

ISA ONLINE GUEST LECTURE

HUNGER STRIKES AND RELIGIOUS REFORM IN YEMEN

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The growing internationalism of armed conflict in Yemen has presented challenges to Muslim reformers working to achieve social justice. In this paper, I attend to the ethical dimensions of Islamic activism by exploring the use of hunger strikes to strengthen otherwise fractious political coalitions. Facing pressure from actors willing to evoke the most strident forms of sectarianism to explain, license and justify violence, hunger strikers and their supporters enlist what Abdulrabbuh al-Rubaidi has called a “new skepticism” toward conventional religious establishments that, for many Yemenis since 2011 especially, have become complicit with authoritarian oppression. With the aim of identifying new currents in Muslim reform across the global South as sovereign state formations face unprecedented scrutiny, I consider hunger strike activists’ turn to what political theorist Achille Mbembe has called “the necropolitical.” By drawing attention to the relationship between hungry bodies and forms of living death exacted on populations through regimes of national and parastatal violence, Yemeni activists are drawing attention to the value of older anti-imperialist discourses for reconstituting Islamic solidarity. The ethical leverage of such activism inheres, I argue, in manifestations of “the secular,” understood not as something opposed to, or outside of, religion but, pace anthropologist Khaled Furani, as a recognition of finitude whose sensory dimensions, magnified against frailties of sovereignty, knowledge and certitude, guide believers toward otherwise unavailable modes of religious worldliness.



Prof. Flagg Miller is a Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California at Davis. Author of *The Audacious Ascetic: What the bin Laden Tapes Reveal about Al-Qa'ida* (2015), Dr. Miller focuses on cultures of modern Muslim reform in the Middle East and especially Yemen. Miller's first book, *The Moral Resonance of Arab Media: Audiocassette Poetry and Culture in Yemen* (2007), examines how Yemenis have used traditional poetry and new media technologies to envision a productive relationship between tribalism and progressive Muslim reform. Along with publications in such journals as the *American Ethnologist*, the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Miller has written the preface to *Poems from Guantánamo: The Detainees Speak* (University of Iowa Press, 2007).

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