

Reporter Uncovers Setting of Islam on the Western Stage

EVENT RECAP: MAY 11

by Rachel Manning

Ian Johnson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter for the *Wall Street Journal* and two-time OPC award winner, spoke about his new book, *A Mosque in Munich* on May 11 at the OPC.

David Andelman, OPC Board member and editor of *World Policy Journal*, introduced Johnson who began the discussion by drawing the parallels between the historical setting of his book and today. In both, he said, "the United States was in a global battle against an implacable foe, the prospects for success were considered bleak, unless you could somehow win the hearts and minds of the Muslim world." In this way, our present era reflects the presidency of Eisenhower. In the 1950s the United States realized that "Islam could be used to win over this new part of the world of growing importance, the newly independent countries of the so-called third world. This period is overlooked in our conversations about Islam...not as a direct link to the terror attacks of today" but in our discussions about tactics and instrumentalization of religious groups in contemporary foreign policy.

In a photo slideshow, Johnson described discovering the original question that propelled him on the five-year research and writing project that became the book: a map in a bookstore in London that charted the Muslim demographics of the world, surrounded by the greatest, or most famous, mosques. Among these pictures was a picture of the Islamic Center of Munich. He remembered thinking that this was odd. "Why would the Islamic Center of Munich, which is certainly not the biggest mosque in Germany...be among this pantheon of the world's great mosques?" As it turned out, the Islamic Center of Munich was the first overseas outpost of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was an essential organization to the foundation and proliferation of political Islam.

The book follows three central characters, Gerhard von Mende, a German linguist who was tied to the Nazi party; Robert Drayer, a CIA agent; and Said Ramadan, a radical academic of Islamic Law. Together these three men were central to the founding of the mosque in Munich, and to the history of the Muslim Brotherhood's presence in Europe. Von Mende was the designer of Nazi policy toward Muslim refugees, prisoners of war and refugees who were in Germany during and after World War II. He worked with former Soviet Muslims to create anti-Soviet propaganda until the CIA moved in on the project, founding Radio Free Europe under Amcomlib, the American Committee for Liberation from Bolshevism. Robert Drayer was active in the CIA and sponsored the work of von Mende and Ramadan in supporting anti-USSR efforts through the instrumentalization of political Islam.

The creation of the Islamic Center of Munich was a goal of von Mende's and Drayer, and Ramadan was asked to speak at the initial planning meeting. While some of the individuals involved were skeptical of his political leanings, others saw him as a "shining star of a rebirth of Islam" and fully



The author, Ian Johnson, flanked by OPC board members David Fondiller, left, and David A. Andelman who introduced Johnson.

supported a long-term political affiliation with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Johnson read an excerpt from the book that described Said Ramadan's time in Germany where he was completing his degree in law. The segment described his advisor, Professor Kegel's impressions of his student: "Ramadan was often abroad. At first, Kegel thought that he was just preparing his final move to Europe. But Ramadan kept his advisor well informed about his movements, sending letters and postcards from Geneva, Damascus and Jerusalem. Over time, the affable professor understood his student's goals more clearly: it wasn't law, it was revolution."

Ramadan's goals of proliferating political Islam found a home in the founding of the Islamic Center of Munich, and later as he partnered with the United States in anti-Soviet propaganda in the Middle East and in Europe.

Returning to his earlier references to the Eisenhower Administration, Johnson described a critical colloquium on Islam at Princeton University in 1973, when Ramadan and other members of the Muslim Brotherhood gathered to speak with Eisenhower about how they could contribute to U.S. foreign policy. A high-level official "recalled the high priority that Eisenhower gave to religion in his personal life and in geo-political strategy. The early discussions about using religion more effectively in global politics had already taken place," setting the stage for the White House to work with Ramadan, who was highly critical of communism based on its rejection of religion.

Wrapping up his talk, Johnson reminded the audience of the critical role that the Muslim Brotherhood plays in the current political climate. Both the Bush and the Obama Administrations have forged connections with the Muslim Brotherhood, which is one of the largest civil society organizations in Egypt and Syria.

A lively question and answer period followed the talk, in which audience members queried Johnson on topics from historical clarifications from the book to the lessons and parallels that can be drawn from his research, and how to apply them to contemporary issues. A book signing took place after the event, which was co-sponsored by the South Asian Journalist Association.