminal period, the late 1970s and early 1980s. But furthermore, it presents a vantage point from which to consider the workings and ramifications of American Islamophilia. “Islamophilia”, as Andrew Shryock defines it, is not simply an affinity for Islam – or the opposite of anti-Muslim racism – but rather a particular kind of “image … impervious to nuance”, a kind of “coercive” demand, which subordinates “‘friendship’ to the demands of sameness” (2010: 9). According to Shryock, in the 1990s, governments in North American and Europe moved to define and then defeat “Islamophobia”.1 This project had at its “heart, a governmental agenda”. By this, Shryock means that the principal concern for this defeat of Islamophobia was to “facilitate the participation of Muslim
minorities in non-Muslim societies”, to domesticate them, to make them – in short – good citizens. In this way, Shryock suggests, not only the image of the Muslim as enemy, but also the “image of the Muslims as ‘friend’ … with whom legitimate conflict” was “not possible” needed to be recognized as part of a “larger disciplinary regime” (2010: 7).

In comparison to the immense variety of work on anti-Muslim racism and representations, scholars have only begun to investigate the aforementioned, related phenomenon of “Islamophilia”. Here, I suggest that the limitations and dangers of Islamophilia deserve attention. The Islam Centennial Fourteen project, on which I focus my analysis, at once attempted to persuade the American public that Islam was an ally of the US and simultaneously reinscribed Islam as a non-American, irrevocably foreign tradition. The advent of this Islamophilia preceded the period Shryock scrutinized – the 1990s and 2000s – and suggests that such domesticating national projects were preceded by and conjoined with international ones; that is, Islamophilia functioned as a mode and project of foreign policy as well as imperial control. In the early 1980s, the ICF provided a counter-narrative to rising anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiment, while the discourses surrounding it – including those contained within their own press reports, as well as external conspiracy theories and academic analyses – foreshadowed more contemporary xenophobic politics.

The Islam Centennial Fourteen

The ICF’s various committees included over 150 names. It engaged US government institutions and figures – drawing on a myriad of former State Department figures and their networks, as well as US economic connections, US Muslim representatives, international Muslim diplomatic advisors. Despite all these figures, it was the ICF’s core staff who appeared in the press, communicated with museums, and organized the public presentation of the ICF’s projects. The core staff included the ICF’s Chairman Lucius Battle, formerly the US State Department’s Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asia Affairs, US Ambassador to Egypt, and Assistant Secretary of State for Education and Cultural Affairs. It also included William Crawford, the Executive Director, who had been principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Near East, North Africa, and South Asia and, prior to that, US Ambassador to Yemen and US Ambassador to Cyprus. The ICF’s Director of Programs and Public Affairs was Dr Naomi Collins, who held a Ph.D. in History and had worked at the Library of Congress and the University of Maryland. And finally, there was James W. Kirkpatrick, the ICF’s Director of Development and Finance, who was a former analyst at Mellon Bank and former Peace Corps Associate Director in Tunisia (National Committee
to Honor the Fourteenth Centennial of Islam 1980). Here, the ICF’s composition demonstrates some of its aims, wrapping business interests, foreign policy, and educational frameworks into the forthcoming celebration of Islam.

Regardless of these myriad connections to the US government, academia, and international business, the ICF began at an unlikely – and unlucky – moment in time. If the start of the Iranian Revolution in 1978 – and Carter’s lack of knowledge concerning Islam – had provided the impetus for the ICF program, the Iranian hostage crisis would dog its progress. The crisis began in November 1979, when Iranian students took hostage American Embassy workers in Tehran. The drama surrounding the hostages would play out on American television screens for 444 days, from November 1979 to January 1981. Such events in the late 1970s and early 1980s were a nodal point in rising anti-Muslim sentiment. In popular US culture, the hostage crisis catalyzed new revisions of longstanding narratives about American identity and international threat. As Melani McAlister argues, the crisis interpellated American viewers into the crisis – making not only the American nation, but also the American family, the prime site of the new Islamic terrorist threat (2005). And, as Megan Goodwin shows, by the late 1980s this domestic threat would move from popular novels to film, and eventually to US legislation designed to protect US children and families from Muslim men (2020: 75).

During this time, however, things were not as set in stone as students of anti-Muslim racism might otherwise think. While the “conflation of Islam, Arabs, and terrorism brought American Muslims and Arab Americans under suspicion as potential threats to national security … [the] vagaries of the notion of ‘Islamic terrorism’ … left spaces open for strategic alliances between” Muslim groups and the United States. The US government, for example, rallied Muslim support against the Soviets in Afghanistan, and Carter’s 1980 State of the Union speech emphasized “respect” for “the faith of Islam” (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 309).

The ICF took full advantage of this surprising space. It produced a nationally touring museum exhibit on the “Heritage of Islam” and distributed information packets about Islam to museum partners, potential funding organizations, and public schools (Smithsonian Institution Archives 1986). It organized a newsletter, produced multiple documentaries on Islam, and coordinated speaker series. Finally, the ICF project culminated in one of the first academic centers in the United States devoted to the study of Islam – the Institute for Islamic Affairs at American University in DC. As Executive Director William Crawford would tell The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs in 1982, “[b]ut at least we have people’s attention. Americans are now interested in learning more about Islam.”

Regardless of Crawford’s enthusiasm, Americans’ interest in “learning more about Islam” was not necessarily a positive transformation in the relationship
between non-Muslim Americans, Muslims, and Islam. In attempting to counteract anti-Muslim racism, the ICF’s Islamophilia dictated firm boundaries for Muslim inclusion. As I discuss below, Muslims who did not politically agree with US policy, and those whose connection to Islam did not make sense within the terms of liberal religion, were beyond the pale – an implicit assumption of the ICF’s work which would only become explicit in US policy and public culture as the 1980s dragged on.

**An Abrahamic Faith**

The ICF’s first public act was – on 4 October 1979, amid the Iranian Revolution and precisely one month prior to the onset of the Iranian hostage crisis – to push for a Congressional resolution in support of the program. The foreign relations committees of the US Congress took up the joint resolution to honor the fourteenth centennial of Islam (although only the Senate Committee passed it in the end). This event is noteworthy given not only the long history of anti-Muslim sentiments in the US and the specific context of the 1970s and 1980s, but also given the very language it would draw on. Here, the Resolution – and the ICF’s program more broadly – would claim a specifically Abrahamic kinship, a trope that would subsequently become a dominant mode of claiming interreligious connection in the decades following 9/11.

It was Democrat Lee Hamilton who introduced the Resolution to the House. He marked the event as one of “global celebration”. It was an “appropriate moment to recognize the common heritage of the great monotheistic faiths: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam”. The very term “Islam”, the Resolution itself argued, drew from an example known to all three traditions: “Abraham’s willingness to accept all God’s commands” even when directed to sacrifice his own son – a story that appears in the Qur’an, the Christian Old Testament, and the Hebrew Bible. Islam, meaning submission, evidenced this relation to the familiar divine authority – a relation that, the resolution suggested, all “monotheistic religions” would find meaningful (“A Concurrent Resolution” 1979). The Resolution stated that the “Congress takes note of the contribution of Islam” to “mankind” and wished “success to the fourteenth centennial commemoration”. The Resolution concluded by asking President Carter to “forward a copy … to the Chief of State of each country where Islam has a significant following and where celebrations will mark this important international event” (“Fourteenth Centennial of Islam. Hon. Lee H. Hamilton” 1980).

Resolutions such as this were, in some ways, a continuation of what Elizabeth Hurd identifies as a decades-long “religious offensive” in US Cold War policy. As Hurd argues, in the early Cold War “it was not religious extremism but
communist secularism that was seen as the chief impediment to bolstering America’s reputation as the global guardian of free religion, and of freedom in general”. As such, the US supported a number of programs designed “to foil communist designs on global spiritual health through religious reform at home and abroad” (Hurd 2015: 68). Here, the US used the “little-understood religious systems and ideas of foreign peoples in order to incentivize those people to act in accordance with American foreign policy” (Graziano 2018: 32). In the Middle East and North Africa, Americans saw Islam as a core drive among Arab actors.

This racialization both of Arabs as inherently Muslims, and of Islam as an inherent biologically imbued component of the “Arab mind”, drove much of the US’s international engagement with Muslims during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s (Graziano 2018; Bobal 2013; Kumar 2012; Jacobs 2006). US propaganda targeted Muslim populations abroad (as well as other religious groups) and posited Islam as inherently opposed to the godless communism of the Soviets, at one point going so far as to translate US speeches into poetic Arabic attempting to mimic the cadence of the Qur’an (Graziano 2018: 33).

The ICF Resolution recognizing the fourteenth centennial of Islam is noteworthy then not only because it pursued foreign policy through religion, but also because of the way that it proclaimed and pronounced Islam’s kinship to the US’s “Judeo-Christianity”. The resolution attempted to project an image, not of the US as a centre of pluralism, but of the US as allied with Islam on the basis of a shared Abrahamic monotheism. Furthermore, the ICF did not simply pursue this policy abroad; instead, it endeavored to work on and through the American public as well. In short, the ICF attempted to engage foreign Muslim audiences by being seen to teach (largely non-Muslim) Americans about Islam.

Here, the potential and possibilities of Islamophilia extend to both domestic and international governance. If Shryock argued that Islamophilia was governmental because its principal concern was to domesticate “Muslim minorities in non-Muslim societies”, the ICF’s activities demonstrate the international reach of such programs – organizing majority Muslim societies into the logics of liberal religion for the benefit of US and US-based projects.

The main conduit for this activity was the “Heritage of Islam” museum exhibition. The exhibit, which included examples of Muslim scientific artifacts, a replica of the Ka’ba, carpets, embroidery, and various other items, was the ICF’s central program. It was opened by the American-born Queen Noor of Jordan in Houston, Texas, on 10 March 1982. As the exhibit traveled from Houston to Washington, DC, the ICF consistently echoed the Congressional resolution – promoting a shared religious lineage as central to US foreign policy. The ICF’s Executive Director William Crawford told the San Francisco Chronicle that the committee emphasized both the “diversity” of Muslims, and the “fundamental
values of brotherhood they share with Christianity and Judaism” (San Francisco Chronicle 1980). Other newspapers printed similar talking points:

Muslims have had traditional religious affinities to Judaism and Christianity because Abraham is considered a Muslim forbear, too, and Moses and Jesus are regarded as prophets. Just as Muslims adhere to their Scripture, the Koran, so they call Jews and Christians “People of the Book” for their adherence to the Bible. In religious practice, Crawford said, Muslims have common elements with Jews and Christians. All observe a weekly Sabbath, have an annual period of fasting and repentance, and have the concept of pilgrimage. (Dart 1980)

These talking points would become almost trite in the years following 2001, repeating claims to Muslim similarity with – rather than difference from – what was generally understood as a Judeo-Christian American tradition. The creation of this Judeo-Christian identity itself foreshadowed these later moves to incorporate Islam. Andrew Preston, for example, has argued that the notion of a “Judeo-Christian” America is rooted in an “ideology of national security” created during the FDR era. As the new framework of “national security” developed, “two new visions of what it meant to be an American also came into view”. One of these was the “American way of life”, but the “second identity to be invented was the ‘Judeo-Christian tradition’”, which imagined “the United States as a bastion of religious liberty uniquely free of prejudice” (Preston 2014, 497).

Conversations surrounding “Abrahamic” traditions began only a few decades later as, from the 1960s onward, the term increasingly became a central trope “to imagine and designate a commonality or a wistful paternity among three monotheisms” (Hughes 2012: 58). In some cases, writers deployed the term “Abrahamic” to point to a common modern spiritual “malaise” – a decline of religious feeling – and to the Abrahamic as a unifying “moral antidote” to the modern era (Hughes 2012: 79). In the 1980s, as Rosemary Corbett shows, immigrant Muslim American communities would take up the label as they sought to craft Muslim Americans as fully “American” – and “moderately” Muslim – in the public sphere (Corbett 2017).

We can trace the Abrahamic narrative to Cold War diplomatic gestures in very much the same way as we can see a Judeo-Christian tradition emerging in the context of “national-security”. The Islam Centennial Fourteen’s Islamophilic framing of Islam subverted Judeo-Christian nationalism and ingrained opposition to Islam. At the same time, as I discuss further below, it maintained a clear sense of Muslim difference that presented Islam as an irrevocably foreign friend.
More than Religion

If Islamophilia marked Islam’s kinship with Judaism and Christianity (through the Abrahamic religions narrative), it also marked the limits of that kinship. As much as Islam had lines of affinity with Judaism and Christianity, it was also unlike them in its remove from secular modernity, a remove that set Islam as both out-of-time and religiously excessive. What is interesting in coverage of the ICF’s Heritage of Islam exhibit is the ways that this assumption of Islam’s removal from contemporary time was embedded in approval and applause for Islamic civilization and its achievements.

Many reviews of the exhibit highlighted Muslim contributions to science and philosophy while relegating those contributions, and Muslims themselves, to a past world – useful historically as a stepping-stone to modern science, but also limited by a specifically Islamic constitution. For example, Ann Holms writing in the *Houston Chronicle* highlighted:

the handsome brass astrolabes, a Greek invention which Muslims took and perfected, beautifully crafted with art. It became an early analogue computer and timekeeper, with its graphs of the heavens, advising of the direction of Mecca and the times for prayer. Related poster comments tell of early Muslim advances in medicine, science, astronomy and mathematics. Omar Khayyam, our old friend, surfaces of course. This time he is linked with Al-Tus, an astronomer, utilizing Euclid geometry.

Holmes noted the significance of architecture, calligraphy, and specifically geometric patterns which signaled an “infinity that appeals more to the Muslim mind than the contained sense of a more realistic present day” (1982).

When the exhibit opened in Pittsburgh, the hosting Carnegie Institute argued that Muslims had been both “synthesizers of the earlier cultures of Asia, Africa, Greece, and Rome” as well as “brilliant innovators” who “created a treasure of artistic and intellectual achievement”. “This achievement”, the Institute continued, “fueled the Renaissance in Europe and continues to exert a profound influence on the world’s cultural development” (Schwab 1983). As the exhibit opened, the *Pittsburgh Press* highlighted this “Islamic Legacy” in the Sunday feature. Reporter Mary Pat Flaherty suggested the exhibit “ought to get visitors talking about … a society whose achievements often were eclipsed by the Europeans”. Among “early Muslims” had been “astronomers who could have taught Copernicus things” (Flaherty 1983).
The *Smithsonian Magazine* too, covering the exhibit’s final stop in Washington, DC, addressed this scientific legacy. While the “Arabian society into which” Islam arose was

one of semiprimitive violence … within two centuries … Islam had spread to include a vast array of peoples steeped in Greek, Jewish, Roman, Persian and Hindu thought. They adopted the Muslim religion; Muslim society absorbed their knowledge, so that at a time when Western Europe was lost in the Dark Ages, Baghdad and other Muslim cities were becoming centers of philosophical and scientific achievement. … In the words of Howard Turner, curator of the science portion of the exhibition, it was “the world’s first truly international science,” and when it was transmitted to Europe it “hastened the Renaissance, thus helping to generate scientific advancements in our own time”. (Lippman, 1983)

Histories of science here, and the museum objects that marked them, magnified not only the universality of science as human activity, but also Islam’s status as not-yet modern. Science, in short, marked an Islamophilic connection – a similarity between Islam and others – but also marked that the cultural specificity of *Islamic* science set Muslims both behind and apart. Coverage of the “Heritage of Islam” exhibits wrapped the universality of science into a public representation of Islam as a civilizational ally – a producer of “our” Renaissance – and, at the same time, as familiar kin stagnant in its wake.

Not was it only out-of-time, but Islam was also divorced from modernity through its relation to religion. As Elizabeth Hurd argues, “representations of Islam as antimodern, anti-Christian, and theocratic … are not coincident by product[s] of an inert, pregiven secular political authority”; instead, “an opposition to Islam has been built into the secularist traditions … and has come to constitute part of the national identities with which these traditions are intertwined. Modern Euro-American forms of secular authority are, at least in part, an effect of the differentiation of a secular ‘self’ from an Islamic ‘other’” (2015: 49). Islamophilia, then, requires overcoming this overarching “opposition to Islam” and does so by representing Muslims (or, at least, some Muslims) as like this “secular ‘self’”. Thus, the ICF subverted this anti-Islamic framework by relying on a secularist definition of religion – one which presents religion as outside of politics.

For example, in 1983 James W. Kirkpatrick, a banker and Financial Director for the ICF, presented this argument in an article for the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* provocatively titled “Islam Cut off from Past and Future”. Kirkpatrick’s article addressed a seemingly obvious linkage between Islam and violence. Islam was not, he argued, “any more inherently inclined to terrorist activity than other religions”. “[F]undamentalist-inspired terror”, he argued, “is not the sole property of
Islam: Hindus murder Moslems in Assam; Protestants and Catholics murder each other in Ulster; Israelis bring wanton destruction upon the civilian population of Lebanon and their Christian allies wreak a vivid havoc upon the refugees of Sabra and Shatilla”. Such fundamentalisms, Kirkpatrick continued, had nothing to do with religion. Islam shared with Christianity and Judaism values of “tolerance, mutual respect and even brotherly love”. The “trouble” was that “other, non-religious elements tend to intrude, abusing these values and converting them into twisted concepts to further self-interested usually political ends”. Among these non-religious elements, in the case of Islam, was a too-rapid economic development and increasing materialism. Both elements had, according to Kirkpatrick, sidelined spirituality in Muslim centers as well as in the West. And it was these non-religious issues which had provoked fundamentalist responses (Kirkpatrick 1983).

Kirkpatrick’s sense that religion had nothing to do with these questions was not idiosyncratic. Again, Kirkpatrick’s claim to ally with Islam depended on a secular connection – “fundamentalist” political activities (though conducted by Muslims) were not based in or truly related to “religion”. Islam, like Christianity and Judaism, was “tolerant” – a secular liberal virtue which, as Wendy Brown has shown, is rooted in depoliticization and operates from a conceit of neutrality that is actually thick with bourgeois Protestant norms. The moral autonomy of the individual at the heart of liberal tolerance discourse is also critical in drawing the line between the tolerable and the intolerable … and thereby serves to sneak liberalism into a civilization discourse that claims to be respectful of all cultures and religions, many of which it would actually undermine by “liberalizing,” and, conversely, to sneak civilization discourse into liberalism. (2006: 7–8)

In this sense, Kirkpatrick’s claim to ally with Islam depended on these secular liberal connections – “fundamentalist” politics were not about Islam, but rather Islam was like Hurd’s “secular ‘self’”.

At the same time, conversations surrounding the ICF’s activities repeatedly defined Islam as religiously excessive. The Smithsonian Magazine reminded readers in its review of the ICF’s “Heritage of Islam” exhibit that what sprung from “seventh-century Arabia [was] a religion and way of life” (Lippman 1983). Another review both contested anti-Muslim prejudices – noting that such common perceptions of Islam were “outlandish” – but also repeated the claim that “Islam governs every aspect of the worshippers’ life” (James n.d.). Kathleen Tyman at the Washington Times referred to “the rich philosophy of Islam” as being “woven through every aspect of its followers’ lives” (1983). The ICF’s materials for the “Heritage of Islam” exhibit itself repeated this formulation, both lauding Islam and

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drawing a distinction between the appropriate bounds of religion and the ways in which Islam exceeded those. The pamphlet that guided viewers through the exhibit juxtaposed claims that both included and excluded Islam: “Islam is many things: it is the youngest of the world’s three major monotheistic religions. It is a way of life, governing every aspect of human activity” (The Heritage of Islam 1983).

The ICF’s educational packet itself highlighted this problem of definition. The packet included a worksheet that asked: “how can it be explained that Islam is a faith and a way of life at the same time?” (Islam Centennial Fourteen n.d.). Later, in more detail, the ICF provided an answer to this problematic:

Islam is not just a religion, if religion means only a system of belief and worship; rather, Islam is a way of life. It proclaims faith and sets forth rituals. It also prescribes order for individuals and society: codifying law, family relationships, matters of business, etiquette, dress, food, personal hygiene and much more. Islam is a complete, complex civilization, in which ideally, individuals, societies and governments should all reflect the will of God. In essence, it is a system of rules or laws to be followed in which the sacred is not separated from the secular. The Western concept of such separation is alien to Islamic thought. As a faith structured by laws, Islam more closely parallels the legalistic Judaic system than the broadly stated principles of Christianity. (Islam Centennial Fourteen n.d.)

The definition of religion here is explicit: “religion means only a system of belief and worship”. Islam, the ICF argues, is more than this. It is not only “belief and worship” or “faith” and “rituals”. It is also a whole “order for individuals and society”: codifying law, family relationships, matters of business, etiquette, dress, food, personal hygiene and much more. It is “law”. It is, ideally, a system in which even “governments … reflect the will of God” (Islam Centennial Fourteen n.d.). Here, kinship via religion is surmounted by the very (liberal) definition of religion at work. Islam’s excess marks Muslims’ relation to the political, where government and law overwhelm secular modernity.

Furthermore, as the ICF – and discourses surrounding it – marked Islam as excessive and unmodern, they also continued to articulate Muslims as distinctly foreign. The laudatory language of the ICF repeatedly erased American Muslim populations from the global picture of Islam. Its initial Congressional Resolution, for example, requested that President Carter “forward a copy” to “each country where Islam has a significant following”, but did not note that the US itself was a country where numerous Americans practiced Islam (A Concurrent Resolution 1979). Major mid-century American cultural and political icons had been Muslims, including Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X. The Nation of Islam, a specifically American movement, blossomed during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and gained sufficient prominence that the FBI launched a full-scale program of surveillance of
its operations (Johnson 2015: 377–400). Changing immigration policies had also led to the creation of new Muslim populations, increasingly from the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. Just a few years before the ICF formed, American Muslims had become significant enough that President Ford had extended his well wishes on the eve of Islamic holy month of Ramadan, not only to Muslim globally, but to American Muslims specifically (White House, 1974).

Yet in the discourses surrounding the ICF, Islam was painted primarily, in both positive and negative terms, as a foreign force – one that needed to be appeased for the good of America or, as I move on to discuss below, one that had infiltrated the US government and academy for its own ends. These efforts dislocated American Muslims from the American landscape and mapped them, instead, as representatives of a foreign “green belt” long before 9/11. This rhetoric – or absence of rhetoric – surrounding American Muslims is surprising for at least three reasons. First, as noted above, the US had a culturally and politically significant Muslim population by the 1970s. Secondly, as Rosemary Corbett argues, while government officials (including the FBI) had seen the American-born Nation of Islam as a threat in earlier decades, by the mid-1970s “fiscal conservatives and city officials across the country came to praise” the Nation of Islam “as an example of the kind of religion that Black Americans needed – one that advocated economic advancement through self-reliance rather than government assistance” (Corbett 2017: 47). And thirdly, the ICF’s extensive committees included notable American Muslims in their lists of names.

Regardless, the ICF’s public presentation emphasized international, rather than domestic, Muslim populations. Here, “friendship” between Muslims and non-Muslims was not part of an American pluralist conversation, but instead constituted one of international relations. Preceding the Islamophilic discourses of the 1990s that focused on Muslims as internal Others, the ICF’s Islamophilia was less about incorporating American Muslims into a domestic project, and instead presented Muslims as representatives of foreign countries and interest.

**Islamophobia**

Not all observers accepted the ICF’s claim that Islam, though religiously excessive, was a natural ally to the US government with strong ties of kinship to the (largely non-Muslim) American public. One review of the exhibit explicitly called out the ICF’s depoliticization of Islam: “The Smithsonian has gone all a-tiptoe though the cultures of the 800 million adherents of the way of Mohammad: A visitor will search in vain for any trace of politics in this sumptuous presentation of the youngest of the world’s great monotheistic religions. In fact”, the review continued, “the exhibit is a propaganda effort, but a disinterested one. … it’s designed
to remind us that the West is deeply indebted to Islam, and that in any case the Moslems aren’t going to go away, so it behooves us to understand them better” (Burchard 1983). The *Smithsonian Magazine* attributed this disinterest in politics to the exhibit’s funding, which was tied not only to US government grants, but also to building tycoons, Middle Eastern foundations, and oil businesses whose political interests the organizers, the *Smithsonian* suggested, did not want to offend (Lippman 1983: 62).

Indeed, the ICF could not entirely shy away from these connections itself. Its board was comprised of not only academics, but also of former State Department employees, international bankers, and business tycoons. Its own reporting to the press echoed these connections. For example, Executive Director Crawford explained the decision to open “The Heritage of Islam” Houston by underscoring economic – and not religious – connections: “[m]ost major traveling exhibits open either in an East or West coast city. … But we felt that the significance of the exhibit and the close ties between Houston and the Muslim nations in Africa, the Middle East and the Far East indicated the breaking of the pattern” (Ewing 1982). Houston was the center of the US oil industry and home to numerous international businesses. In this sense, Houston’s “close ties” to Muslim-majority nations were economic and a reference – barely disguised – to the oil politics that dominated economic concerns in the early 1980s.

Here, more contemporary concerns with Islam – and with those who promote and/or defend it – began to circulate around the ICF. There was a broad concern “prevalent in American society in the mid- and late 1970s, that the circulation of petrodollars was permitting Arab governments and interests a dangerous degree of influence over the nation’s economic, cultural, intellectual, and political life” (Yaqub 2016: 277). Salim Yaqub highlights the ways in which these concerns with Arab wealth and dominance were fixated not only on land deals (were, for example, Saudis positioning to buy the Alamo?), but also on undue influence in academic centers and scholarship (2016: 276–301). While Yaqub’s study focuses on the questions of *Arabs*, as the “Arab Middle East” transformed in many American minds to the “Islamic Middle East”, these concerns also elicited new theories about Islam, Muslim movements, and the dangers they both presented to American society.

Some of these critics were fringe – though the conspiracies they articulated vis-à-vis the ICF seem to have developed traction in recent years. For example, the international conspiracy group the La Rouche movement was the least subtle, suggesting in 1982 that the “Islam Centennial Fourteen works to deliberately obfuscate Islam, by creating a smokescreen in the name of religious ecumenism and cultural relativism for such extremist pseudo-Islamic cults as the Muslim Brotherhood” (Coker 1982: 43).
More notable critics of the Islam Centennial Fourteen’s project included Daniel Pipes. Pipes formed part of the foundation for contemporary anti-Muslim racism – his Middle East Forum (begun in 1994) was one of “a small group of civil society organizations with strong anti-Muslim messages [that] emerged in the 1990s. Many of these groups were composed of hawkish neoconservatives who turned their sites toward dictatorships in the Muslim world as the Cold War faded into history” (Bail 2015: 39). Pipes had focused on Middle Eastern Studies as a graduate student at Harvard and attempted to prove in his first book that Islam had originally been spread by violent means. Following criticism of the book, Pipes left academia in 1986. But in the early 1980s, Pipes was active – teaching at the University of Chicago and Harvard, and serving as an expert for the State Department.

In 1983, Pipes critiqued what he saw as “a new tendency toward uncritical adulation” of Islam. This new tendency was visible in both affluent converts to Sufism and the “apologists” at the Islam Centennial Fourteen in particular who praised “Islam for profit”. “Praise for Islam and Muslims”, he argued, “often translates into better access to research materials for professors, funds for administrators, visas for journalists, votes at the United Nations for diplomats, and trade opportunities for businessmen”. More than this, the concern that Pipes articulated hinged on oil money – essentially implying that foreign interests were at play (Pipes 1986: 90).14

Of course, Pipe’s critique was not simply that professors, administrators, journalists, diplomats, and businessmen benefitted from their relationship to Islam, but rather that they were being disingenuous. Islam itself, as far as Pipes was concerned, was a real threat – a dangerous political-religious formation that dictated the actions of millions of Muslims worldwide. Pipes reiterated a common talking point in coverage of Islam at the time (and for the ensuing decades). While the ICF consistently repeated that Islam was like the Judeo-Christian tradition that defined American life, the news reports that circled around the ICF – and reports on Islam more generally at this time – as well as the ICF’s own materials argued that Islam was (perhaps uniquely) more than a religion. Pipes was explicit that Islam and Christianity were entirely different. He argued that “[a]pproaching Islam in politics with Christian experience in mind is misleading”. The “community of Christians”, Pipes asserted, shared “almost no political traits”. It was correct, Pipes argued, that considering political events in terms of Christianity would lead nowhere; Christians were quite diverse politically and such a rubric would be unhelpful. The same could not be said of Islam. “Islam, unlike Christianity, contains a complete program for ordering society. … Islam specifies exact goals for all Muslims to follow as well as the rules by which to enforce them” (Pipes 1986: 88).

What Pipes suggests here is that while Christians have the ability to make political decisions, Muslims do not. Muslims are, instead, compelled by “Islam” into certain
types of political actions and ideas (Asad 2003: 10–11). This position, espoused by Pipes, is based in a particularly racial understanding of Islam and Muslims. In short, it not only posits that Muslims are univocally political, but also that Muslims are essentially religious. It is religion – Islam – that determines the core personality, being, and behavior of any individual Muslim. Christians, Pipes tells us, are politically “diverse” individuals. Muslims are the opposite – they are all the same.

To be clear, then, what the Islamophilic discourses of the ICF and the Islamophobic discourses of anti-Muslim observers like Pipes had in common were their universalizing gazes, which subsumed all Muslim activity under the header of “Islam”. Learning about Islam, and not economics, politics, etc., was what would make Muslims intelligible – and make them into allies – as far as the ICF was concerned. “Knowing” what he did about Islam, as far as Pipes was concerned, made him certain of all Muslim motivation, whether those were regarding economics, art, or political alliance. This “culture talk” (Mamdani 2004) tied Islamophilic and anti-Muslim sentiments to the same processes of racialization, albeit with competing readings of Islam and end goals in mind.

**Conclusion**

A leaked document amid a religious revolution abroad catapulted the US to formally sponsor a celebration of Islam. The US marked its celebration by using language of inclusion – Abrahamic religions – even as that language excluded American Muslims themselves by portraying Islam as inherently foreign. The ICF’s activities included “The Heritage of Islam” exhibit and tour, an event whose press coverage fixated on Western modernity’s debt to Islamic science at the same time as it located Muslims as not-yet modern and left behind in the wake of Western advancement. Anti-Muslim responses to these projects mirrored the ICF’s own Islamophilic racialization and culture talk: what you needed to know in order to understand the motivations of the world’s Muslims – whether as enemy or ally – was simply Islam.

Significantly, I suggest that the dynamics traced here were not isolated to the ICF and its program. It is worth considering, for example, how later discourses surrounding “moderate” and “good” Islam continued the strain of Islamophilic moves seen surrounding the ICF, as well as how post-9/11 moves to interfaith – and specifically Abrahamic – dialogue are themselves in part related modes of governmentality. I do not have space here to do more than gesture at these later permutations of Islamophilia; however, in short, there is more to anti-Muslim policy and posturing than Islamophobia. Islamophilia is Islamophobia’s under-theorized corollary and highlights the supposedly positive, supportive ways that anti-Muslimness shows up in the world and demands attention.
It is in this sense that I have presented the ICF as a case study of American Islamophilia – an attempt to create an ally of Islam through the language of Abrahamic friendship. This Islamophilia merits more, critical attention. Islamophilia is not simply a friendly stance towards Islam and Muslims, but instead a mode of domestication – one that suggests certain kinds of Islam and Muslims are worthy of inclusion in society. As I have detailed above, Islamophilia operates not only in domestic arenas – under the rubric of citizenship – but also in and through international spaces. The ICF project, which I focused on here, presented Islam as at once as an ally of the US and as an irrevocably foreign and non-American entity. More than this, it posited a racialized mode for understanding Muslims – an implicit suggestion that understanding the vast variety of the world’s Muslims could be rooted in an understanding of Islam and the tradition’s kinship with the (American) Judeo-Christian tradition. Implicit here, and dangerous, was the suggestion that Muslims who did not align with US values and ventures were beyond the pale – a suggestion which would only grow over the following decades in both Islamophilic presentations and overtly anti-Muslim ones.

Notes

1 As Shryock explains, “it is difficult…to find a book with Islamophobia in its title published before 2001—and the term first rose to prominence in Britain in the late 1990s. It was the centerpiece of *Islamophobia: A Challenge for Us All*, a report issued in 1997 by the Runnymede Trust, a think tank specializing in ethnic and racial diversity issues. The report was written in response to anti-Muslim sentiment in Britain, which had grown steadily following the Rushdie affair (1989) and the first Gulf War (1990–91)” (2010, 4).

2 For a recent discussion of the problems of citizenship as category, see: Azoulay 2019, 50.

3 Its membership shifted somewhat over the years, but included at times Muhammad Abduh Rauf (later replaced by Imam Khalil Abdel Alim, of the Masjid Muhammad #4 in Washington, D.C.), Dr. John Duke Anthony of the Foreign Policy Institute at John’s Hopkins, the Executive Vice-President of the international company 3D International (based in Houston, where the “Heritage of Islam” exhibit began), the Dean of Arts and Sciences at Central Connecticut State College, the Vice-President of the Fluor Corporation, Margaret Dodge Garrett (a trustee of the Baltimore Museum), the Executive Directors of the Eisenhower Exchange Fellowships, President of the ICF Board Dr. Malcolm Peck (Director of Programs at the Middle East Institute), Vice-President of the ICF Board William J. Baroody of American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (who later left), and the ICF’s Executive Director, William Crawford.

4 For the impact of these events on Iranian Americans specifically, see Maghbouleh 2017.

5 See also Chan-Malik 2011.

6 For a recent discussion of the problems of citizenship as category, see: Azoulay 2019, 50.

7 For an early analysis of this trope in US media, see Said 1997, 41–42.

8 See Elshakry 2010 for a discussion of the co-creation of universal Western science and specifically cultural sciences.

9 In 1980 the *Associated Press* printed a five-part series on Islam that drew attention to the ways “‘We’” had faced modernity “gradually, piecemeal,” but Muslims were “up against it for the first
time.” Secular modernity was, according to the paper and the experts it cited, a “totally new phenomenon for them” (Cornell 1980).

10 The local chairman of the ICF was Jack Rains, a Houston industrialist and chairman of international company 3D International, a design and construction management company.

11 Indeed, one member of the ICF’s Board, J. Robert Fluor, the then Vice-President of the Fluor Corporation, had himself become embroiled in these debates. Fluor had organized a controversial project for a new Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Southern California funded in large part by Arab donors.

12 For more on this transformation see McAlister 2005a.

13 See Marmura 2014 for a discussion of more contemporary theories surrounding the Muslim Brotherhood’s activity in the US and what has come to be called “stealth jihad.”

14 In articulating this critique Pipes refers to these apologists as promoting “Islamphilia” (Pipes 1986, 90), but his use of the word does not denote that same interplay of liberalism and governance that both Shyrock and I intend by the term.

References


Smithsonian Institution Archives (1986) Record Unit 342.


