The Cold War's Clash of Civilizations: 
The Soviet Union, the Left, and the Islamic World

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The conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union has long been understood in an international context, but little is known about the ways in which the showdown between the superpowers transformed the decades-long struggle between secular regimes, socialists, and Islamists across the Middle East and Central Asia. Existing scholarship generally overlooks how Islamist activists determined to challenge the Soviet Union, its client regimes, and domestic Communists reinvented visions of an “Islamic world” through the transnational Shi’a clergy or institutions like the World Muslim League during the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, scholarship reifies a narrative in which Islamist actors appear out of nowhere in the late 1970s, rendering their earlier engagement with and subsequent challenge to Western and socialist internationalism invisible. In my talk, I offer an alternative approach that emphasizes the integrated nature of the debate about anti-Western internationalism and brings Russia, the Soviet Union, and socialism back into debates about a supposed analytical dyad between "the West" and "Islam."

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