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ATFP Senior Fellow Gives Graduate Seminar at Georgetown

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Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact Information: [Hussein Ibish](#)

[2] February 22, 2010 - 12:00am

ATFP Senior Fellow Hussein Ibish lectured at a graduate seminar at Georgetown University on Islam, perceptions of Islam and Islamophobia in the United States on February 16, 2010. Ibish gave the Georgetown graduate students a brief rundown on the essential elements of the Islamic faith, but concentrated most of his talk on the evolution of Western perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Ibish said that shortly after the founding of the Islamic faith, the world of Islam and the Christian world came into conflict and competition, and that these societies had at least to some extent defined themselves in opposition to each other. He pointed out that before Europe had defined itself as such, its self-perception was as "Christendom," essentially meaning, for most of its history, that which was not Muslim. He said a similar sense of rivalry and self-definition by negation existed on the Islamic side.

Ibish then described the medieval relations between the three monotheistic faiths as being largely composed of not only political competition, but also endless scholastic efforts to "disprove" the validity of the other two through tendentious religious polemics. He said this laid the basis for the emergence of later, more systematic stereotypes. Ibish said that during the late Renaissance and into the Enlightenment and the colonial era, these folkloric and religious stereotypes about Islam and Muslims gave way to systematic negative ideas increasingly based on the European sense of cultural superiority, colonial forms of knowledge, pseudo-scholarship and pseudoscience. Ibish said the United States had inherited this cultural background from its Anglo-Saxon and more broadly European roots.

Ibish detailed how in the 20th century American culture began to develop its own particular negative perceptions of Arabs and Muslims that were pervasive in popular culture for several decades and closely tied to a series of political events. He noted that the idea of Arabs as a political enemy was linked to hyper-positive representations of Israel beginning in the early

60s with films such as Exodus. He said that following the 1973 oil embargo, the image of the Arab oil sheik, a warmed-over version of the traditional anti-Semitic stereotype of the Jewish money-lender, became pervasive. This negative image was supplanted following the Iran hostage crisis and terrorist attacks in Lebanon by the new dominant stereotype of the Arab/Muslim terrorist. Ibish pointed out that this stereotype was also reminiscent of a classical anti-Semitic trope, the bomb-throwing Jewish subversive. He said that these images dominated representations of Arabs and Muslims in American popular culture until September 11, 2001.

Ibish then explained his long-standing analysis that following the 9/11 terrorist attacks the entertainment industry had largely avoided repeating the kind of egregious defamation that had characterized the preceding decades, but that the situation had gotten worse because much cruder and more blatant forms had migrated into the world of nonfiction, commentary and news analysis and were inching their way towards mainstream acceptance. Ibish pointed out there has been a shift at two registers: a thematic shift from Arabs as an ethnic group to Muslims as a religious community, and a medium shift from the entertainment industry to nonfiction commentary. He noted that the normative subject -- the crazed, irrational and dangerous Arab Muslim male -- remained the latent message behind the shift in manifest content. Ibish also stressed the uncanny thematic similarities between contemporary American Islamophobic discourse and the widespread anti-Semitism in the United States between the two world wars.

He engaged in a lively Q&A session with the students including evaluations of the coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the American news media and measures that might begin to improve representations of Arabs and Muslims in American popular culture.

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