Review Essay

# Beyond the "Conflict" Paradigm: Western-Muslim Interactions and Intersections

**Books Reviewed:** Karim H. Karim and Mahmoud Eid, eds., *Engaging the Other: Public Policy and Western-Muslim Intersections* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Mahmoud Eid and Karim H. Karim, eds., *Re-Imagining the Other: Culture, Media, and Western-Muslim Intersections* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014); Roberto Tottoli, ed., *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West* (London: Routledge, 2014).

Western-Muslim relations have experienced long periods of peaceful coexistence, fruitful co-operation, and close interactions that have enriched both civilizations. And yet an alien observer of our mainstream media could be forgiven for concluding that "Islam" and the "West" can never co-exist in peace because they seem to have nothing in common. In fact, the intermittent violence interrupting these long peaceful interactions – from the Crusades to the "War on Terror" – has constituted the core of most mainstream media coverage and "scholarship" purporting to "study" and "explain" these relations.

In a zero-sum power game, these dominant frameworks emphasize that such a "clash" is inevitable. Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" theory has become the best known articulation and deployment of "conflict" as an "explanatory" framework for understanding current and past Muslim-West interactions. Simply put, existential, cultural, and religious chasms have put the Muslim world on a collision course with the western world, a problem that is most exacerbated by the presence of "Islam" and Muslim communities in western societies (Huntington, 1993).<sup>1</sup> His thesis appears to ignore each civilization's internal diversity and pluralism and to be willfully oblivious to the inter- and intra-civilizational interactions and centuries-old co-existence, as Edward Said argued in his rebuttal: "Clash of Ignorance" (2001).<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the broadest generalizations, after all, what do "Islam" and the "West" mean? How long can we afford to "ignore" the "porousness" and "ambiguity" of their geographical and cultural borders? Is "conflict" between these two realms inevitable? How about the centuries-old dialogue between these civilizations, the "Self" and the "Other"? How can researchers and intellectuals deploy their inter-disciplinary insights and scholarship to address both the real and the perceived civilizational "chasms"?

These questions constitute the overarching themes of some very important scholarship published in three recent books: *Engaging the Other: Public Policy and Western-Muslim Intersections*, edited by Karim H. Karim and Mahmoud Eid; *Re-Imagining the Other: Culture, Media, and Western-Muslim Intersections*, edited by Mahmoud Eid and Karim H. Karim; and the *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*, edited by Roberto Tottoli. With rich methodological approaches, broad theoretical lenses, and diverse topics, these three books offer a unique platform to build both a holistic and nuanced understanding of the contingencies and intricacies surrounding "Islam" and the "West."

For scholars interested in how the news media have long contributed to demonizing the "Other," the books offer an exposé of the roots of media and cultural biases. They explain how mutual ignorance has plagued the relationship between these societies, thereby creating conflict and profound mutual suspicion. In the face of the "clash of ignorance," these researchers demonstrate that "Islam" and the "West" have a documented history of constructive engagement, common worldviews, historical intersections, and mutual contributions. This essay reviews these books and synthesizes their main themes and case studies. The review first looks at the history of engagement between Islam and the West, presents alternative ways of re-imagining the "Self" and the "Other," and then discusses Islam's evolution and contributions in the West.

## A Long History of Engagement

The mainstream media's coverage of Islam and the West predominantly focuses on the tension and ruptures. Rarely does its discourse explain the interdependence, mutual cultural influence, or alternative narratives that curtail the "clash of civilizations" narratives. In *Engaging the Other*, Karim and Eid analyze the underlying policy contexts that feed this particular discourse and similar conflict-centered narratives. As the editors explain (chapter 1), the various contributions "rebut" and challenge the long-held assumptions about the violent interactions between "Islam" and the "West." In this respect, the volume "foregrounds the reality that they ["Islam" and the "West"] have actually co-existed in a state of mutual interdependence for almost one and a half millennia – contributing to the growth of each other's societies and to those of others" (p. 2).

Evidence for such co-operation, mutual cultural influence, and interdependence abound from architecture to philosophy and ethics. The architectural heritage of the Iberian Peninsula testifies to this mutual exchange. Through architectural design, inscriptions, and linguistic insignia, such Toledo monuments as Cristo de la Luz (or Mosque of Bal al-Mardum), Museum of Visigothic Culture (San Roman), and El Transito (Synagogue of Samuel Halevi Abulafia) incarnate the interactions between the three Abrahamic faith traditions, as H. Masud Taj explains in chapter 2. These surviving symbols demonstrate reciprocal cultural debts despite aggressive and systematic attempts to purge Islamic traces and influences from Spain.

Aside from this architectural heritage, the intellectual output of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d. 1111) emphasized open debate and good deliberation as a discursive method to discern "truth," build civil societies, and strengthen communal ties. Building on the work of these intellectual giants, Marianne Farina suggests that "through the cultivation of intellectual magnanimity, debate becomes a forum for ongoing learning and has the potential to improve the quality [of] public discourse and deliberation in faith communities and society" (p. 62).

It is this pedagogical value of deliberation as a public service that should be present in current debates about European education's attempts to "deal" with Muslims and other cultural groups living in the West. The attempts to reconcile the "universal" and "cultural" in western educational systems cannot but involve an intense probing into how identities are constructed via interactions with different cultures, an inclination observed in Shiraz Thobani's summation in chapter 4 of the debate about European education and Islam.

But engagement is a two-way street: The "Self" must be ready to interact and engage with the "Other," because disengagement breeds isolation and marginalization. Karim examines these attempts to engagid the "Other" in the context of Muslim civil society in the "West," specifically Muslim associations that partner with non-Muslims to serve the common/public good. For instance, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women (CCMW) and the Agha Khan Foundation (AKF) have frequently collaborated with non-Muslim organizations to promote inclusive institutions and social justice initiatives both at home and abroad. For Karim, these initiatives are inclusive because they negotiate the local and the global, thereby benefiting Muslim communities living in the West while being "consonant with Islamic principles that promote the betterment of the condition of all humanity" (p. 106).

Moreover, this engagement can cement recent attempts in some Muslim-majority countries at "progressive" interpretations (*ijithād*) of Islamic laws. Anicée Van-Engeland examines these attempts in several nations seeking to reform family laws in accordance with contemporary human rights values. From Morocco to Indonesia, these hermeneutic projects' success is contingent both upon the mobilization of civil society actors and the "legitimization" of universal human rights among Muslims – through emphasizing reform as a public good (*maṣlaḥah*) (chapter 6). This approach indirectly supports Steven Kull's findings and conclusions (chapter 7) that Muslims support both democracy, namely, democratic elections and governance, and Islamic law.

For Muslims living in the West, the "clash of ignorance" can be acute, given the fact that they are facing a host of public policies and hostile media discourses that may impede their full integration into society. For instance, western multiculturalism and policymaking have faced challenges in integrating Muslim communities. Eid analyzes these challenges by exposing the dangerous drift toward criminalizing these communities (e.g., blaming all Muslims for 9/11) and promoting a xenophobic discourse that treats immigrants as "Other" (chapter 8). He provides examples from the underlying racism couched in anti-immigrant rhetoric, as well as negative media portrayals that make the task of integrating Muslims in their adopted societies even more daunting.

Among the mechanisms suggested to promote integration and social cohesion is the devising of inclusive policies that address Muslims' current alienation and foster their participation in policymaking. Their religious activities should not be viewed as suspect because they can potentially promote social cohesion as well as civic and political engagement, as Jocelyne Cesari concludes in her comparative overview of Muslims' political participation in the United States and Europe (chapter 9).

At the level of media discourse, Faiza Hirji lauds new "alternative" media discourses that seek to re-present Muslims as "progressive" and "complex," thereby combating their stereotypical and negative casting as terrorists and alien to western culture (chapter 10). She cites examples of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, among others, as providing alternative media discourses with the capacity to change both how Muslims in the West view themselves, as well as expose non-Muslim viewers to "how Muslims participate in normal life, not just crisis situations" (p. 208).

#### **Reimagining Mutual Others**

Western-Muslim interactions and conflicts have been nurtured by "mutual ignorance" of the intersections and common worldviews shared by the two civilizations, as Eid's and Karim's second book, *Re-Imagining the Other: Culture, Media, and Western-Muslim Intersections*, reveals. This issue is rarely raised in contemporary discussions. The authors maintain that the contentious "relationship of 'Judeo-Christian' and Muslim civilizations is like that of amnesic siblings: both have trouble remembering the Self's kinship with the Other" (p. 1). It is this kinship among the "mutual Others," the deep cultural links between the "East" and the "West," that has been forged through trading, mono-theistic religious practices, and scientific exchanges (Jack Goody; chapter 2). The chasm between them widened after the Renaissance as its scientific, intellectual, and innovations began transforming Europe.

Despite their close interactions during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, largely facilitated by Eastern Christian travelers and residents of the Maghreb, a similar Arab "Renaissance" (*Nahda*) did not occur. The Arab Awakening and "Renaissance" began in earnest only after the French Revolution and Napoleon's invasion of Egypt (pp. 35-51). "Soon after," according to Nabil Matar, "Muhammad Ali in Egypt (1805) sent Arabic speaking Egyptians to Europe to learn about scientific modernity and religio-political reform, heralding thereby the Arabic *Nahda* of the nineteenth century" (p. 51).

"Cultural conflict" provides a useful framework for understanding the current relationship. According to Mohammad Ghanoonparvar (chapter 4), Iranian and western perceptions and reconstructions of each other reveal mutual "distrust" and "ambivalence." He unsurprisingly finds that western writings, film, and media stories about Iran emphasize the "exotic" nature of the "Other," reminiscent of negative Iranian writings about America and the West.

Ethnocentrism and racism feed the media "clash of civilizations" narratives, often demonizing the "Other." In an interesting essay, John M. Hobson revisits Huntington's "clash of civilizations" thesis, cogently arguing that it shares "scientific" racists "fundamental belief in a great divide between East and West" stoked by imperialism and European ethnocentrism (p. 89). He reminds readers that the "'media-friendly' headlining discourse of the clash of civilizations has obscured the more peaceful and far less dramatic *dialogical interactions* that have long underpinned the relations between Muslim and Western societies" (p. 90).

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Contemporary negative and stereotypical depictions of Muslims in western mainstream media have long stoked these clashing discourses. Eid argues that these caricatures of Muslim interlopers, outsiders, and deviants are rooted in the media's binary (mis)perception of Muslim communities as "homogenous" and "fanatical." This is largely due to widespread ignorance of Islam and Muslim life (chapter 6). The "clash of ignorance" can only be alleviated through responsible, balanced, and fair portrayals that effectively "re-imagine the Other" (p. 112).

Jiwani's incisive analysis of the Canadian mainstream media's construction of domestic violence in Muslim families, such as the so-called honor killings, reveals how this "clash of ignorance" permeates western reporting (chapter 7). Instead of rooting "femicide" in the patriarchal context of domestic violence, Jiwani compellingly argues that newspaper reports of such killings root these crimes in Islamic culture, thus cementing the construction/ perception of Muslims as "alien Others" whose "barbaric cultural practices" remain outside the pale of western civilizational norms.

The clash can be abridged through effective communication, linguistic clarity and translation, as well as religious traditions' re-imaginings of the Self and the Other. In addition to mainstream media, language becomes an important site in which "Islam" and "Muslims" are being misconstrued through the loose and imprecise use of such terms as *Islamist, Islamic, moderate*, and *extremist*, as Karim reminds readers in chapter 8. While using such terms as *self-radicalization* to refer to Muslims engaged in terrorism endows officials and pundits with an aura of authoritativeness, a sense that they "apprehend" Islam, the reality remains that these terms are used to obfuscate and thus serve as a "veil for ignorance" rather than as a way to attain knowledge of the Other (p. 154). Karim warns readers that both Muslims and non-Muslims are intentionally exploiting these terms for ideological reasons to re/construct the Self and the Other as different, and to distinguish between the "good Muslim" and the "bad Muslim" (p. 169).

If precise and less ideological exploitation of language can lead to more "accurate" understanding of the Self and the Other, so can religion, according to Richard Rubenstein (chapter 9). He advocates a re-imagining of the relationship between the Self and the Other that incorporates three principles: "with regard to character, the Other's essential similarity to oneself; with regard to situation, his/her role in the system of global power and exploitation; with regard to future prospects, his/her capacity for transformation in conjunction with a transformation of the system" (p. 190). Furthermore translation, defined as the cultural interpretation of the hidden/unknown, can transform the relationship between the West and the East by demystifying the Other (Salah Basalmah; chapter 10).

### Islam in the West: A New Convergence

The third book in this review essay, *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*, edited by Roberto Tottoli, similarly studies the intersections between "Islam" and the "West," employing these "categories" as conceptual frameworks to focus on Muslim communities living in the West. The first part draws a "historical portrait" of the relationship between Islam and the West, reviewing the Muslim presence in Europe and America. The implantation of Islam in Europe happened in three distinct waves: the seventh-century Arab expansion into Spain and Sicily, the fifteenth- to early-twentieth century Ottoman expansion into southeastern and central Europe, and the twentieth century's waves of migration and re-settlement throughout Europe.

Medieval European experiences with Islam bear witness to the myriad forms of contact and adaptations of Islamic culture and practices to Christian contexts. While the contribution of al-Andalus to contemporary Spanish society may still refer to that era, explains Alessandro Vanoli (in chapter 1), its memory continues to nurture psychological tensions and dreams about Islamic greatness in the Muslim world. The Muslims' conquest of the Iberian Peninsula brought about a new cultural and religious space, one that would be fractured after the Reconquista. The peninsula's converted Muslims – the Moriscos – created a unique Muslim European culture that preserved and built upon existing Islamic knowledge while seeking to integrate Christian practices in their day-to-day lives prior to their expulsion in 1609-14 (Mercedes Garcia Arenal; chapter 2).

The diversity of the Muslim presence in, and cultural interactions with, Europe may be appreciated further if readers are reminded that Europeans' encounters with Islam were not limited to the Iberian Peninsula. Islamic traditions and practices were adapted to life in twelfth-century Sicily (Annliese Nef; chapter 3). As Nathalie Clayer explains, Muslim communities in the Balkans evolved and were part of the region's transformation after the Ottoman conquest, through the upheavals and "ruptures" of the two world wars, and the creation of the European Union (chapter 4). The historical trajectory of European Islam became more complex with the waves of Muslim migrants who have been settling all over Europe since the 1960s.

The roots of Islam and Muslims in America were shaped in the "triangular relations between Europe, Africa, and the Americas" when African Muslims arrived as slaves during the eighteenth and nineteen centuries. In a historical overview of this period, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri observes that Muslim immigrants faced a host of challenges, among them immigration policies, recognition of their religious identity and practices, and the racialization of Muslim communities (chapter 6). The American "Black Muslim" experience, embodied in the evolution of the Nation of Islam, demonstrates how Islam was used to construct a new identity for African Americans while also uncovering the doctrinal tensions inherent in Islamic interpretations and practices (Herbert Berg; chapter 7). These tensions have not inhibited American Muslims' engagement in public life, despite the post-9/11 "hardening of public attitudes toward Islam and Muslims," Kathleen Moore argues (p. 140).

Unlike the American experience with Islam, scant scholarship exists on Islam and Muslims in the Latin American context. In a review of Islam's presence in Mexico and Central America, Mark Lindley-Highfield links it not only to the waves of migration and colonial experiences, but also to the idea that Islam "has provided the people of the region with an opportunity to explore their spirituality further and, for some, it has presented a response to marginalization" (p. 167). Similarly, the presence of Islam in South America has been publicly more visible only in recent decades due to the adaptation of Muslim practices and identities to local cultures (Marco Gallo, chapter 10).

The second section of the *Routledge Handbook* analyzes contemporary interactions between Islam and the West, specifically the location of Muslim communities and the deep tensions and anxieties their presence instigates at the level of identity and public policies. Some of these European identity tensions originate from the "fragilities and limits of Europe's secular tradition," not merely due to the presence of Islam and its Muslim population, or so postulates Luca Mavelli (chapter 11). These tensions appear to neglect the diversity of Muslim communities in the West and how their own tensions to adapt and integrate into their adopted milieus are producing both progressive and neotraditional identities (See Adis Duderija's discussion in chapter 12).

The supposed failure of multiculturalism discourses and policies to integrate Muslim immigrant communities has led to a new confrontation and backlash against these policies and rising Islamophobia (Anna Triandafyllidou; chapter 13). These anti-Muslim prejudices and discriminatory policies, as the New York Police Department's policing and surveillance of Muslim youth and organizations reveal, further fuel western Muslims' feeling of disenchantment, distrust, and alienation (Salua Fawzi; chapter 14). Despite these conflict-ridden encounters, the potential for a new rapprochement between Islam and the West, a reconciliation between Islam and modernity exists, as attested to by the Ismaili Muslim community's integration in and engagement with the modern state (Karim; chapter 15). According to him, this particular form of modernity grew out of the Ismaili religious leaders' twin efforts to develop an institutional infrastructure to ensure the wellbeing of their transnational communities, such as the Agha Khan Development Network, while ushering in a pragmatic approach to faith in the contemporary world. Beyond the immigrant experience, Patrick D. Bowen's chapter 16 indicates that Muslim converts' diverse backgrounds and religious motivations have the potential to positively influence how Islam is perceived and practiced.

Despite these interventions, Islamophobia and the radicalization of young Muslims in the West remain intertwined phenomena, each feeding off the other. As Tahir Abbas explains in chapter 17, these young Muslims are often drawn into a vicious circle: Feeling "Otherized," discriminated against, economically and social marginalized, as well as victimized by growing Islamophobia, some of them turn to radical Islam.

These complex interactions, conflicts, and convergences between Islam and the West raise important questions: How do European and American Muslims enact their citizenship and religiosity? How have they contributed to the western world? Contemporary Islamic buildings in the West reflect a pan-Islamic style and identity that seek to reconcile the diverse strands of Islamic traditions and religious iconography. To better understand the religious imagery of these contemporary Islamic buildings, however, Eric Roose calls on scholars to shift their attention to the design process and the "patrons" who launch them (chapter 18). Elisa Banfi draws attention to an understudied contribution of Islamic organizations in the West, namely, the welfare programs developed to address the community's spiritual, social, and economic needs (chapter 19). At the level of the arts, American Muslims' heterogeneous artistic expressions and contributions, including pop culture and literature, has a "distinct register" that evolves out of the intersections of race and religion in the North American experience (Sylvia Chan-Malik; chapter 20).

Muslims' participation in contemporary western popular culture, such as the production and consumption of new forms of halal (licit) leisure activities and consumer products, becomes a new force of Islamic revivalism that is shaping European Muslim youth identities. The different shades of Muslimness enacted by Moroccan Dutch youth involve mixing "fun" and "faith" – following ethical Islamic codes in the production and consumption of popular culture – while filling the void left by the gradual erosion of traditional Islamic authority (See Miriam Gazzah's discussion in chapter 21). At the level of consumption, Muslim identities in the West are enmeshed in the rise of new Islamic marketplaces, where the proliferation of Islamic commodities and services marketed as halal provide a way to "purify" consumption and money in everyday life, as Johan Fischer argues in a study of London's Islamic markets (chapter 22).

The book's last section focuses on how the presence of Islamic communities in western societies and western-Muslim interactions are contributing to innovative Islamic practices and jurisprudence at various levels. In the realm of jurisprudence and daily practices, Uriya Shavit and Iyad Zahalka analyze the evolution of a new Islamic law relating to Muslim minorities: *fiqh alaqallīyāt al-muslimah* (chapter 23). The chapter describes the Dublin-based European Council for Fatwa and Research and how its religious-legal decisions provide *wasatī* ("harmonizing middle-ground") views and solutions to help western Muslims better integrate into their non-Muslim-majority societies by fortifying their religious identity without compromising their social and professional standing.

Similarly, American Muslim intellectuals and scholars (e.g., Khaled Abou El Fadl and Omid Safi) are confronting ethical questions related to human rights and gender equality, clearly siding with more tolerant, pluralist, and progressive interpretations of Islam to empower Muslim minorities (See Francesca Forte in chapter 24). In the same vein, Juliane Hammer overviews the contributions of American Muslimah scholars to current debates about Islam and gender in the American context. She argues that, compared to their male counterparts, Muslimahs have led most of the "gender-justice-oriented work" that contributes to an ongoing negotiation of Muslim identity and religious traditions (chapter 25).

In the realm of economics, Gian Marian Piccinelli recommends that Islamic banking and finance emphasize its "complementarity" – in terms of transparency, fairness, and socially responsible investing attributes – rather than "alternativeness" to existing western banking systems, for it to better serve and integrate Muslim communities living in the West (chapter 26). At the level of knowledge production, Islam in the western context implies coexisting as a minority in a secularized and pluralistic context, a minority status that helps "produce" more pluralistic Islamic beliefs and practices, argues Stefano Allievi in chapter 27. Western Islamic knowledge welcomes *ijithād* (independent legal judgment) and theological interpretation through the participation of both Muslim actors (e.g., scholars, intellectuals, and NGOs) as well as non-Muslim actors (e.g., western media and non-Muslim scholars), for these have significant implications on Islamic practices in Muslim-majority countries as well.

The book concludes with Francesco Leccese's examination of Sufism, Islam, and post-modernism, and how the "discovery" of Sufi doctrines and practices metamorphosed from early western intellectual interest in this "Oriental" tradition to its current cultural category status as being akin to a "consumption good." The current information environment and increasing global interactions have transformed not only its spread in both western and Muslim-majority countries, but also as, to some degree, divorced Sufism's current teachings and practices from its spiritual tradition.

# Conclusion

In this review essay, I discussed multi-disciplinary contributions and alternative approaches in order to analyze the complex interactions between "Islam" and the "West," the Self and the Other. Despite assertions in popular and media discourses about the fundamental "difference" and "clash" between them, we learn from the books reviewed above that a pure "Self" or "Other" do not exist: Islam and the West have mutually shaped, influenced, and contributed to each other's knowledge and daily practices. As an example, contemporary Muslim communities residing in the West are producing new western Islamic knowledge that not only influences the "here" (e.g., integrating Muslims and fighting Islamophobia), but that western-based *ijithād* also influences Islamic practices "there" (i.e., religious and cultural practices in Muslim-majority countries). The same also goes for the Other: The West is "a poly-civilizational amalgam that is significantly constituted by Muslim ideas, technologies, and institutions."

The books reviewed in this essay debunk the "clash of civilizations" discourse and demonstrate just how porous and ever-shifting the cultural and religious boundaries of these two complex realms are. Instead of isolationism and permanent cultural clash, these works demarcate ways of moving forward to eliminate the "clash of ignorance."<sup>3</sup> In *Engaging the Other: Public Policy and Western-Muslim Intersections*, Karim and Eid suggest that "reimagining" the Self and the Other should be central in designing inclusive and collaborative public policies and in paving new pathways to a more "productive engagement" and alleviate the tensions associated with the "clash of ignorance."

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In *Re-Imagining the Other: Culture, Media, and Western-Muslim Intersections*, Eid and Karim remind readers that "the Other is not inherently alien to the Self, but is often imagined as such." Their caveat is important: The same sources of misunderstanding – language, religion, and the media – can effectively challenge the "clash of ignorance," launch a re-imagining of the Self and the Other, and thus bring about a better understanding between both societies (p. 217). In the *Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West*, Tottoli and the book's contributors re-emphasize the long historical connections between Islam and the West. They remind us of the "common ground," especially true of the Abrahamic faiths and their shared written injunctions for daily and even supernatural life.

Finally, these three edited volumes could not have been published at a more opportune time, a time when reckless demagogues are, unfortunately, exploiting aberrant interpretations and conflict narratives to whip up collective fears and angst about Islam and its adherents in the West. These books offer useful new material and insights for different audiences. Academics from political science, sociology, and media studies will find incisive and historically grounded analyses that may suggest new research areas and pathways. For policymakers, students of Islam, journalists, and activists, these evidencebased approaches can help them build upon existing common grounds between Islam and the West.

#### Endnotes

- 1. S. P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22-49.
- 2. E. Said, "The Clash of Ignorance," The Nation 273, no. 12 (2001): 11-13.
- 3. K. H. Karim and M. Eid, "Clash of Ignorance," *Global Media Journal* (Canadian ed.) 5, no. 1 (2012): 7-27.

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