

Conference Report

The Annual Convention of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists

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The Annual Convention of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS), was held at the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences in Leesburg, VA 29–31 October.

By all accounts, this convention was a success and heralds a resurgence of the Association. The convention generated an air of excitement and expectations about the Association's immediate future. Over 150 participants attended and 70 presentations were made. In addition, the convention was graced by nine foreign scholars: two from India, one from Brunei, one from Malaysia, three from Canada, one from France, and one from Turkey. The Faruqi memorial lecture was delivered by AbdulHameed AbuSulayman, the president of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT). He focused on the Muslim communities' need to focus on the intellectual development of children because it is an important aspect of the revival of the ummah. The keynote address at the banquet was given by Tariq Ramadan a prominent Muslim social scientist and community leader from France. His talk brought a refreshing focus to what it means to be an engaged Western Muslim.

In many ways this convention was a turning point in the history of AMSS. Here, the old and the new met and had a meaningful dialogue about the direction of the Association. The convention also marked a change of guard as many new and younger Muslim scholars, particularly graduate students, joined the board. Faizan Haq, a Ph.D. student at SUNY Buffalo was elected general secretary and is also in charge of the AMSS outreach

programs. Waleed al Ansary and Ibrahim Kalin, both Ph.D. students at George Washington University were elected treasurer and member at large, respectively. They will be program chairs for the next annual convention. Muqtedar Khan, a Ph.D. student at Georgetown University, was elected member at large. And Deonna Kelli, another young Muslim intellectual from New York, was elected to the board pending a constitutional amendment that will allow the executive committee to coopt additional members.

Mumtaz Ahmad, a professor of political science at Hampton University in Virginia and a longtime member of AMSS, was elected the new president. Louay Safi, director of research at IIIT, was elected its vice president. Both Dr. Ahmad and Dr. Safi bring a good mixture of the old and the new to the board of the AMSS. They have the wisdom age and the enthusiasm of youth. Their leadership is already promising to make AMSS more active — more engaged with both American Muslim communities and American academia. Their joint leadership cements the long-standing marriage between IIIT and AMSS.

The convention reflected the changes that are shaping the Muslim intelligentsia in America. Six out of the 17 panels at the convention (over 35 percent) were on Islam in America. Indeed, this reflects a profound transformation. Clearly, Muslim intellectuals in America are beginning to accept the fact that they are here to stay and not in some temporary exile from home and Muslim issues. A generational change was also reflected in the convention. Many of the scholars who participated were those who are “home grown,” that is, born, brought up, or converted in the West, they are free of the lingering nostalgia over the distant homeland which forever haunts the psyche of the immigrant.

The second significant aspect of the program was the complete absence of panels, or even papers, which used titles beginning with “Islamization of ...” What this says about the Islamization of knowledge project that fueled the initial growth of both IIIT and AMSS remains to be analyzed. It could suggest that the project has lost favor or that the project has matured and Muslim social scientists no longer need to remind themselves and readers of their goal — Islamization of knowledge. Perhaps they have now become more engrossed in the details of the project and need no legitimizing symbolism.

For the first time, Islamic activists and intellectuals interacted at AMSS in a prolonged meeting on Friday, 29 October. A panel titled “Islamic Activism in America,” chaired by Ali Ramadan Abuzaakouk, executive

director of the American Muslim Council (AMC), and attended by Nihad Awad, executive director of the Council of Islam and American Relations (CAIR), provided the occasion for a very useful discussion of the future of Islamic activism, Muslim participation in American politics, and the need/avenues for cooperation between activists and academics. Many participants realized the enormous potential of such interaction and one could sense the palpable resolve among the constituents to continue this dialogue in the future.

Besides American Islamic studies, if we can call it that, the other disciplines that were represented included political science, economics and development, reform, and philosophy. The Contemporary Islamic Philosophy project, which made its debut with three papers at the 1997 AMSS convention, had 12 papers at this convention. The Islam and Women Initiative, which began at the 1998 AMSS convention in Chicago, had one of the best attended and appreciated panels at this convention. It was also interesting to see the issue of ummatic reform returning to center stage. There were two panels on reform and both were well attended.

The participation of the local community was one of the best in recent years. Scholars and concerned Muslims gave the sessions depth and produced lively discussions in the question-answer period. There was an effort to display recent publications of AMSS members. But this effort was not supported enthusiastically — very few brought copies of their recent publications for display. We hope, however, that this will pick up at future conventions. As usual, the last event on Saturday was a poetry session, once again lead by Faizan Haq, the new secretary, and admirably supported by Ali Raza Mir.

In an innovative development, Sunday morning was reserved for presentations of new projects and a meeting between the old and new executive board. The new projects that were introduced included the Islamic History Project under the leadership of Aftab Ahmad Khan, the Center for Balanced Development by Louay Safi, Security Studies and Islam Online by Ejaz Akram, and the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy by Radwan Masmoudi.

In the past, most internal Association business was conducted at the business meeting. But at this convention, business-oriented meetings between the board members and senior members were held throughout the convention. The new board took over from the old in a brief but dignified ceremony at the business meeting. Mushtaqur Rahman, a two-time former pres-

ident of AMSS and longtime supporter, was given a plaque of appreciation in recognition of his lifetime commitment and contributions to the development of AMSS. Sadly, Dr. Rahman passed away a week later. His presence at the conference was a source of inspiration to all, and his dedication and desire to work for AMSS was apparent in his deep involvement in all the important business-related meetings.

Salahuddin Malik, the outgoing president, introduced the new board and thanked everybody for their support. Highlighting the achievements of the outgoing board, he identified the two conferences held on Islamic philosophy, and the various panels that were organized at Islamic conventions and at professional academic meetings. He was also happy that his board had managed to improve the financial condition of the Association. He expressed the hope that the next board, which was now inheriting an economically viable AMSS, would work toward building an endowment and increasing year-round activities.

The new president began by thanking everybody for the confidence that was reposed in him and promised to keep up the good work. He emphasized the commitment of this board to pursue the cause of improving the condition of Muslim communities everywhere. Both presidents recognized Iqbal Unus and Muqtedar Khan for their efforts in making the conference a success.

Regular members who came to the conference went home with hope and a feeling that better things are around the corner. Newcomers were excited to have found a noble enterprise to associate with and a group of people with whom they could work in pursuit of their academic and Islamic goals.