

## Islamic Studies: Challenges and the Future

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to contribute to an understanding of the challenges and the future of Islamic Studies in the contemporary European countries. The paper begins with a brief explanation of the 'Islamic Studies' and 'Islamic Sciences' terms development. Also, it is discussing the challenges and the future of educational institutions in Western Europe in terms of the process of transmitting the knowledge and its recognition within the legal systems of European countries. Finally, the paper encourages the actors of higher Islamic education in Europe to create a new language of research and learning through the dialogue of different epistemologies and to offer a new definition of Islamic studies that will reflect the congruence with the contemporary trends.

**Key words:** Islamic Studies, Muslim communities, universities, Islamic education, higher education.

Until recently, it was neither practiced nor conceivable to appoint a Muslim to a chair of Islamic Studies. In fact, it was widely feared that Muslims were unable to engage scientifically with Islam.<sup>1</sup>

Today, the subject of Islamic Studies is in transition. Islamic Studies gained a more scholarly character during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and became a significant branch of Oriental Studies. They had a broadly speaking philological, literary, and historical orientation. Those who studied the subject paid particular attention to the earlier part of Islam and medieval Muslim culture and civilisation. As Oriental Studies moved to examine and engage with contemporary societies, the scholars employed different methods of studying Muslim societies. Growing interest in the East (the Middle East, China, India Japan and Africa) emerged as these areas became more accessible through trade and travel, as did an interest in colonisation and administration. Islamic Studies thus remained the interest of scholars of the Orient and of colonisers, and the subject was studied through that lens.

It is important to acknowledge that such contributions to Islamic Studies – largely text-based analyses – have made a significant contribution. They have been of huge benefit to scholars of Islam over the years, particularly the last hundred years, and such scholarly contributions should continue.

The post-World War II period and the cold war period that followed generated renewed interest in Islam and Muslim societies. The creation of Pakistan and Israel, Muslim migration to European countries, and the political expressions of Islam (in Iran, Pakistan, Egypt, Sudan and Afghanistan) provided a new direction for scholarly study. “Islamic Study” was no longer fully contained within philological or Oriental Studies. Rather, it entered into the subject areas of Politics, Sociology and Economics. The worldwide resurgence of Islam and especially the political uses of Islam became the focus of study. The Iranian Revolution, the Gulf War, and 9/11 further changed the focus of Islamic Studies. As a result, research on contemporary Islam and Muslims has become more politically directed. Today, in European countries, Islamic Studies Programmes are conducted under an increasing “securitisation” agenda.

Research is now more focused on the contemporary aspects of world politics and Muslim realities. The sociological and politically inspired hot-spot studies of conflict and conflict zones are here to stay. Conflict at various levels – cultural, social, theological and political – demands that the study of Islam and Muslim societies must be conducted at various levels and from various perspectives.

There is still a significant area that requires our attention. Here, I would like to refer to Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), who highlighted the very important point

1 The Council of Sciences and Humanities (Berlin, 29-01-10), *Recommendations on the Advancement of Theologies and Sciences concerned with Religions at German Universities*, pp. 13. Full report available at [www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archive/9678-10\\_eng.pdf](http://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/archive/9678-10_eng.pdf), accessed 25 December 2017.

that, while Western scholars know plenty about what sound scholarship looks like (he is referring to Western universities where Western scholars' contributions have been of significant value), their work is not directed towards the changing realities of Muslims today. As part of the task of re-reading and re-discovering the vocation afresh, he makes a clear distinction, remarking that "to think Islamically and to rethink Islam has not been one of their concerns".<sup>2</sup> This, I believe, is a very important point. Scholars who are at the centre of "rethinking Islam" in universities – Muslim scholars included – have adopted historical methods of enquiring about Islam. They are looking at the study of Islam "from the outside in". Their research programmes are largely addressed to fellow scholars or current "trendy" scholarship. But are they still able to address the challenge "to think Islamically and rethink Islam"? In other words: to think Islam "from the inside out" and not simply "from the outside in." Is it even possible?

One must acknowledge the fact that the study of Islam without its believers is incomplete. It is not only the believers but the nature of their beliefs that deserve serious attention. Islamic Studies is inherently a study of beliefs and believers. Islam has a meaning for people. For those who study Islam (whether the scholar is a Muslim or not is of secondary importance), the issue is whether the scholar is a good scholar who understands the interconnectedness of this relationship. This is important. In this respect, Islamic Studies constitutes a venture into the secular realm.

The study of the "Islamic Sciences," however, is a different matter. *Madrasahs* and *dar al-ulum* offer traditional confessional courses to prepare future religious leaders for Muslim communities. At the Shia's Hawzas similar courses are offered. They focus largely on Quranic interpretation (*tafsir*), *hadith*, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), *kalam*, etc. These sciences are taught with essential reverence and devotion. Men and women, who qualify from these seminaries, play a significant role in their Muslim communities. Their courses are not recognised by the state, however.

In some institutions in European cities, e.g. London, some Hawza courses are recognised by a university, but this is not the case with the *dar al-'ulum*. Mediation has been provided by institutions such the Markfield Institute of Higher Education (MIHE) and the Islamic College in London – a combined Shia and Sunni establishment. Such institutions go through a rigorous process of scrutiny and quality assurance, as with any other university. In addition to other benefits, such institutions provide a bridge between the non-validated private courses and the validated courses from universities. Students who attended such institutions have been able to chart a future for themselves that is different from that open to those who rely exclusively on a *dar al-'ulum* certificate.

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2 Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 124.

What is the future for such institutions? In England, the *dar al-ulum* are adjusting their courses and administration for future accreditation/validation by recognised universities. If they succeed, their courses will perhaps change drastically in order to comply with the validating bodies' requirements.

Before I move on, let me highlight the current state of training related to religious leadership in Britain (although I believe that it is not substantially different in other European countries). For a number of years, I have had a stream of *dar al-ulum* graduates in my classes. I ask them – male and female – to list the requirements of the Imam's role. The following is what I am generally told: To lead five daily prayers; to lead Friday *khutba*; to conduct *nikah*; to take funeral services; to teach the Quran and basics of Islam to children; and to respond to basic queries about *fiqhi* issues, *taharrat*, etc. I ask them to tell me which task could not be performed without an Imam. They all agree that all these tasks could be performed without an Imam.

Students spend years studying Islamic sciences with little outcome. South Asian Muslims in Britain seem to see the *dars-i nizami*<sup>3</sup> as an ultimate source of strength for the preparation of future religious leadership in Muslim communities.

Another story that gives an idea of what is needed to allow for change is the following: I was asked several years ago to give a talk on "Islam and the West" to an invited group of approximately forty *ulama* in London. I requested the chair of the session to allow me to ask a question of the audience once they had asked what they wanted at the end of my talk. I told them I am a layperson, that I had not gone through rigorous training in Islamic sciences, but that what I had learned about *fiqh* suggested to me that to give a religious edict (*fatwa*) on various issues, a *mufi* must understand the *urf* and *adaat*, the customs and practices of the people to whom he is ministering. In order to understand the customs and practices of British/European society, he must have a broad understanding of the dominant religious trends of that society and the history and philosophical routes of its culture. In order to understand the religious trends, one has to understand the Judaeo-Christian beliefs of their religion and religious history. Here, one has to learn what and how they believe from their sources and their perspectives. Secondly, in order to understand

3 This syllabus owes its origins to Mulla Nizamuddin Sihalwi (d. 1748) who prepared it in the declining years of the Mughal Empire in India. The East India Company bought the rights from the Mughals to administer some provinces in North India where the company had already established its economic and political influence. The rights were conditional on the Company continuing to run the affairs of locals according to legal provisions based upon the *hanafi* school of thought. Any disputes over property, business transactions, or family affairs, including inheritance, were to be decided accordingly. Nizamuddin's syllabus (*Dars-i Nizami*) became the standard for training its staff and civil servants particularly. This syllabus was continuously used for this purpose until 1857, when India came under the direct control of the Crown and its civil servants were no longer obliged to train their staff under this system. Soon after the establishment of the *Dar al-ulum* in Deoband, in 1866, it adopted the syllabus to train future religious leaders, albeit with some modifications.

today's Britain (and Europe), one has to understand its history and the impact of the Enlightenment. I stated to the audience that if I am wrong in my understanding they should please correct me. If not, that then something was wrong there. After a long silence, a senior Imam stood up and said that what I had said I was right but that they did not know how to go about it.

A generation of young men and women has been sent to such *madrassas* and "pushed through the mill" of *dars-i nizami*. What is required is to identify the kind of future Imams needed in Britain/Europe and to revisit and rewrite the syllabus and training courses so as to produce effective religious leadership. An Imam is not simply an Imam who is in the front to lead daily prayers but an effective, articulate leader/Imam for the community, for the neighbourhood, and for the country.

I stated earlier in this document that some of the *madrassas* are trying to validate their courses in England. In the Netherlands, attempts were made to bring together the local culture and the teaching of Islamic sciences. They have also tried to address the practical needs of Muslim communities in the country, like counselling, but this is in its early stages. Such experiments are being repeated elsewhere as well. The Christian experience is different. The training of a priest does not have to be separate from university. The Muslim situation somehow demands that the training of an Imam has to be conducted in a particular way. A student is expected to learn at the feet of a master, and competence is gained through reading and understanding certain books under his supervision. The learned master or teacher is not only a teacher in a generic sense but also a person who helps to enhance a student's knowledge and further helps in his/her spiritual living, thereby building moral character. Once the teacher is satisfied with the progress of a student, he will issue an *ijazah*, which provides the student with a licence to teach, but also connects him/her with a continuous chain (*silsilah*) of spiritual descent. A student receives knowledge in a confessional and obedient way. Here, learning "Islamic Sciences" is to guide the communities in spiritual development. "Islamic Studies" does not have such an obligation.

The situation in Germany is unique in the sense that the churches have a strong voice in the appointment of professors at the universities' theology departments. The *nihilo obstat* clause means that a bishop has the final say in the appointment of a professor in the theological disciplines. Muslims have a similar opportunity in Germany to have their say in the appointment of professors. Perhaps European governments would prefer such arrangements, whereby a future Muslim religious leader is couched in a particular frame of leadership. Confessional identity is good but should be challenging and should question some of the received notions of people's faith. Are Muslim communities ready to accept

a university graduate who is not trained through other channels to lead them? Only time will tell.

One question that emerges quite often in conversations among academics and policymakers is whether Muslims can be trusted to train their own religious leaders in Europe? The quote from a German report cited at the top of this piece is a reminder of that. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is still the case. A senior lecturer at a reputable university in England told me that a respected colleague in his department made it clear that a Muslim academic's work could not be measured at the same level as theirs or their colleagues; implying that Muslims are unable to engage critically with their own traditions.

There is now another area of Islamic Studies that requires considerable rethinking and investment in the future: the increasing crises on European shores with refugees traumatised by war and displacement who are also in need of support and support structures. The future of Islamic Studies has great potential to expand in a direction it has never travelled before. The growing Muslim population in Europe is increasingly a young and vibrant generation<sup>4</sup>, with unique needs. The increasing refugee crisis includes families, but a large proportion of these refugees are young. This in itself generates trauma and psychological issues that require not only professional and cultural attention but also demand a religious response to such needs. Moreover, the increasing number of Muslim prisoners in European jails is also of major concern to Muslim countries. An increasing number of young Muslims are in prisons that have no adequate support network and spiritual guidance during a time of acute need.<sup>5</sup> There are also other areas, such as health care, schooling and higher education, and community needs, where spiritual support is also essential. I believe that there is an urgent need to explore and develop a *Fiqh of Khidmah* or a theology of service. Islamic Studies also need to move in this direction through research, developing courses and training. Areas such as chaplaincy, mental health, refugees and their needs, anxiety, depression and emotional well-being are vital and require professional and academic development because universities have a responsibility towards their communities.

The independent Christian colleges were increasingly enticed to enter into agreement with the universities that had theological departments, albeit under pressure for conformity with the regulatory agencies. The subsequent "agreements" were discontinued, however, and eventually the colleges merged with the departments with which they had the agreements. Muslim colleges that have ad-

4 See Pew Research Center: [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/19/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/19/5-facts-about-the-muslim-population-in-europe/), accessed 20 January 2018.

5 See for example in England and Wales, the House of Commons Library, Briefing Papers 20/04/17 UK Prison Population, pp. 14. See also [www.adamsmith.org/blog/are-70-of-france-prison-inmates-muslims](http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/are-70-of-france-prison-inmates-muslims), accessed 20 January 2018.

opted the validating route may have to face these challenges as well. “Compliance” that meant fulfilment of rules and regulations may turn into full submission, thereby relinquishing the idea of an independent Islamic Studies department. Fairness, freedom and flexibility, in introducing and running courses according to the needs of their “clients,” may slowly erode and conform to the ethos of the secular department of religious or theological studies. One such example in England is the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, which encouraged colleges with theological foundations to become universities in their own right, but these new universities had then increasingly to adopt the government’s rules and regulations. As a result, their Christian identity has become largely irrelevant.

How do you educate others about the current situation regarding Islamic Studies, and especially its issues and challenges? One way is to participate in national and international forums. But how do you share and learn about each other? A simple answer is to visit their websites and engage with them individually. Another way is to have face-to-face meetings, whereby modalities may be explored. But it is important that the conversation continues.

Here, I would like to highlight that the Balkan states have their own unique historical and contextual experiences. They should continue to exchange ideas among themselves but they also need to share their experiences with others. In Europe, the institutions created by Muslims or Muslim endowments to teach in *madrassa* education as well as in the higher education sector are unique. They have gone through a series of trials and tribulations over the years and are only recovering under new regimes. But their history and their experiences may have something to offer us.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, I would like to highlight two points. First, we are living in a “plural” society with multiple identities. People who *believe* are living and working in a world largely suspicious of religions or even “ignorant” of faith – of Islam most prominently. For the post-modern culture, religion is an annoying presence; a legacy and a reminder of an archaic world. This also includes our own “fanatics” with one-track religious mindsets. Against this background, I believe that there is an obligation on our part to find partners in research and to encourage and involve them in teaching and in planning projects. Here, religions – Islam included – are *not* called upon to stand against the inheritance of Enlightenment. Its legacy in Europe of freedom of the individual and conscience, gained after a long struggle, needs to be appreciated, albeit critically. There is a need to have a dialogue of different epistemologies and, through that, to create a new language of research and learning.

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6 Ahmet Alibasic, “Islamic Higher Education in the Balkans: A Survey”, *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, Jorgen S. Nielsen (et.al.) (ed.), Vol. 2, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2010), pp. 619–634.

Secondly, while we have been talking about Islamic Studies, its definition as an independent discipline is widely contested. There are those who believe that Islamic Studies has its own core subjects and methodologies. Others suggest that the subject does not have the core make-up of a discipline.<sup>7</sup> Islamic Studies today can be found in almost every other discipline, such as Politics, History, Sociology, Business and Finance, and because of that it does not have its own “home”. This is a challenge we need to keep in mind.

## Islamske studije: izazovi i budućnost

### Sažetak

Cilj ovog rada jeste doprinijeti razumijevanju izazova i budućnosti islamskih studija u današnjim evropskim zemljama. Rad počinje kratkim objašnjenjem razvoja pojmova „islamske studije“ i „islamske nauke“. Također, u njemu se diskutiraju izazovi i budućnost obrazovnih institucija u Zapadnoj Evropi u smislu procesa prenošenja znanja i njegovog prihvatanja u pravnim sistemima evropskih zemalja. Naposljetku, rad podstiče aktere visokog islamskog obrazovanja u Evropi da formuliraju novi jezik istraživanja i nauke kroz dijalog različitih epistemologija i da ponude novu definiciju islamskih studija kompatibilnu sa savremenim kretanjima.

**Ključne riječi:** islamske studije, muslimanske zajednice, univerziteti, islamsko obrazovanje, visoko obrazovanje.

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7 For other definitions, see Siddiqui, A., (2007), *Islam at Universities: Meeting the Needs and Investing in Future* (2007), pp. 27 – 30. [www.islamic-foundation.org.uk/Resources/siddiqui\\_report2007.pdf](http://www.islamic-foundation.org.uk/Resources/siddiqui_report2007.pdf) or [dera.ioe.ac.uk/6500/1/Updated%20Dr%20Siddiqui%20Report.pdf](http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/6500/1/Updated%20Dr%20Siddiqui%20Report.pdf), accessed 20 January 2018.

A comprehensive definition has been provided by Jacques Waardenburg in *Muslims as Actors: Islamic Meanings and Muslim Interpretations in the Perspective of the Study of Religion* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), pp. 109:

1. The Quran, *ilm al-Hadith* (study of tradition), and other recognized *‘ulum al-din* (Islamic religious sciences), including the study of law (*fiqh*), theology (*kalam*); 2. The history of Islamic civilization and religion; 3. The study of Muslim societies past and present; 4. Relations between Islam and other civilizations/religions and between and between Muslim and other societies/communities.