Editorial

Just as the world united in grief after the tragic carnage of 9/11, so too has the world become one after the cataclysmic tsunami that has claimed, according to Australia's *Sydney Morning Herald* (February 8, 2005), 295,608 lives, and has affected 11 countries in the Indian Ocean region.

The tsunami destroyed entire villages and families. Long after the houses have been rebuilt and the people have returned to a kind of normalcy in their lives, the effects of this catastrophe will continue to be felt. Local economies and the infrastructures needed to support them will have to be rebuilt, and there will be the continuing psychological impact on the survivors, who will always feel guilty for having survived and who will never be free of the pain of losing their loved ones.

No one has been unaffected by the tsunami, although some of us, by the grace of God (swt), have not felt its devastation. As the English adage goes, every cloud has a silver lining. And in the face of such an awesome natural calamity, we have seen the best side of humanity, as people rush to provide aid and assistance to the survivors.

The tsunami has also allowed those working in poverty relief and aid programs elsewhere to turn the spotlight on their efforts to avert other calamities that are of the same magnitude but occur at a much slower pace. Among such people is Stephen Lewis, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, who pointed out during an interview on CBC radio (January 12, 2005) that more than 2 million people in Africa die each year of AIDS. And then there is Rabbi Michael Lerner, who reminded us in his essay in *Tikkun* (January 5, 2005) of a recent UN report that 29,000 children die every day from avoidable diseases and malnutrition.

Calamities and their accompanying suffering and struggles are tests for humanity. They remind us that we are not in control of the universe, and thus are a lesson in humility. They remind us that life is fragile and can be taken from us at a time and in a way that we do not expect, and thus are a lesson in priorities and perspective, a check against the materialism and hedonism that is overtaking our consumer capitalist lives. Who would really care that they do not own the latest iPod if they knew that they were to die tomorrow?

Events like the tsunami call into question every person's belief in a just and merciful God. As one of AJISS' priorities is to serve as a space for Islamic perspectives on contemporary issues, this issue includes as its forum article an essay by noted Islamic scholar and imam Zaid Shakir. Imam Shakir used to be a professor of political science before becoming a lecturer at the Zaytuna Institute, an institute dedicated to studying Islam from a traditional perspective and methodology. While not perhaps as "academic" in nature as other forum pieces, his reflective essay is nevertheless appropriate, as it provides a scholarly reflection written in a traditional Islamic mode on the latest natural disaster to strike humanity.

Our other forum piece, written by Tahir Ali, alerts us to yet another attempt by the West to teach Muslims their religion. He gives us a brief analysis of the RAND Corporation's report, "Civil Democratic Islam: Partners, Resources, and Strategies," written by Cheryl Benard and published in 2003. Those committed to social justice, democratic pluralism and respect for different religions and cultures should acquaint themselves with the report's vision of an acceptable "western-style" Islam and take appropriate measures to let the nation at large know that this is no way to build bridges to the Muslim world, which is already intensely suspicious and distrustful of the West due to the joint American-British "war on terror."

The other essays, prepared long before the tsunami struck, continue the themes that have been explored in our most recent issues. While the "war on terror" continues to focus on routing out Muslim groups that embrace violence to achieve their goals, and the academic community parallels this with a similar research bias, scholars still show little interest in studying Muslim groups that eschew violence and seek to reform their world via peaceful methods.

Muhamad Ali seeks to fill at least part of this gap with his article on the rise of the Liberal Islam Network (JIL) in Indonesia. He looks at the country's political context, JIL's intellectual and organizational origins, and its developing discourses around the meaning and praxis of Islam in the contemporary era. Ali hopes that his essay will provide a more contextualized study of Islamic social movements and serve as a corrective to a homogenized view of Islam. This is, of course, a theme already well grounded in some social science disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology; others, such as political science, still have a way to go in this regard. Unfortunately, this message of diversity within the Islamic world at large has yet to be heard in the mainstream media and popular culture.

Islamic economics is arguably one of the most important institutions of Islamic theory and practice in our modern capitalist world economy, which is based on interest. One of my students even postulated that the current attack on Tariq Ramadan stemmed not from his so-called links to terrorist groups, but ultimately from his hostility to and rejection of an interest-based economy. While perhaps understandable mostly to readers with a background in economics, AJISS is pleased to include in this issue an insightful study of Islamic insurance *(takaful)* in Malaysia: Hairul Azlan Annuar's "*Al-Wakalah* and Customers' Preferences toward It: A Case Study of Two Takaful Companies in Malaysia."

Bilici's "'American Jihad:' Representations of Islam in the United States after 9/11" brings the issue back to our more familiar themes of Muslim identity and media representation of Islam since 9/11. The author presents a fascinating study of the contested meanings that the concept of "jihad" has assumed in American popular culture by analyzing Steven Emerson's *American Jihad*; a 2002 Harvard commencement speech, originally entitled "American Jihad"; and an episode of the popular NBC television series *Law & Order* with the same title.

Given the number of people asking "Where was God on December 26th?" our last article, "Models of Communication in the Qur'an: Divine–Human Interaction," is especially noteworthy. M. Zakyi Ibrahim brings insights from the modern study of communication to bear on Qur'anic studies by developing various models to study how God (swt) communicates with human beings.

And to close, as in the last issue, on a sad note: Hisham Sharabi, a towering intellectual and activist on behalf of Palestinian and women's rights in the Middle East, died of cancer on January 13 at the American University of Beirut Hospital. Many of our readers will be familiar with his scholarship and activism. Born in Jaffa, Palestine, in 1927, he received a B.A. in philosophy from the American University of Beirut in 1947. Like Mourid Barghouti (author of *I Saw Ramallah*), he was turned unexpectedly into an exile: When Israel was created in 1948, he was a student at the University of Chicago and suddenly unable to go home.

Returning to the Middle East, he fled in 1949 when the Lebanese government cracked down on the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, with which he was involved. In 1953, Sharabi completed a Ph.D. at the University of Chicago in the history of culture. He taught European intellectual history and political science at Georgetown University before being named to an endowed chair at Georgetown: the Umar Al-Mukhtar Chair in Arab Culture.

A pioneering Arab intellectual in the United States, Dr. Sharabi founded or cofounded several academic institutions dedicated to studying the Arab world: the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown (1975), at that time the only such center in the United States; the Jerusalem Fund for Education and Community Development (1977); and the Center for Policy Analysis on Palestine (1991). He also authored 18 books and countless scholarly articles.

According to the obituary published in *The Washington Post*, Dr. Sharabi finally returned to Jaffa for a British documentary in 1993 and later wrote about the experience for the Center for Policy Analysis. He recorded his emotional response to "revisiting the harbor near his childhood home and the 'bitterness and anger' he felt." Expressing his pain, he wrote:

> As I stood there I could hear people speaking Russian, probably recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union. They were full citizens in my country, and I was there only on a limited Israeli tourist visa. ... Does the solution lie in the reversal of what happened 50 years ago and the destruction of Israel? No, the clock cannot be put back, the past cannot be redeemed, Israel's destruction cannot be the goal. The conflict's real solution cannot be a zero-sum outcome, but only a political compromise. The legitimate struggle of the Palestinians will seek a solution based on justice, international law, and the imperative need for mutual accommodation and survival (Sunday, January 16, 2005, C09).

As Michael C. Hudson, current director of Georgetown's Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, told *The Washington Post*, Dr. Sharabi was "a man of the highest moral and intellectual integrity. ... The Arab world has lost one of its premier intellectuals."

Katherine Bullock