"The Muslim World or Ummah? 
Historicizing Modern Muslim Connectivity 
and Pan-Islamic Imagination”

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Muslims make up almost one fourth of world’s population and inhabit all corners of the globe. Given the diversity of Muslim societies in terms of language, ethnicity, political inclination, and economic wealth, it is not surprising that they are divided into various national, ideological, or cultural units. Yet, there has been a persistent appeal to imagined global Muslim unity by Muslims and non-Muslims throughout modern history. When U.S. President Barack Obama made his Cairo address “to the Muslim world” in 2009, he was confirming this modern assumption that there is a global Muslim community that has to be engaged politically and intellectually. There are many Muslim intellectuals, politicians, and activists who also share this vision of a Muslim world, and often refer to the religious notion of *ummah* and the need for its solidarity. It is almost unthinkable for a world leader to appeal to “the Christian world” or “the Buddhist world” in a similar fashion. Why does the term “the Muslim world” have such well-entrenched academic and political credibility, despite the obvious naiveté of categorizing one-and-a-half billion people, with a striking range of diversity on every topic, into one imagined geopolitical unity? Why do we find such levels of convenience in imagining the unity of “the Muslim world,” when comparable terms such as “the Christian world,” “the Buddhist world,” or “people of color” do not have similar cache anymore? Given the widespread over-utilization of the term “the Muslim world,” it is essential to ask when this term originated and how it has been employed in modern history.

Whatever the nature of contemporary aspirations for creating a strong Muslim solidarity, it would be mistaken to assume that Muslims were united throughout history, and that they became divided due to European colonialism or nationalism. On the contrary, it was at the peak of European colonial hegemony in early 20th century that we see a peak in pan-Islamic public opinion. The fact that no such pan-Islamism existed two centuries ago, in 1814 (which coincided with the Congress of Vienna at the end of Napoleonic Wars)
illustrates the fact that the modern idea of the Muslim world and calls for pan-Islamic solidarity were products of the imperial era of Eurocentric globalization of the late 19th century, not necessarily inherited from early Muslim history. Throughout the millennium from the 9th to 19th century, Muslim societies were ruled by multiple kingdoms, sultanates, and empires, many of which were in conflict with each other. There was perhaps a cultural commonwealth of Muslims facilitated by a network of education institutions, legal practices, Sufi orders, religious rituals such as the pilgrimage to Mecca, and trade, but, never a political unity, which was logistically impossible. In the aftermath of the Euro-Asian rule of the Mongols, there emerged several grand-scale empires ruled by Muslim dynasties, namely Mughals, Ottomans, and Safavids, but these three empires did not control the majority of the Muslims societies spread across three continents. In 1814, just two centuries ago, there were more than two dozen disparate Muslim kingdoms, with their own political agendas and without a vision of solidarity, and several European empires already had established their outposts and control over Muslim societies with help from Muslim intermediaries.

Despite the reputation of colonial policies of “divide and rule”, late-19th-century Western imperial globalization over Asia and Africa counterintuitively united Muslims, by fostering more intense trans-Muslim networks of education, communication, publishing, transportation, trade, and pilgrimage. More importantly, the late 19th century witnessed the formation of a new Muslim world identity shared in the global public sphere and embraced by educated Muslim intellectuals. Thus, a century ago, on the eve of WWI, many Muslims (as well as colonial officers of various European empires) believed in the existence of a geopolitical unity called “the Muslim World”. Some of these transnational Muslim activists imagined the leadership of the Ottoman Caliphate in the emerging global Muslim public sphere divided into multiple European empires, but what mattered most was the vibrancy
and mobility through the existing Muslim networks. Ironically, the empire that had the largest Muslim population in the world was the British Empire, not the Ottoman Empire, and there were some Muslims who called it the “greatest Muhammedan power in the world.”

In 1902 American naval officer Alfred T. Mahan published this as the map of the Middle East. The map shows the importance of the Indian Ocean area for the imagination of the Muslim world and the Middle East. The area marked as the Middle East actually comprised British Empire-controlled territories of Asia when new Muslim networks of transportation, mobility, and communication prospered. The map also shows the close links among the imagined Middle East, the birth place of Islam, and South and Southeast Asia, where the majority of the Muslims had been living at that time. Sources: A. T. Mahan, "The Persian Gulf and International Relations," The National Review, September 1902, 38–39; Roderic H. Davison, "Where Is the Middle East?" Foreign Affairs 38 (1960): 667–68.

Muslims masses were not necessarily anti-imperialist for theological reasons, and many found ways to integrate their lives under the rule of a Christian monarch. Yet, at the same time, colonial officers of the British, French, Dutch and Russian empire were mostly islamophobic, perceiving the activities of increased mobility, education, publishing, and pilgrimage as a sign of growing Muslim threat. In some sense, European Orientalist views of Muslim societies did a disservice to the European empires by categorizing Muslims as primarily motivated by their traditional religious beliefs and as hopelessly anti-Christian.
and anti-imperialist. In reality, Muslim elites who were later branded as pan-Islamic were often less anti-imperialist and more concerned about the islamophobia they were subjected to: thus, Muslims living under the rule of the British Empire found Christian missionary zeal or offensively racist remarks by leading British politicians such as Gladstone a betrayal of their vision of an inclusive British empire.

There was a worldwide debate about potential for Muslim solidarity, pan-Islamism and European islamophobia in the early 20th century. It is often forgotten that leading Muslim intellectuals who were identified with anti-imperial pan-Islamism had complex ideas about empires and Muslim identity. Even the most celebrated pan-Islamist names such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashi Rida expressed highly positive remarks about the British Empire and Anglo-Saxon race in their writings, while embracing the spaces and imaginations of a trans-imperial Muslim cooperation. More Indian Muslims expressed loyalty to the Ottoman caliph on the ever of WWI than ever, and exhibited sympathies for the destiny and well-being of other Muslims in the Balkans or Africa, but this did not mean that they were against the British Empire. Many did imagine a continuation of a reformed and revised British empire, which could eliminate islamophobic racism and allow for their social mobility, as part of their political future. They cherished their empowerment as Muslim actors benefiting from impressive communication and transportation infrastructure and intellectual webs that the Eurocentric imperial world order had created. Some Muslims tried to benefit from Ottoman-British, French-British, or Russian-British inter-imperial rivalries for their varying political goals, but there was no pan-Islamic conspiracy masterminded by the Caliph in Istanbul, until the Ottoman-German call for jihad in 1914.

There are four major reasons why a global pan-Islamic identity emerged in the era of European colonial hegemony from the 1870s to the 1920s. First is the fact that by 1914,
there were only three relatively independent Muslim dynasty–ruled political entities (the Ottoman Empire, Persia and Afghanistan), while the rest of the world’s Muslims lived under the rule of a handful of European empires. Even though European empires had their own conflicts with one another, they developed a shared discourse on their Muslim subjects, a European islamophobia, often depicting them as disloyal, susceptible to revolt, and civilizationally inferior to the Christian white race. It was the pan-European islamophobia and Orientalism that ascribed an image of a global Muslim world that is in need of civilizing, subjugating, and fighting, or converting to Christianity. When colonized Muslim intellectuals felt the need to talk back and counter islamophobic charges of inferiority, they embraced the ascribed pan-Islamic identity, helped create transnational intellectual discourses on Muslim reform, Islamic civilization, and its political visions of equality and dignity. We cannot understand the origins of modern Muslim identity without taking into account the writings of Muhammad Abduh, Jamaluddin Al-Afghani, Namık Kemal, and Mustafa Kamil, who often engaged European orientalists or missionaries, while presenting a complex view of the question of empire.

Second, the failure of imperial integration of Muslim subjects led them to a broader search for a political solidarity that would end Muslim’s political humiliation. Some pan-Islamic thinkers treated European colonial fears of a Muslim threat as a common point around which Muslims could rally; such suspicion was a problem they all had to deal with, and achieving solidarity among Muslim societies could perhaps empower them by giving them global political voice. In that context, we should not assume that European empires categorically failed to integrate Muslims from the very beginning. On the contrary, there were many Muslims who believed in the viability in the European empires they belonged to and assumed positions in imperial armies and bureaucracies. Writings of Seyyid Ahmad Khan of India, for example, epitomized a vision of Muslim identity loyal to the British
monarch. Yet Britain, like other European empires, repeatedly failed to give sufficient political space and dignified positions to their Muslim subjects, who eventually experienced alienation and sought alternatives. It is no coincidence that Seyyid Ahmad Khan’s own students began to create political ties with the Ottoman Empire, and espoused the importance of the Ottoman Caliphate partly to criticize the lack of opportunities and mobility for Muslims in the British Empire and to demand improvements in their conditions.

Third, and more unexpected, reason for the emergence of a stronger notion of Muslim solidarity in late 19th century was the extraordinary human and information mobility created by modern transportation and communication technologies. During the opening ceremony of the Suez Canal in 1869, Khedive Ismail famously said that Egypt will be part of Europe thanks to this world historical event, and, in fact, the Suez Canal project was a joint Egyptian-French cooperation. Yet within 40 years, the Suez Canal became instrumental in making Egypt a part of Asia and the Muslim world, not necessarily a part of Europe. The British-made steamships carried more Muslims to pilgrimage sites in Arabia and allowed them to travel cheaply and connect with other Muslims. At the same time, printing technologies, telegraph, and postal services were carrying Muslim publications to different parts of Asia and Africa. As the Suez Canal was linking Egypt not only to Europe but also to India, Africa, and East Asia, certain Arabic-language journals published in Cairo, such as al-Manar, were finding subscribers in faraway places such as Singapore, Bombay, and Kazan. A vibrant Muslim press, travel system, and trade network created an informal pan-Islamic cultural empire, political sympathies, and emotions that overlapped, utilized, and challenged the formal empires of Europe.
The fourth aspect of this process was the vague political discourses around the symbolism of the Ottoman caliphate that animated the post-imperial and anti-imperial visions of the new Pan-Islamic networks. The Ottoman Empire never did promote a global caliphate during the 19th century, as it was an empire with significant Christian populations and aspired to be part of the European concert of empires. Muslim populations of the Ottoman empire was much less than the British Empire, and even the Dutch Empire ruled more Muslims. Yet, its very status as a civilized empire in diplomatic relationship with other European empires, giving equal rights and high-level political positions to Christian subjects, increased the popularity of the Ottoman caliphate among colonized Muslim subjects. Even the pro-British Muslim elites of India perceived the Ottoman caliph as the dignified representative of a global Muslim community to European imperial public opinion. Many Muslims in British India, for example, could envision serving their Christian monarch in the army or civil service while affirming their sympathy for the Ottoman caliph, and thus empower themselves in negotiations with their British superiors. Thus, when the Ottoman Empire entered into a military conflict with the Italian Empire in 1911 due to Italy’s invasion of Libya, and subsequently when several small Christian Balkan states jointly invaded the Ottoman territories in Europe in 1912, there was an extraordinary mobilization of global Muslim civil societies and charities to provide humanitarian aid to the Ottoman caliphate. The Red Crescent association became a symbol of pan-Islamic global civil society and humanitarianism, and it generated enthusiasm and financial support similar to that which made possible the building of the Ottoman Hejaz Railway connecting Damascus to Medina. The modernization of the Ottoman Empire was observed with pride by educated Muslims in Asia and Africa, who had constantly been told that Islam and modern progress could never be compatible. There was surprisingly little intra-Muslim
conflict on the eve of World War I, and even Shia Muslims of Iraq, India, and Iran were sympathetic to the Ottoman caliphate.

The complex politics of global Muslim identity and inter-imperial rivalries led to various confusing and misguided strategies on the part of European leaders when the Great War broke out in Europe in 1914. German imperial elites could not see the mutually beneficial overlap between pan-Islamic networks and European imperial rule, and thus were mistakenly convinced that they could benefit from the power of what they perceived as primordial Muslim hatred of the Christian West and anti-imperialism in their war against the British, French, and Russian empires. When the Ottoman Empire joined WWI on the side of Germany, there was an attempt to utilize the idea of pan-Islamic Muslim solidarity with the Ottoman declaration of holy war. Shia clerics in Najaf endorsed the Sunni Ottoman caliph’s call for Jihad against the infidels, and both German and Ottoman agents tried to mobilize colonized Muslim societies to rebel against Christian empires. Yet, there was not any mass Muslim revolt against the British Empire, precisely because of the symbiotic relationship between that empire and pan-Islamic networks. Ottoman-German wartime campaign taught them the restrictions on how much pan-Islamic networking they could mobilize, and showed them that it was the British Empire that controlled the allegiance of the majority of the world’s Muslims—and not simply the steamships and telegraph lines that connected them. When Lawrence of Arabia and Sherif Hussein’s son Faisal sabotaged the famous Hejaz Railway connecting Medina to Damascus, a symbol of pan-Islamism, they were, in a way, illustrating the power of the British-controlled Indian Ocean sea networks and steamships over the Ottoman-German-controlled railway networks. At the same time, the British colonial officers had their confused vision of “the Muslim World,” afraid of a Muslim revolt even they could mobilize many Muslim soldiers to their armies.

The shared vision of a Muslim world survived the great transformations around WWI and persisted throughout the interwar period. In fact, there was a revival of pan-Islamism during the 1920s, exemplified in the extraordinary financial and moral support
that Indian Muslims gave to the Turkish War of Independence in the name of saving the caliphate. It was the same Indian Muslims who supported the British war effort that would now ask, confidently, that the British Empire respect the religious values of its Muslim subjects and guarantee the independence of Muslim rule in Istanbul, the seat of the caliphate. Even Mahatma Gandhi joined the India’s Khilafat movement, well aware of the British promises to its Muslim subjects during WWI, and convinced of the British Empire’s duty to them, given its status as the empire with the largest Muslim population. In that context, the Turkish War of Independence under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was presented to the world as a Muslim struggle to liberate the seat of the caliphate, and Turkey’s diplomatic victory at the signing of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923 was hailed as a victory for Muslims. Yet, for various political and ideological reasons, the nationalist Turkish government in Ankara abolished not only the Ottoman dynasty but also that dynasty’s claim to the caliphate. When the last Ottoman caliph was sent into exile in March 1924, the centrality of Istanbul in the imagined Muslim world began to fade away. Furthermore, the Saudi state’s rule over Hejaz and Mecca in the same year decreased that city’s role in transnational Muslim networks. Pilgrims still went to Mecca after a short period of boycotts, but the diversity of scholars, sufis orders, and madrasas in Mecca supported by trans-Asian philanthropies decreased over time. Thus, both Turkish nationalism and the Saudi state weakened the pan-Islamic networks that had previously energized tremendous new connections between South Asia and the Middle East. The British Empire still ruled over the largest share of Muslim populations worldwide until 1947, in which Muslim public spheres continued to thrive, and the pan-Islamic imagination did not disappear. Yet, during the interwar era, the main focus of political imagination shifted from pan-Islamism and imperial rivalries to creating some sort of a decolonized national state.
During World War II, Nazi Germany revived its policy toward the Muslim world, benefiting from some of the same experts who worked for Germany’s Islam campaign during World War I, such as Baron Oppenheimer. This time, Mussolini’s Italy, Hirohito’s Japan, as well as the Soviet Union, the Great Britain, and the United States also formulated their own special propaganda and plans regarding the Muslim world, trying to gain favor in public opinion and harness the political power of its populations, which were still seen as united in religious and political outlook. In the post-WWII era period of decolonization, the majority of Muslim societies gained their independence, with nationalism further eroding earlier pan-Islamic networks. Ironically, during the Cold War, the United States repackaged some of the key arguments of the earlier German and British policy assumptions about the Muslim world, such as the inherent anti-communism of Muslims and their religious objections to materialism and atheism, in its propaganda toward Muslims populations living under Soviet rule. Thus, even though various Muslim societies gained their national independence through the Cold War period, they continued to be categorized as part of a larger unity, the Muslim world. The persistence of the idea of the Muslim world into the Cold War period is rather counterintuitive, given that the main political actors of the post-WWII period were nationalist leaders, and that geopolitical terms used to categorize other groups of people—such as *Asian, African* or *black*—were losing political traction.

It is in the context of the later Cold War period that a new generation of Muslim activists re-embraced the notion of the Muslim world as a redefinition of the term *Ummah*, to formulate a new kind of internationalism that is not aligned with the two major blocks of the Cold War. Various branches of the Muslim brotherhood and Pakistan’s Jamaat-i Islami revived earlier themes of Islamic revival and pan-Islamic cooperation when secular nationalist regimes failed to offer a globalist alternative. In fact, the last two decades of the Cold War witnessed different strands of transnational Muslim ideologies and identities,
critical of the post-colonial Muslim modernization projects and their international alliances. While many Muslims have had to reflect on the notion of *ummah* as part of their globalist and internationalist vision in the age of nation-states, the idea of the Muslim world has survived the Cold War to appear in European and American writings on geopolitics as well. Edward Said’s book written in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, *Covering Islam*, offers a critique of the late Cold War era for its dehumanization and otherization of Muslim in Western media. Thus, in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution, the Afghan liberation struggle against the Soviet invasion, and the rise of political Islam, a revival of a redefined brand of American and European islamophobia encountered more assertive discourses on Muslim solidarity in political and intellectual domains. Even the sincere Muslim humanitarian concerns over the genocide of Bosnian Muslims in the early 1990s were interpreted by Western observers such as Samuel Huntington as a sign of a clash of civilizations between the imaginary Islamic world and the West.

Today, a century after the trials and tribulations of the British Empire with the pan-Islamic question (1882-1924), a post–Cold War era American superpower has had to deal with a similar set of puzzles, dilemmas, and contradictions with regard to its policy toward an imagined Muslim world. Like its British predecessor, the United States became instrumental in intensifying the globalization and mobility of Muslims over large geographies. From the boom of satellite television channels like Al-jazeera, to Internet and facebook connectivity among Muslims, or from the development of various airline hubs in Muslim Middle East (Dubai, Qatar, Abu Dhabi, and Istanbul) to the rise of Muslim populations in Europe and America, America has had to face increasing mobility of Muslim populations, most of which is actually beneficial to America’s global projection of power. At the same time, due to the United States’ political entanglements with Iran, Palestine, Afghanistan, and other countries, its elites also perceive a growing Muslim threat to its
interests, which were confirmed in the American imagination by the September 11 attacks by al-Qaida. Thus, the American government desires to monitor and control the multiple Muslims networks of trade, charity, information, and political solidarity with perhaps historically the most crowded and well-organized force of intelligence-gathering organizations targeting Muslim societies and institutions. Yet, similar to the experience of the British attempts at monitoring and infiltrating the complex web of Muslim networks in the early 20th century, this a futile attempt. How can one monitor and control any segment of 1.5 billion human beings dispersed all over the world carrying hundreds of different nationalities and other signs of diversity? How irrational it would be to profile and be suspicious of all black-skinned people of the world, or seeing all the Protestant Christians as belonging to a single Protestant World. This impossible task is partly epistemological in a manner of a self-fulfilling prophecy. There may not be much connection between Indonesian, Ozbek, and Nigerian Muslims, but if they are all subjected to similar discourses of islamophobia, they may express shared sentiments toward the publication of Danish Cartoon, or the burning of a copy of the Quran by a fundamentalist American pastor, which will then raise a renewed waive of suspicion about global Muslim solidarity. On the other hand, an increase in European and American islamophobia (and its legal and political implications) coupled with the ideological and political divisions within Muslim societies supports the argument of political Islam that the Muslim ummah is still being humiliated and is in crisis, and thus needs pan-Islamic solidarity. Yet, an imposition of a particular pan-Islamic ideological vision itself reveals and aggravates the natural diversity of ethnicity, language, class, gender and ideological orientations among diverse Muslim populations of the world.

This historical overview of the modern trajectory of the idea of the Muslim world should not imply that contemporary Muslims do not have any right to imagine a
humanitarian or political solidarity of *ummah*. Muslims of all kinds have every right to show concern about the conditions and destiny of their co-religionists or other human beings, and they have a right to act on their internationalist and humanitarian visions. Here a scholar of international and intellectual history can only suggest that both Muslims and non-Muslims alike pay attention to the recent history of the utilization of the idea of Muslim unity or Islamic threat, and do not make ahistorical and essentialist assumptions about experience of being Muslim in the modern world. This historicization can help us overcome not only the obsolete binaries of Islam and the West, but also reveal the entangled essentialisms of islamophobia and religious fundamentalisms.