“Middle East Meets Middle Tennessee: Mosques, Immigrant Communities, Wars, Travel and Academic Programs”

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More and more, the boundaries between Middle East and Middle Tennessee, two geographic locations that have become central in my own narrative over the past couple of decades, have become blurred. It has become more and more difficult to disentangle the two terms, the two places. In my talk I examine various ways these two regions seem to refuse to stay in the spots designated for them on maps, based largely on events and developments I’ve witnessed over the past several years. I will specifically address the controversy of the building of an Islamic Center in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, proposed legislation in the state to ban Sharia law, immigrant communities in the MidSouth (primarily Somali and Kurdish), issues related to soldiers from Tennessee who have served in the Middle East (mainly Iraq, Afghanistan), travel between the two regions, and how our Middle East programs at Middle Tennessee State University at once respond to and participate in these phenomena, troubling our traditional geographic and cultural categories. My presentation thus challenges binary assumptions embedded in Edward Said’s seminal work Orientalism. In deconstructing categorical distinctions between Middle East and Middle Tennessee, I rely on views proposed by the great modern Arab poet Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said) that question hard and fast distinctions between East and West.

What is happening in Middle Tennessee seems to be connected to a widespread, national effort to generate anti-Islamic fear and hysteria for political purposes that I will examine. The story of the Murfreesboro Islamic Center is linked to the controversy of the building of an Islamic Community Center in Manhattan several blocks from Ground Zero. Islamophobia (often now intentionally mistermed Islamaphobia to create a rhyme with and thus a subliminal tie to Obama) is being stoked and fueled.