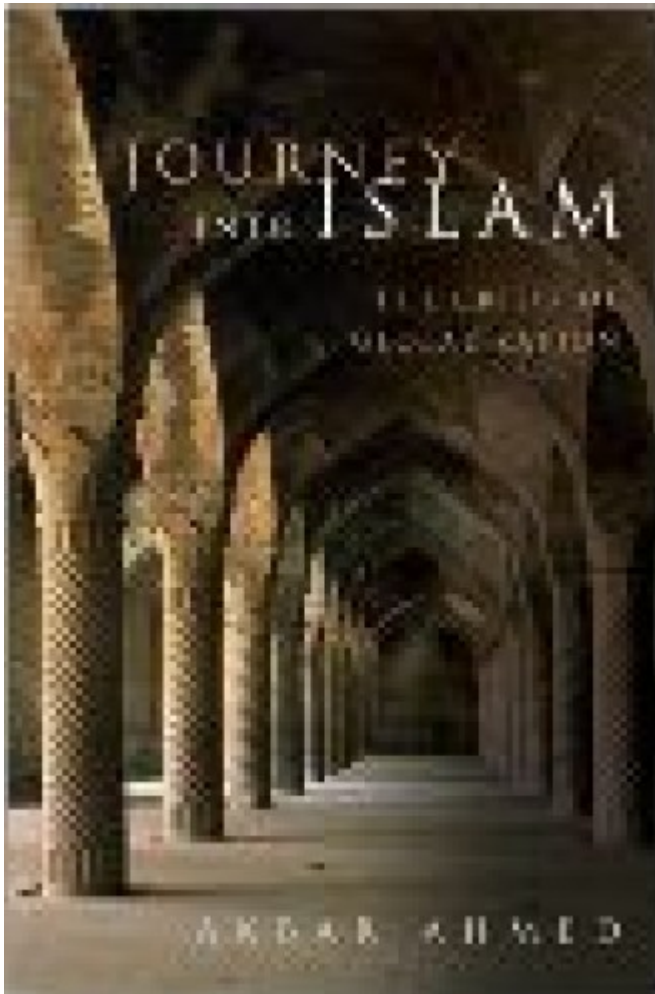


# Journey into Islam

reviewed by [William E. Lesher](#) in the [March 11, 2008](#) issue

## In Review



### **Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization**

Akbar Ahmed

Brookings Institution Press

Anyone who is still pondering the post-9/11 question “Why do they hate us so much?” will find no simple answer in Akbar Ahmed’s intellectually engaging and

passionately written book, but they will find a complex web of persuasive reasons. *Journey into Islam* is an informative primer on Islamic history, an astute analysis of U.S. relations with the Islamic world over the last century and the deeply personal journal of the man the BBC calls “the world’s best-known scholar on contemporary Islam.” Pakistan’s former high commissioner to Great Britain, Ahmed is currently the Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington, D.C.

At the heart of this clear and tightly written text is the thesis that there are three models or ways of thinking about Islam that must be understood and respected if a person (or a nation) is to relate effectively with the Muslim world today. In the book each model bears the name of a city in India that serves as a metaphor for one of these worldviews. The city of Aligarh is a metaphor for socially progressive Muslims’ distinctly modernist response to the world. The city of Deoband is a model of fundamentalist Islam, essentially doctrinaire and consistently dogmatic in teaching and practice, creating communities that are largely isolated from others in the world. The city of Ajmer symbolizes the worldview of Sufism, the form of Islam that embraces the oneness of humankind and promotes cooperative efforts that foster the global common good. These three contradictory models show the complexity within the Islamic world, and Ahmed is clear that all three draw their inspiration from the Prophet Muhammad, whose person is the unifying essence of Islam for Muslims of every worldview, in all times, everywhere.

Employing his considerable skills as a storyteller, Ahmed traces the rise to dominance of the Deoband model in several Muslim countries in the Middle East and Asia, and he does not hide his frustration and even despair about these developments. The literary structure of the book is that of a travel report on a recent trip that Ahmed took with three of his prize students, a man and two women. The purpose of the trip was “to hear what Muslims were actually saying and experiencing”; a set of sensitively constructed survey questions initiated the many illuminating conversations that are reported in detail in the book.

Ahmed’s far-reaching reputation as an Islamic scholar and former diplomat gave him access to politicians, academics and clerics in positions of power. The student companions also played an invaluable role by administering the survey in formal classroom settings, as well as using its content as a template for many informal conversations with Muslim students eager to talk to these young Americans. The result is an unusual collection of intergenerational Islamic thinking drawn from a wide spectrum of society.

Acutely aware of the sensitive nature of their mission, the team began their interviews by asking their hosts to name the leaders past and present, religious and secular, whom they most admired. This simple research technique unveiled an immense amount of information—some of it surprising—about the attitudes and opinions of an important group of Muslims. It is this data that supplied the basis for Ahmed’s highly useful observations and insights.

The research team learned that the perception that Islam is under attack by the West is nearly universal among Muslims, and they discovered that the crisis between the Muslim world and the West is deeper than they had expected. The progressive Aligarh model of Islam, the one in which Ahmed was trained as a promising young Pakistani diplomat in the 1960s, is dramatically losing ground to the conservative Deoband model. The researchers learned that the reasons for this shift is similar in Muslim societies around the world: attempting to integrate an Islamic lifestyle with democracy is perceived as kowtowing to the West; commercial globalization has created a business and government elite in many Muslim countries even as it has spawned increased poverty and hopelessness among the majority population; and relationships between the U.S. and Islamic countries have worsened significantly during the Bush administration because of its unquestioning support of Israel, the war in Iraq, and the administration’s much publicized departure from democratic practices and the principles of universal human rights.

Readers of this engaging book will learn a great deal of information that is essential to interpreting confusing messages about Muslims. In a chapter on “Tribalism in Islam,” for example, Ahmed tells us that the Prophet himself rejected tribalism, yet Muslim society continues to have deep tribal roots. Westerners often mistake local tribal customs, such as honor killings and female circumcision, for Islamic traditions, while some Muslim scholars see tribalism as a form of opposition to Islam.

Likewise, the fact that the women who surrounded the Prophet Muhammad in the early years played a critical role in shaping the faith will be a new insight to many readers. Khadija, the Prophet’s wife, was the first to realize that her husband’s visions of the angel Gabriel were something extraordinary. She arranged for him to visit a Christian priest, who confirmed to them that Muhammad was indeed receiving a revelation similar to those received by the prophets of the Bible.

*Journey into Islam* takes on an ominous tone in the chapter titled “The Clash of Civilizations?” The research team was clearly sobered by the consistency and

passion of the negative opinion that they encountered regarding the West. Ahmed, drawing on his historical and diplomatic background, recounts the long history of failed Western policy positions that have been and continue to be recycled decade after decade. One such failed strategy is the attempt to divide the Muslim community by isolating factions that the West designates as extremist. Such attempts have consistently reinforced the inherent oneness of the international Muslim community.

Still, this book is in no way a treatise of hopelessness. Rather, it is a passionate appeal for contact, dialogue and interaction. The team's own experience is offered as a model of what is possible. Time and again, Ahmed and his companions entered situations that appeared threatening and that they approached with understandable apprehension. In several places, they were the first Americans their hosts had ever seen. Some initial contacts were confrontational and even hostile, but the atmosphere was significantly changed in second encounters, often conducted in a setting of warm Islamic hospitality. Positions were softened, common concerns discussed and, in some instances, friendships formed.

Their many experiences of this kind are what led Ahmed and his team to cautiously conclude that although the separation between Islam and the West is serious, it is not at all hopeless. Nations too can develop the will and expertise to engage one another in new, more consistent and more effective ways.