

# A New Look at Islam

## BU INSTITUTE TO FOSTER BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF MUSLIM SOCIETIES

**THESE DAYS** Americans are eager to learn more about the Islamic world. Bookstores, newspapers, and television newscasts brim with commentary about Muslims and their worldview. Unfortunately, a lot of what's being said "is very superficial, and much of it discounts how varied the Muslim populations are," says Herbert Mason, William Goodwin Aurelio Professor of History and Religious Thought and a University Professor.

Mason is the director of Boston University's new Institute for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations. Its mission, he says, is to foster a broader, more nuanced understanding of Islam and those who practice it. In November the institute held its inaugural event, a showcasing of Islamic texts from the University's Howard Gotlieb Archival Research Center, selected from the collection of Richard Frye, founder of Harvard's Center for Middle Eastern Studies, who also attended the event.

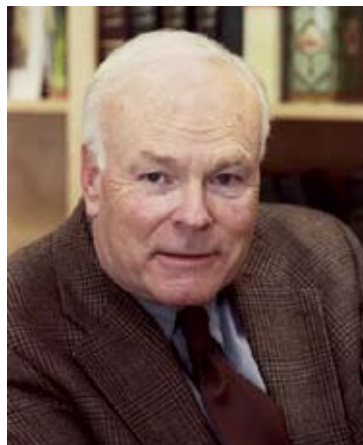
In addition to four recently acquired libraries of Middle Eastern and Central Asian texts, the heart of the new institute will be twenty-eight affiliated BU faculty, in disciplines ranging from modern foreign languages and literatures to anthropology to religion to women's studies.

These faculty include Shakir Mustafa, a College of Arts and Sciences assistant professor of modern foreign languages, who teaches Arabic and courses in contemporary Arabic literature, and Jenny White, a CAS associate professor of anthropology, who specializes in the politics, gender roles, and urban life of Turkey. Also among the faculty are Houchang Chehabi, a CAS professor of international relations, whose books include *Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the Last 500*

*Years and Sultanistic Regimes*, and Kecia Ali, a CAS assistant professor of religion, whose research focuses on Islamic religious texts, particularly regarding jurisprudence and women in both classical and contemporary Muslim writings.

In addition, the new institute has incorporated the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, headed by Thomas Barfield, a CAS professor and chair of anthropology, who will serve as associate director.

"This institute will be a coordinating body," says Mason, noting that it will foster research collaborations among faculty and graduate students, award graduate and postdoctoral fellowships, host lecture series and visiting scholars, and design academic programs within existing departments at the master's and doctoral levels. Mason also says that the institute is developing an interdepartmental undergraduate concentration related to Islamic studies.



**Professor Herbert Mason, the director of the new Institute for the Study of Muslim Societies and Civilizations**

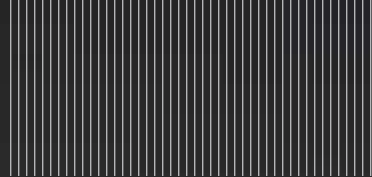
"We will be dedicated to primary source reading and experience in the field. We want to understand the Muslim peoples' sense of history and what's precious to them," Mason says. "Now, applying that kind of knowledge really takes time, and I think one thing that would characterize us, as opposed to more politically or development-oriented institutes, is a sense of the longevity of the Islamic world."

**CHRIS BERDIK**

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Photo by Vernon Doucette



## Student ID

**WHO: AMANDA ROBISON**  
**AGE: 20**  
**SCHOOL: CAS'08**  
**MAJOR: ASTRONOMY**  
**HOMETOWN: FREMONT, CALIFORNIA**

### **Why astronomy?**

I wanted to be an astronaut like every other kid, and it just stuck with me. I went to space camp when I was little, and I loved every minute of it and knew right away that's what I wanted to do.

### **Who's your favorite professor?**

[CAS astronomy professor] Harlan Spence has basically been my mentor since I walked in the door. He's very encouraging and really excited to help you be the best that you can be. He treats all of us like we're his own kids.

### **What are your post-college plans?**

Graduate school for a Ph.D. in space physics and probably research after that.

### **And then, Mars?**

Really, I would be happy with being the first female on Mars.

### **Should Pluto have been downgraded to a "dwarf planet"?**

I still like to think Pluto is a planet. But you can't argue with the smart guys. They know what's going on.

### **Where do you live now?**

In a brownstone on Bay State Road.

### **What's your dorm decorating style?**

My favorite thing is to put up Museum of Fine Arts posters. It gives it a local feel. They had an Ansel Adams exhibit last year and an *Americans in Paris* exhibit.

### **Favorite hangout?**

Havana Nights, a salsa dancing club in Cambridge. It's very low-key. If you're not very good, it doesn't matter. It's a lot of fun.

### **What are you watching on TV?**

*Grey's Anatomy* and *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*.

### **Hobbies?**

Ballet and singing.

