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In This Show, an Islamic World Brimming With Innovation



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The exhibition "1,001 Inventions" focuses on a time when the Muslim world was an incubator for ideas in science and technology.

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In David Lean's majestic film "Lawrence of Arabia," the beleaguered Arab leader Prince Feisal reminds his British Army adviser, [T. E. Lawrence](#), of a glory that once was.

"You know, Lieutenant," he says, "in the Arab city of Córdoba were two miles of public lighting in the streets when London was a village."

"Yes, you were great," [Lawrence](#) says. To which Feisal replies ruefully, "Nine centuries ago."

There lies the heart of the problem. An awfully long time has passed since anyone thought of the Muslim world in general, let alone the Arab world in particular, as an incubator of great ideas in science or technology. Not to be flippant, but radicals' devising ways to equip suicide bombers doesn't cut it.

The fact, however, is that some of history's finest scientists and scholars once emerged from predominantly Muslim societies, extending from Spain to China across a long stretch of time that began in the seventh century.

That flourishing of knowledge is the theme of an [exhibition](#) that opened over the weekend at the New York Hall of Science, in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park in Queens.

The show, called "1001 Inventions" in a distinct bow to "1001 Nights," arrived after successful runs in London and Istanbul. On display are long-ago advances by Islamic thinkers in medicine, optics, mathematics, astronomy, higher education, library science, personal hygiene and even the rudiments of aviation.

Queens was "the logical place" for telling this story, said Margaret Honey, the hall's president and chief executive. The borough is, after all, the true [United Nations](#) of New York. Nearly half of its 2.3 million residents are foreign-born, including tens of thousands of Muslims.

But unless you spent the last decade on Neptune or beyond, you know that the image of Muslims has taken a pounding throughout the West.

New York, having endured the most devastating act of Islamist-inspired terrorism, is hardly an exception. The uproar over a planned Islamic cultural center near ground zero is a graphic example of the powerful emotions — with unmistakable undercurrents of Islamophobia — that saturate the arguments over what to build in Lower Manhattan.

Ms. Honey said there had been no "9/11 component" in the decision to host an exhibition that turns to an encouraging phase of Islamic history.

A similar point was made by the creator of the exhibition, Salim T. S. al-Hassani, a professor of mechanical engineering at the University of Manchester in Britain. "We started a long time before all this" — nearly two decades ago — he said by phone from Manchester.

Still, there is no running from harsh realities. "We can't be isolated from the sociopolitical environment," Professor Hassani acknowledged.

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Children from the Y.W.C.A. of White Plains explored the Home and Life kiosk of the show, at the New York Hall of Science in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park.

Ms. Honey said, "I do think in light of all the controversy over the mosque, and with the news continuing to proliferate with disturbing information about people of Muslim background, that we can benefit from a shift in perspective."

For the most part, the exhibition is less overtly about politics than about science. There is electronic razzmatazz aimed at a young audience, along with a short film that stars [Ben Kingsley](#), giving a performance that is more Dumbledore than Gandhi.

Topics in the show, which continues until April 24, include innovations in surgery around A.D. 1000 by an Arab physician, al-Zahrawi; the founding of a university in the ninth century by a woman, Fatima al-Fihri; an attempt at flight with a set of wings by a ninth-century thinker, Abbas Ibn Firnas; and insights into how vision works by a 10th-century polymath, Ibn al-Haytham.

In the West, those centuries are considered part of the Dark Ages. Professor Hassani said people had been led to believe that there was this long period of nothing after the heydays of Greece and of Rome. Then, poof, out of nowhere, up sprang the Renaissance. This notion "defies logic," the professor said. That era was anything but dark, he said. Discoveries made in Islamic societies provided "the continuity, the smooth graph, of how ideas travel in humanity."

How those inventive juices happened to dry up, or how they might be restored, is not explored in this exhibition. One is reminded, though, of Lawrence's response to Prince Feisal: "Time to be great again, my lord." Long past due, some would say.

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