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The war in Iraq, the price of oil, the deadlock over Iran's nuclear ambitions, the terrorism of al-Qaeda and the tensions surrounding immigrant communities in Europe ensure that Islam is rarely far from the headlines. But you would have to be an avid student of Muslim affairs to come across any discussion of science and technology not linked to the development of nuclear weapons.

In this week's issue, *Nature* offers an unprecedented look at the prospects for science and technology in the Muslim world (see page 20). We have never before collected together such a range of voices and analysis in one issue.

In ignoring Muslim science, the West follows the lead of the Muslim world itself. Low investment and a low profile combine to keep the scientific community small, marginalized and unproductive. This is not simply a matter of underdevelopment; the oil-rich Gulf states invest pitifully in R&D (see page 28). In our Commentary section, on pages 33 and 35, Nader Fergany, the lead author of the Arab Human Development Reports, and Herwig Schopper, president of the council for the Middle East laboratory SESAME, offer their own critical analyses of what needs to change to allow science to take off in Muslim countries.

The poor scientific track record of Islamic countries might suggest that there is something about Islam inherently inimical to research. Muslims bristle at this idea, pointing to the major achievements of Muslim scholars under the Islamic caliphate (see timeline, page 23). But what of the present? Our News Feature on page 22 looks at the attitudes to science in the various Islamist organizations growing in power in key states ranging from the Occupied Palestinian Territory to Malaysia. The secular regimes and one-party states that have ruled many Muslim countries are being replaced, or directly challenged, by voices calling for a more directly political Islam.

The conditions in which knowledge flowered a millennium ago are hardly those that today's Islamists say they favour. Back then, support for scientific enquiry was matched by an openness to other cultures and sources of knowledge. But when Islamists come to power the picture is more nuanced than it may first appear. Restrictions on freedom of speech and a high level of investment in military technology are distressing to outsiders, but greater attention to higher education is a trend that could offer hope. Mostafa Moin, an Iranian reformer and scientist, lays out his hopes and fears for the future on page 29.

Greater attention to the challenges of the present is sorely needed. Too few Muslim governments collect data on the status of science and innovation (as our analysis on page 26 shows), and so the problems facing scientists are not even on their agenda. Muslim nations wanting to invest in science as a broad cultural activity need to extract the right lessons from their glorious past and their politically charged present. ■

AMBITION & NEGLECT

Science in the Muslim world