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## Duke professor fights Islamophobia

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### **Daniel Bayer**

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Professor Omid Safi of the Duke Islamic Studies Center gave a presentation on “America and Islam: Quest for Justice in a Turbulent World” last Wednesday, March 13, at the Elliott University Center.

The lecture focused both on various misconceptions held about Islam in the U.S. and the complex situation in the Mideast. The presentation was sponsored by the Islamic Studies Network Research Network at UNC-Greensboro.

With his presentation peppered with humorous asides, Safi, who specializes in Islamic mysticism (Sufism), contemporary Islamic thought and medieval Islamic history, tackled issues ranging from the murder of three Muslim-American students in Chapel Hill last year to the

stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process, as well as the rise of the extremist Islamic State in parts of Iraq and Syria.

“I have no interest in giving you either an optimistic or a pessimistic view of things. These are just a matter of optics,” Safi said. “My comment is that we’ve got to have an open-eyed, honest and compassionate look at where we are as a people.”

Safi said that Islamophobia in the U.S. can be seen in this year’s presidential campaign.

“We’re going to be talking about Islam and America. It is 2016, and this crazy presidential election, which as some people much smarter than me have said, ‘It’s as if the Youtube comment section has come to life and is running for president,’” Safi said, referring to various anti-Muslim remarks by leading Republican presidential candidates Donald Trump and Ted Cruz.

Safi pointed out that Muslims have been in America since the first European colonists reached the continent.

“We were here on Columbus’s ship — when he got lost. When West African human beings were stolen and kidnapped, sold into slavery and brought over here, 15 to 25 percent of those human beings were us,” Safi said, referring to Muslims. “We have an old presence in this country.”

Safi spoke negatively about those who insist that Islam and American values are incompatible saying, “To treat this conversation through a lens of otherness is just something I’m not going to grant them.”

Safi quoted Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1967 speech at Riverside Church in New York, where he openly criticized the Vietnam War, as a way of linking previous civil rights struggles to today’s struggles against Islamophobia and police brutality.

“He says there’s a triplet giant of evil that is killing the soul of America,” Safi said. “And first, as it has always been, is racism. What does the spirit of Martin have to say to 2016 America, where we need to have a movement today — Black Lives Matter — with a simple demand: stop shooting black people.”

Referring to Islamophobia and the views of groups like ISIS as “two extremist discourses,” Safi condemned the latter as well as the former.

“ISIS is responsible for a level of savagery and brutality that frankly we haven’t seen before,” Safi said. “ISIS is guilty of level of savagery that — get this — al Qaeda releases a press statement saying, ‘ISIS, you’re messed up.’ Like here’s the line of crazy, and you just went two miles beyond it.”

Safi said that all Americans are responsible for changing the tone of the conversation, particularly as previously marginalized groups in U.S. society come together to demand justice.

“You’re seeing the rise of people who see justice as a holistic process,” Safi said. “It’s not just about being nicer to Muslims. We should be nice to Muslims because Muslims are human. They’re not all saints, and they’re not all sinners. They’re every bit the messy, complicated human beings that the rest of us are.”