Editorial

Shirin Saeidi's "A Passionate Pursuit of Justice: Towards an Ethics of Islamic Feminist Research Practice" is a well-researched and thought-provoking piece on the question of how a scholar investigating lived practices (of Islam, in this case) may fruitfully deploy feminist theoretical perspectives; in particular, "how a feminist committed to breaking down hierarchies between research participants and herself can carefully study ambiguous activism." By "ambiguous activism" the author seems to mean the practices of groups or forms of life toward which the author feels morally ambivalent. Her essay is a judicious combination of literature review of feminist theorization, methodological reflection, and self-reflection in the context of her object of study. Her object of study is Iran's Hezbollah, a conservative cultural movement backed by the mullahs and in this respect, quite unlike other Islamist movements in the Middle East; a movement, Saeidi notes, which may be regarded as both "oppressive, but also suppressed." While enjoying powerful backing by the Supreme Leader (still the king-maker in Iran) it struggles within civil society against secularization and individualistic religiosity introduced by neoliberalism.

Feminist scholarship, the author argues, has drawn the attention of ethnographic research to "the importance of intimate and dynamic relationships based on receptivity, reciprocity, altruism, kindness, and moral considerations." But she asks whether caring about her subjects might compromise the researcher's sense of justice. Saeidi draws on some feminist authors' caution as well as Islamic teachings against letting care trump considerations of ethics and fairness. She finds that her application of the feminist theory of care and respect for subjects in return for their trust did not always succeed, and that despite her own Muslim and Shi'i faith, her American upbringing and feminist beliefs prevented the Hezbollah activists from fully trusting her. Rather than pretending to be a caring but distant

observer, the author found that her path to trust was paved by her decision to be herself and to resolve to interact, intervene, and object to what she observed, moved inevitably by her own sense of ethicality and fairness. This instructive passage nicely captures the dynamic that she settled on: "During one interview, an 18-year-old student studying in a seminary outside of Tehran gave me a response that signified the importance of conceptualizing care broadly. I interrupted her and asked why she placed her views in opposition to reformists, given that through her emphasis on rights, space, and criticism of state domination she shared much in common with the reformist movement. She broke down, and exclaimed: 'Miss Saeidi, what more do you want from us? We believe in the revolution, we believe in an Islamic state, but we are also young people who have no space for social and political life. They don't give young people any space.'"

Saeidi's insightful and intimate reflections on her experience as an American liberal-leaning, rights-advocating feminist investigating but also preaching to conservative Islamist activists in Iran challenges and is challenged by the second article in this issue, Tanzeen Doha's "Specters of Islam: Anti-Islamist (Re)Presentations in Secular Media and Feminism (1979–2011)." From the latter's perspective, might her feminism not be a profoundly colonial and secularizing force that diametrically opposes the very essence of the aspirations of Islamist subjects? In return, Saeidi's research too poses tough challenges to Doha's approach, to which I shall return presently.

Doha breaks with the mainstream representation of hostility, fear, and opposition to Muslims as being an anti-Muslim racism, "Islamophobia," which, like racism, would be purely irrational fear, and one akin to racism, one impervious to further analysis except in exposing its subtle disguises. The fear of Islam/Islamism (the author wants to problematize the simple dichotomy between the two) is not that. He does not deny its racial dimensions, but brings out the "historical, epistemic, and psycho-social" dimensions of opposition to Islam, which he connects not to the unenlightened xenophobia of white nationalism, but to the staple motifs of the establishment (hence his focus on *The New York Times* as the paramount liberal elite mouthpiece and the feminist discourse that features there as well as in academic writings), viz., secularization and the war on terror. Doha wants to turn our focus on secularism not merely as an ideology but a phenomenon inclusive of "histories, social relations, psychologies, reasonings, and cultural formations" that both promotes a certain Eurocentric worldview and political categories but also seeks to destroy the "world-making project

of Islamism." This is attained, he argues, by de-centering the Sharia, the normative tradition that organizes and purifies the body and the soul as well as disciplining social and political relations for Muslims. The focus of discourse about Muslims—including by ostensibly committed Muslims themselves, one might say—becomes "how Muslims can live within the national and international imagination of the history of the state."

In his bid to demonstrate the centrality of hegemonic feminism in advancing the project of anti-Islamism, Doha draws on critical feminists, those who might be said to lie on the periphery of feminism, and who illuminate "the relation between feminism (as a category) and the machinations of war." In these critiques, Doha finds inspiration to look at new ways of classifying the world—a feminist who refuses to look at the world as divided between males and females, but between the slavers and the enslaved, the colonizer and the colonized, the affluent North and the subjected South, and thus to create space for contemporary Islam "to become a force in opposition to American (neo)plantations, as a retaliatory and guiding principle for the mobilization of slave revolts." Doha's critical feminists target not only the Europeanist thought but also the nativist traditionalist claims of authenticity in gender discourses. Doha's own treatment does not seem to adequately develop this latter kind of critique. Whereas he encourages us to learn from these critical feminists, he considers the paradigmatic feminist discourse as categorically incommensurable with any meaningful form of Islam. That is so because, the author contends, liberal feminism is grounded in "the sovereignty of the radical subject, the subject of the Enlightenment" and therefore, "any form of submission to authorities that violate this sovereignty" is not only unacceptable but the marked enemy in the feminist view.

Mainstream feminism seeks to empower women through enhancement of the paradigmatic capitalist goods: enhancement of property relations, political representation, and state-based rights. Marxist feminism adds a concern for labor and wage relations, and underscores a connection between patriarchy and capital; yet it shares liberal feminism's fundamental commitment to the sovereignty or autonomy of the subject. It is precisely this autonomy of the self that, the author contends, is diametrically opposed to the Islamic commitment to fashioning subjects that are obedient to God. Doha's reading of Islamism is equally fresh: dismissing the usual narrative that Islamism is an organism categorically distinct from Islam, a myth happily promoted by Muslims perhaps seeking to assuage fears about themselves, he suggests that Islam's various forms—statist, anti-statist, anti-colonial, anti-nationalism, democratic, or pro-nationalism—are less a result of

chimerical or expedient transformations of Islamism than of the fact that adherents of a complex, multifarious, and yet stable tradition, anchored by its practices and beliefs, respond variously, at times skillfully and successfully, to various perceived challenges. He would seem to suggest that while there is no fixed blueprint for Muslim action, there is such a thing as an orthodox Islamic tradition with a limited range of variation.

Tracing the feminist critiques of Islam over the three decades following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, when the Western establishment was suddenly faced with explaining the threat of Islam, the author notes shifts in the treatment of Islam. These range from the strategy of attributing practices seen as misogynistic or violent to culture rather than religion (with the important exception of vocal native feminists who doggedly pointed to the essence of Islam rather than any cultural or ideological aberrations as the real foe); the 1990s increase in American feminists' interventionist aspirations and bold anti-Islamism; and the rise in the post-9/11 decade of Western indigenous-Muslim feminism. The first impulse among these feminists, paralleled in the depictions of Islam in the mainstream high journalism of the NYT—and in keeping perhaps with President Bush's explicit policy during the "War on Terror" to culturally isolate the terrorists by declaring Islam to be a peaceful religion—was to defend Islam while attacking patriarchy by arguing that such practices were anti-Qur'anic. The varying strategies of feminists and the pundits go back and forth between endowing Islam itself with inexorable violence or misogyny and isolating those promoting interpretations unhelpful to the West.

The larger point of Doha's provocative study seems to be to suggest, by demonstrating the general correspondence between feminists and secularist pundits, whose views oscillate between anti-Islam and anti-Islamism, that although the diversity of interpretation in Islam is a veritable fact, the task of limiting and prioritizing that interpretation is the prerogative (if not responsibility) of Muslims embodying that tradition itself and its orthodox structures. Put differently, to assert that Islam can be interpreted differently is to say nothing significant; in order to claim the mantle of Islamic tradition and orthodoxy, those women and men recasting Islam in terms amenable to modern forms of life must still reflect on (and make a case for) what their own criteria of reform and critique truly are: and if their interpretative variations can be shown to closely historically parallel the agenda of the elite liberal consensus of the day (especially where it comes to the notion of self-sovereignty), is it still Islamic? Doha posits a bold claim, namely that, "at the most elemental level," there is a difference between the two tradition's

ethical dispositions. Doha's important insights leave the reader thirsty for a more sustained engagement with the writings of Muslim feminists who do seriously struggle with questions of secularism, imperialism, and machinations of war, while also reflecting on the conditions, meanings, and limits of their own re-readings of the Qur'an (Aysha Hidayatullah's 2014 work, *Feminist Edges of the Qur'an*, may be cited as an example of such self-reflection).

Returning to Saeidi's article, we are reminded that despite her liberal and feminist sense of justice, her commitment to sympathize with yet also challenge her Hezbollahi interlocutors as a Shi'i Muslim American ethnographer underscores not only the power differential—or at least not only that—but also the possibility of genuine dialogue and exchange between Muslims locating themselves within the two traditions. It may still be that Western social scientific study of the other, even when undertaken by professing Muslims, performs its structurally hegemonic function, but it is equally likely that religiously sensitive Western Muslim scholars may contribute to bridging the widening gap between secularizers and reformers on the one hand and religious conservatives on the other.

Ovamir Anjum, Editor, *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*
Imam Khattab Chair of Islamic Studies
Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Affiliated Faculty, Department of History
University of Toledo, Toledo, OH