



## **Global Politics of Knowledge Production: The Challenges of Islamization of Knowledge in The Light of Tradition Vs Secular Modernity Debate**

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### **Abstract**

This paper argues that the main objective of the 'Islamization of knowledge' project is to assert Muslim ownership over their institutions by developing an alternative system of learning/knowledge production that serves as a foundation for re-inventing/renewing the Islamic traditions to cope with the multitude of challenges that Muslims face today. These challenges stem from a number of intertwining factors that influence this process, including the modern advances that accompanied the colonial and post-colonial developments that shaped and reshaped the intellectual culture and institutions of Muslim and non-Muslim societies precisely by allowing Western methodological approaches to set the agenda and the objectives of the schools. Accordingly, proponents of the Islamization of knowledge such as Naquib al-Atas, Ismail al-Faruqi, Taha Jaber al-Alwani, and others have developed their own different approaches to the production of knowledge and in so doing have generated a philosophical discourse that offers a critique of modern/Western knowledge and its epistemological and methodological assumptions. What, therefore, has been the outcome of the Islamization of knowledge project in terms of producing, for instance, Islamic social sciences, broadly defined, in the areas of, say, economics, sociology, political science, and so on? How have normative teachings of Islam, its ethical concerns, and Muslim efforts to come to terms with modernity (an ideology that carries the values and ideas of triumphant capitalism and secularism) been incorporated into these disciplines to counter or respond to Western hegemony and Eurocentric and orientalist order of knowledge? Finally, have Muslims succeeded in bringing together scholars of the text (fuqaha) and scholars of the context (experts in different fields of knowledge from social sciences to sciences) to deal with pressing modern problems that require new interpretations? This paper will attempt to answer some of these questions.

**Keywords:** Islamization, Reform, Education

## INTRODUCTION

This is the context within which one can understand Muslim efforts to reshape modernity as it impacts the contemporary state of higher religious and, in some cases, non-religious education in Muslim countries although such attempts have not been without challenge. The origins of this proposed faith-based learning as championed by some Muslim thinkers/reformers is fostered by the felt need to challenge Western imperial and epistemic assumptions. It is a response to the marginalization of Islam and its intellectual traditions (i.e. orientalism) as a function of, among other things: the relationship between the social sciences as they have developed in the West and the formation of empire in support of a certain social order; the West's establishment of a global presence followed by a willingness of the state (and corporate foundations) to support and subsidize the production of this knowledge that is crucial to the project of managing the military-commercial empire; and the domination of knowledge production by Western scholars whose methodological approaches have set the agenda and the goals of educational institutions all over the world, much to the detriment of traditional Islamic schools and their system of education.

It was in response to such challenges that in 1977 the First World Conference on Muslim Education was convened in Makka and was attended by 313 scholars, including Naquib al-Attas (from Malaysia) and Ismail al-Faruqi (based in the US), who came from different parts of the Muslim world. Its purpose was to suggest ways in which Muslims could effectively deal with the educational issues that they faced and in particular the existence of a parallel system that favored secular over Islamic schools. Earlier Muslim reformers such as Syed Ahmad Khan of India (1865-1935), Syed Jamal ad-Din Afghani (1838-1897) and others after them saw educational reform as the way forward. Nevertheless, after 1977, the focus was now on totally restructuring, redefining and reorienting it in a totally new Islamic direction (al-Attas, al-Faruqi, Abu Sulayman and others being among the pioneers). For this reason, the conference in Makka and others like it in different parts of the Muslim world (Islamabad 1980, Jakarta 1982, Cairo 1987, Malaysia 2009 etc) marked a turning point in such efforts and set events in motion that led to, for instance, in 1981 the founding of an International Institute of Islamic Thought/IIIT in Herndon, Virginia, in the U.S. (with a global network of liaisons in many Muslim countries, Western Europe, the Middle East, and Asia). This was accompanied by the establishment of the International Islamic Universities in Malaysia [IIUM] in 1983 and the foundation in 1980 and later restructuring in 1985 of the International Islamic University in Pakistan. Furthermore, in support of this alternative Islamic education, there was a pledge, for instance, by Indonesia's UINM in East Java to promote Arabic education for first-year university students and to encourage them to memorize the Qur'an before they began their specialization in the different fields of humanities and technology in the following years.<sup>1</sup>

Similar institutions were established in different parts of the Muslim world. In the USA the formation of ISNA/Islamic Society of North America (growing out of the existing MSA/Muslim Student Associations of North America) also led to the creation of professional associations such as the Islamic Medical Association, the Association of Muslim Social Scientists

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Syukri Salleh, Strategizing Islamic Education. *International Journal of Education and Research* (1)6, 2013: 4.

and Associations of Muslims Scientists and Engineers which were housed in the same building as the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in Herndon, Virginia. Their purpose was to examine, debate, and define Muslim perspectives on social issues of global concern. By 1984 IIIT had established the American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences. In 1996 IIIT founded the SISS/School of Islamic Social Sciences in Leesburg, Virginia.

### **The Genesis of the Islamization of Knowledge Project**

It is important to point out that the idea of “Islamization” of knowledge is produced within the context of ongoing Western hegemony and the Eurocentric and orientalist order of knowledge that has its origins in the colonial period and has been consolidated in the post-Cold War era. Put simply, the genealogy of this proposed Islamization or faith-based learning (as championed by some Muslim thinkers/reformers) is generated by a felt need to challenge Western imperial and epistemic assumptions. It is a response to the othering of Islam and its intellectual traditions (i.e. orientalism) as a function of, among other things,<sup>2</sup> the relationship between the social sciences as they have developed in the West and the formation of empire in support of a certain social order; the West's establishment of a global presence followed by a willingness of the state (and corporate foundations) to support and subsidize the production of this knowledge that is crucial to the project of managing the military-commercial empire; and the domination of knowledge production<sup>3</sup> by Western scholars whose methodological approaches have set the agenda and the goals of educational institutions all over the world, much to the detriment of traditional Islamic schools and their system of education. Clearly, therefore, knowledge production in the post-Enlightenment period is seen (by Muslim critics) as reflecting the interests, values, and epistemologies of the Western powers whose cultural matrices have become the standard elements for defining the universal, with respect to developing concepts, theories, and methods to explain and interpret different phenomena.

But first what is “Islamization” of knowledge and what does it aim to achieve? Needless to point out, the basic assumptions of this knowledge project are linked to the movement for the restoration of Islam and, by extension, Islamic education to their rightful place/position before they were derailed by modern secular developments that we have alluded to and developments from within the Muslim Umma of abandoning critical thinking in favor of taqlidism. In other words, the sub-text here is one of Islamic reform to end what is seen as an educational and civilizational crisis of legitimacy and identity for Muslims.<sup>4</sup> This crisis has forced Muslims to live in the shadow of ineffective political systems (authoritarian rulers), uneven economic development, inequalities and injustice, and military defeats at the hands of colonial and post-colonial Western powers and their proxies in the Muslim countries.

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<sup>2</sup> David Nugent, *Knowledge and Empire: The Social Sciences and United States Imperial Expansion, Identities*, 17:1, 2010: 9-44, DOI: 10.1080/10702890903458838

<sup>3</sup> E.W. Said, (1978) *Orientalism*. (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1978); Talal Asad, “Trying to Understand French Secularism.” In Hent De Vries & Lawrence E. Sullivan (eds.), *Political Theologies: Public religions in a Post-secular World*. (NY: Fordham University, 2006); and Saba Mahmood, Secularism Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation. *Public Culture* 18(2), 2006: 323-347.

<sup>4</sup> A.H. AbuSulayman, Islamization of Knowledge: A First Step to Integrate and Develop the Muslim Personality and Outlook. *Islam: Source and Purpose of Knowledge*. (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1988).

It follows, therefore, that the purpose of Islamization of knowledge is first and foremost to manage or to address the problems posed by the dual system of education in Muslim countries (contemporary secular/Western-oriented social sciences, humanities, technical and applied sciences on one hand and Islamic sciences/transmitted religious knowledge on the other hand that is considered limited, uncritical and, to some, even supposedly “outdated”) that they see as having created a major crisis in Muslim education. This speaks to the reality of European style educational institutions established during the colonial period that exist in competition with the religious educational system making the two mutually exclusive.

Accordingly, the new methodology proposed by scholars or Islamizers such as Jabir al-Alwani is to identify and articulate the relationship between revelation and the real world of existence.<sup>5</sup> Alwani for one outlines a number of steps from which the concept of the Islamization of knowledge may proceed.<sup>6</sup> These steps include: articulating the Islamic paradigm of knowledge; developing Qur’anic methodology plus the methodology for dealing with the Qur’an and Sunnah; and reexamining the Islamic Intellectual Heritage as well as dealing with the Western Intellectual Heritage. Whether this programmatic road map and others like it have been realized will be the focus of a later section of this paper.

The above notwithstanding, it is important to point out that the major proponents of Islamization of knowledge are mostly Western or dual trained (for instance, Naquib al-Attas and Hossein Nasr) and a few (for instance, Taha Alwani) solely Islamic trained who debate modernization, indigenization (associated with Sardar and others) and nativization (Nasr’s mystical orientation) approaches. They seek to reunify knowledge bifurcated between rational/modern and religious/Islamic sciences.<sup>7</sup> What they seek is not to oppose or discredit science but to construct a Muslim modernity using intellectual arguments.

With respect to their views and programmatic orientation, the Islamization of knowledge scholars see themselves as occupying a middle position between the traditional ulama who (lacking the critical spirit needed for our modern age) are seen as having retreated to the comfort of the past tradition and have no modern solutions to offer<sup>8</sup> and the secularists who have accepted and advocated imitation of the West.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, unlike the secularists, the Islamizers are first and foremost champions of Qur’an and Sunna, deploy ijihad to interpret or reinterpret Islamic sources, and see themselves as bringing together the universal principles of Islam and the Western scientific and technical traditions. For them the reform of education is possible by integrating the Islamic and Euro-American style of educational system through the

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<sup>5</sup> Leif Stenberg, “The Islamization of Science: Four Muslim positions Developing an Islamic Modernity,” *Ph.D. dissertation*. Lund Studies in History of Religions. Department of Religious Studies, Lund University, 1996; Christopher Furlow, “Islam, Science, and Modernity: From Northern Virginia to Kuala Lumpur.” *Ph.D. dissertation*. Department of Anthropology, University of Florida, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> T.J. al-Alwani, *The Islamization of Knowledge: Yesterday and Today*. *AJISS* (12),1. 1995.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Furlow, “Islam, Science, and Modernity: From Northern Virginia to Kuala Lumpur.” *Ph.D. dissertation*. Department of Anthropology, University of Florida, 2005: 14-16.

<sup>8</sup> Manzoor P., *The Crisis of Muslim Thought and the Future of the Ummah*. In Z. Sardar (ed.), *An Early Crescent: The Future of Knowledge and the Environment in Islam*. (London: Mansell,1989); Sardar Z., *Islamic Futures: The Shape of Ideas to Come*. (London: Mansell, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Bassam Tibi, *Islam’s Predicament with Cultural Modernity. Religious Reform and Cultural Change*. (NY and London: Routledge: 2009).

Islamization of social sciences and humanities as a starting point.<sup>10</sup> They insist that to make knowledge production connected to its beneficial use (not to capitalist, consumerist, militarist culture) it has to be ethically grounded in spirituality. This calls for reviving the old methods of ethical restraints along with incorporating the idea of service to humanity as part of the efforts to reform the educational system.

### **Case Study of SISS run by IIIT in Leesburg, Virginia**

In order to produce an alternative knowledge system/s new institutions need to be created to chart the way forward. This is what IIIT hoped to do when it was founded in Herndon, Virginia in 1981. It was established as a think tank with the dual purpose of organizing conferences, workshops and seminars and also for producing monographs, pamphlets and a quarterly journal AJISS/American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences.<sup>11</sup> These two objectives have been realized as IIIT has a global reach and liason branches in London, Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangla Desh, Nigeria, Egypt, and Morocco. Its most important liason branch was in Malaysia (a source of much of the institute's support), that is, until 1998 when Anwar Ibrahim, the deputy Prime Minister, fell from political grace and the branch office was shut down.<sup>12</sup> IIIT also had a branch in Cairo that has been closed at various times and (as I have been informed) is no longer open today due to the current tense political situation in Egypt under the military regime of al-Sisi. Furthermore, IIIT has played a role in the planning and setting up of some Islamic universities in countries as far apart as Algeria, Jordan, Pakistan and Malaysia.<sup>13</sup>

By 1996 the former head of IIIT in Herndon, Virginia, the Azhari-trained scholar of Islamic jurisprudence, Taha Jabir al-Alwani, a founding member of the Muslim World League in Makka and chairman of the Fiqh council of North America, established the SISS/School of Islamic Social Sciences in Leesburg, Virginia.<sup>14</sup> The purpose of the school was to offer a system of education that could integrate both the Islamic and Western traditions of education and their epistemologies. The basic underlying principle of the SISS educational project (according to Muna Abul-Fadl) was the belief that there is a "unity of knowledge" whose roots are located in "transcendent values drawing on the principle of unicity (the tawhidi episteme)".<sup>15</sup> In other words, it was hoped that they could bring together Tawhid (the transcendent dimension) with ways of knowing or acquiring knowledge that are related to the vocation (al-khilafa) of humans on earth. As Stenberg put it, "The idea is that a classical study of Islam joined with contemporary social science can provide the means to build a vision of a new academy."<sup>16</sup> In other words, Islamization of knowledge project hoped to bring together (in a happy marriage of) Islam, science and modernity.

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<sup>10</sup> A.H. AbuSulayman, *Islamization of Knowledge: A First Step to Integrate and Develop the Muslim Personality and Outlook. Islam: Source and Purpose of Knowledge*. (Herndon: IIIT, 1988).

<sup>11</sup> Ismail R. al-Faruqi, *Islamization of Knowledge: Problems, Principles and Prospective. Islam: Source and Purpose of Knowledge*. (Herndon: IIIT, 1988); and AbuSulayman, *Islamization of Knowledge*, 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Leif Stenberg, "Islam, Knowledge, and 'the West.'" In Birgil Schaebler & Leif Stenberg (eds.), *Globalization and the Muslim World: Culture, religion and Modernity*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004): 95.

<sup>13</sup> Stenberg, *Islam, Knowledge*, 2004: 96

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*; and Furlow, "Islam, Science, and Modernity."

<sup>15</sup> Stenberg, *Islam, Knowledge*, 2004: 96

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

From the very beginning of launching its dual Master's program in 1996 in the two streams/fields—Islamic Studies (for those interested in the academic pursuit of Islam) and Imamology (for those interested in being trained as imams to serve as chaplains in prisons or in the US army), SISS/Graduate School of Islamic Social Sciences struggled to establish its institutional identity. There was a mismatch between what the school promised and what it was able to deliver given its mix of students with different educational backgrounds and different expectations. First, in my conversations with the students who were enrolled at SISS in its first semester of operation I found out that quite a good number were quite unclear as to what SISS's proposed methodology for conducting research or for acquiring knowledge in the elusive "Islamic Social Sciences" was. To complicate matters, those who were being trained to serve as imams had no idea what they were supposed to gain from taking courses such as the "Seminar in the Methodology of Comparative Religion and Civilization" taught by Shaykh Jabir al-Alwani's wife, Dr. Muna Abul-Fadl, a graduate of SOAS in London. Therefore, irrespective of whether they were being educated/trained to be imams or academics of the "Islamic Social Sciences" all the students (less than 20 during the first semester with only four course offerings) had to take the same courses and also complete the same assignments. For instance, in the seminar taught by Dr. Abul-Fadl the students had to read the same books by grand history theorists such as Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee, Pitirim Sorokin and Ibn Khaldun. The purpose was to develop some paradigms and epistemic traditions to guide the new proposed academic study of Islam that SISS proposed and that Muna Abul-Fadl highlighted in her class by attempting to bridge Islamic and Western intellectual epistemologies. Furthermore, to provide courses that had a global and critical content, SISS brought in a big name scholar Professor Ali Mazrui (he flew in once a week from Binghamton, NY) to teach a course on Islam and Politics. Yet, students were unsure as to how taking a course on Islamic law by Shaykh Al-Alwani, a seminar in the methodology of Comparative religion and civilization by Abul-Fadl and a course on Islam and politics by Ali Mazrui contributed to Islamization of knowledge. They all clearly followed different approaches with Alwani being Shariah-oriented in his training, his wife, Abul-Fadl's main focus being on cultural/civilizational heritage and Mazrui's scholarly interest ranging from humanities to comparative political science and international relations.

It is important to note here that the Azhari-trained director of SISS, Shaykh al-Alwani, despite being a pioneer in the field of Islamic legal reform who had written about Islamization of knowledge, *ijtihad* (which he argued had fallen into disuse), ethics of disagreement, Muslim minority jurisprudence, an approach to understanding the Qur'an that did not privilege the opinions/voices of past Qur'anic interpreters, yet he struggled with articulation and application of the Islamization of Knowledge project to realize his vision of the new academy through SISS. His entire education from bachelors to doctorate degrees was in Islamic legal studies from al-Azhar university with no training in the modern social sciences or the academic study of religion. In fact, some of his works that have been written in English have been edited and even rewritten and sometimes reframed in some sections in post-modern language of his London educated wife, Dr. Muna Abul-Fadl. She assisted in redefining and articulating the terms of this bold new intellectual approach that SISS was championing.

One interesting question to ask is why was IIT and its institutional affiliates such as SISS established in the US/the West and not in some majority Muslim country? This goes back

to developments during the mid-twentieth century when the Muslim world was undergoing profound changes economically and politically and in other ways with young people becoming disenchanted with their lives and with the way things were. Some began to migrate whether by choice or to escape persecution and economic difficulties or simply to seek opportunities for further education abroad. The spike in Muslim migration to the West beginning in the late 1960s onwards had profound consequences, including shaping an internal debate within the Muslim communities about Islam. In the following decades, a number of institutes and organizations emerged and with them competing projects to foster/reform Muslim thought or to reform Muslim minds as Tareq Ramadan would put it. One such project was the “Islamization of Knowledge” whose major proponents were Muslims who had been trained both in the East (Islamic education) and in the West.

### **IIUM/The International Islamic University of Malaysia**

Malaysia is one of the countries that has been at the forefront of the Islamization of knowledge project in response to what is seen is the intellectual and epistemological hegemony of the West. What is more, a leading proponent of this project, Naquib al-Attas, lived and taught in Kuala Lumpur. He was among the trailblazers calling for an alternative order of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> It was also in Kuala Lumpur that the IIUM/International Islamic University of Malaysia was established. It was originally funded by OIC (the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference and its chancellor from 1988-1998 was the Saudi scholar, Abdul Hamid AbuSulayman) but now mostly by the Malaysian government that has recently been slashing its funding to universities. This institution and IIT in Herndon, USA (with which it has close ties) and others like them are the location in which Islamic modernity is being constructed and contested.

Malaysia is both an important Muslim country and a former British colony whose educational system was strongly impacted by developments during the colonial period. More specifically, the British colonial education attempted to undermine and even dismantle indigenous thought systems and replace them with the construction of “colonial forms of knowledge” in which, categories were created, for instance, of the “Malay” in Malay studies in which he/she was exoticized as a colonial subject.<sup>18</sup> The outcome of the colonial conquest of epistemological space was that new investigative forms were introduced and colonial masters were conferred with discursive powers to racially define their subjects and, in particular, the Malay Muslim in less flattering way (the “lazy” native) compared to the Chinese (as supposedly “hard-working”) or the Indians who worked in plantation agriculture. Direct colonial rule brought with it European racial theory that negatively impacted the Malay and most especially in the area of education.

Given the above situation, the Islamization of knowledge project in Malaysia found some sympathisers even within the government (for instance, former deputy Prime Minister,

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<sup>17</sup> Sayyid M.N.al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*. (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978).

<sup>18</sup> Azmi Aziz and Shamsul A.B., Colonial Knowledge and the reshaping of Islam, the Muslim and Islamic Education in Malaysia. Kamaruzzaman Bustam-Ahmad & Patrick Jory (eds.), *Islamic Studies and Islamic Education in Contemporary Southeast Asia*. (Kuala Lumpur: Yalyasan Ilmuwan: 2011): 116, 120.

Anwar Ibrahim). As a pioneer institution that attracted both local and international Muslim students and faculty from Muslim countries, IIUM saw as its educational mission (especially in the period between 1988-1999) to integrate revelation and reason in the production of knowledge. It is a university (as Kemal Hassan, former rector of IIUM explains in a videotaped/youtube lecture) that was based on the Islamic philosophy of education to produce graduates whose intellectual and religious values are integrated. This is an alternative to the secular model of education that pays less attention to the spiritual development of the student. The basic assumption here is that there is no human knowledge that is value free; rather, knowledge is value loaded and is colored by one's worldviews and is the product of human mind. So, why should knowledge produced by Muslims not reflect their own cultural and religious values instead of those of the Europeans/Americans? Therefore, IIUM seeks to adopt scientific methods and make them consistent with ethical norms that are derived from the revealed knowledge. This in turn calls for adopting purposeful scientific research agenda as the goal of such Islamic institutions in the Long Run. This means that, according to AbuSulayman (former IIUM chancellor), Islamization of knowledge is a temporary solution that intends to marry Islamic and Western scientific tradition. As he explained, it follows the eclecticism, syncretism and development of new sciences during the period when certain fields of knowledge flourished in the major urban centers of the Muslim world. This means that Islamic institutions have to bring together ethical constraints/restraints with the idea of service to humanity.

Thus the first step to development of a Muslim worldview involves borrowing but then Muslims have to follow this up to produce knowledge that serves their interests. Beyond that Divine knowledge and acquired knowledge (human and social sciences, science and technology, ecology, architecture, economics and so on) have to work together to attain certain goals. In other words, acquired knowledge has to operate within certain ethical constraints to control against unrestrained consumerism and capitalism gone amuck!

### **IAIN/UIN's Higher Institution of Islamic Learning in Indonesia**

Indonesia's five State Institutes for Islamic Studies/IAIN that have since been transformed into fully-fledged universities called UIN (with more autonomy and a clearer mandate) are not seminaries but institutes that in addition to teaching courses in Islamic religious sciences also now offer courses in social sciences, sciences etc. This is part of the long-drawn out effort by the state to integrate these schools into the national development process with a view to ending the separation of Islamic religious sciences from the "secular" sciences. A major outcome of this was the transformation of most madrasahs into public schools so that their graduates could pursue their undergraduate degree programs in either the Islamic or the natural sciences at IAIN.<sup>19</sup> (Azra: 2011, 45). As such, IAIN education is no longer limited to just preparing young people for employment as teachers of Islamic instruction at madrasahs, Islamic boarding schools, public schools and even as teachers of English but also professionals in different fields.

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<sup>19</sup> Azyumardi Azra, "From IAIN to UIN: Islamic Studies in Indonesia." In Kamaruzzaman Bustam-Ahmad & Patrick Jory (eds.), *Islamic Studies and Islamic Education in Contemporary Southeast Asia*. (Kuala Lumpur: Yalyasan Ilmuwan, 2011): 45.

A major difference between IAIN/UIN in Indonesia and, for instance, IIUM in Malaysia is that the former has not embraced the idea of Islamization of knowledge. This is due to the fact that as (Azra explains) UIN sees all knowledge and all sciences as being already Islamic, that is, as being part of the signs of God that are spread all over the universe and that humans have to study. It follows, therefore, that if certain theories in the social sciences and humanities are Western-based then it is the responsibility of the Muslims not to Islamize them but to develop their own theories based on their own socio-cultural realities.<sup>20</sup>

What is happening to Indonesia's IUNs, however, is that there are two competing approaches to the study of Islam that are a product of the faculty being trained in their graduate studies either in the Middle Eastern countries (Makka, Madina and Cairo) or in the last half century in North America and Western Europe. The development of Islam and the tradition of Islamic learning in Indonesia is partly connected to the Islamic intellectual traditions as they developed in the Islamic religious centers of Makka and Madina.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Indonesia also developed its own distinctive intellectual tradition based on intellectual chains of Islamic knowledge (locally linked to Sufism) and learning perpetuated through endogamous marriages among the families involved. More specifically, Nahdlatul Ulama organization has its roots in such a development.

Beyond that, within Indonesia modernization in Islamic education was part of the national development program from the later decades of the twentieth century onwards especially with Muslim intellectuals such as Nurcholis Madjid, Harun Nasution (later rector of IAIN Jakarta) and Mukti Ali (later minister of religious affairs) assuming positions that allowed them to reorient the direction of IAINs.<sup>22</sup> The new orientation encouraged a number of shifts from a single madhhab to a non-madhhab approach and from a normative/idealistic to a socio-historical and empirical approach. The non-Madhhabi-empirical approach is associated with academic training in Western universities whereas the normative/idealistic approach is the outcome of the traditional Islamic learning in the Middle Eastern universities. While there is criticism and counter-criticism by proponents of the two approaches, the two orientations find a meeting place (even if an uneasy one) in IAIN/UIN. The traditionalists ask how Muslims can learn about their religion from non-Muslims whose orientalist approach can only do more harm than good. Yet, it is the modern approach that has allowed Indonesian Muslims to broaden their scope of study to include ideas related to civil society, democracy, gender, and human rights. In other words, Indonesian Islam is enriched by such developments that have relevance to contemporary realities in the country and that manifest themselves in the various forms of local Islam.<sup>23</sup>

Putting aside these internal debates, the purpose of integrating general science (offered in non-religious schools) and religion (taught in Pesantren/Islamic boarding schools) in Islamic

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 45-46.

<sup>21</sup> Azyumardi Azra, *The Origins of Islamic Reformism in Southeast Asia: Networks of Malay-Indonesian and Middle Eastern 'Ulama' in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century*. (Crows Nest, Australia: Asian Studies Association of Australia, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> Azra, "From IAIN to UIN," 51; and Zainal Abidin Bagir and Abdullah Irwan. The Development and Role of Religious Studies: Some Indonesian Reflections. Kamaruzzaman Bustam-Ahmad & Patrick Jory (eds.), *Islamic Studies and Islamic Education in Contemporary Southeast Asia*. (Kuala Lumpur: Yalyasan Ilmuwan, 2011): ch 4.

<sup>23</sup> Azra, "From IAIN to UIN," 52.

Senior high schools in Indonesia was motivated by three factors: first, the need to end the inherited two tiered/dual system of education that tended to privilege secular over religious education; second, the necessity to broaden the course offerings at Islamic schools to include non-religious subjects as a way of preparing them to deal with the challenges of globalization; and third, the political imperative to align Islamic schools with the principles of Pancasila (a convenient political ideology promoted by politicians) or tolerance of diversity in the multi-religious Indonesian society.<sup>24</sup>

### **Critique of the Islamization of Knowledge**

Criticisms against the Islamization of knowledge have been quite wide-ranging and have come from different quarters by both Islamicly oriented as well as secular scholars. For instance, some of these critics point out that there has not been as much thought given to the political ramifications of the Islamization of knowledge/science project perhaps to avoid antagonizing potential donors from the authoritarian Middle Eastern regimes that were involved in running their societies and their educational systems based on Western models while claiming to be promoting Islamic and Arab culture. In the Muslim world science is taught in the service of the state and is connected to economic development agendas. Abaza for one argues<sup>25</sup> that the Islamization of knowledge project was hostage to the needs and vicissitudes of realpolitik and the political machinations of statist elites and politicians who saw in it a convenient vehicle to enhance their own Islamic credentials by sponsoring ostensibly "Islamic" educational initiatives in order to boost their own waning Islamic credibility. In other words, this knowledge project was dependent on state patronage and funding so that IIUM, ISTAC (now part of IIUM with the subsequent removal of al-Attas as the director), IIIT in Cairo could not effect a paradigm shift in thinking on a public scale. Moreover, they have not impacted popular grass-root Muslim understanding of their faith as they are tied to governments for support and patronage.<sup>26</sup>

Some argue that the creation of these academies or institutions function the same way as other Muslims organizations that are focused on preaching/teaching and dissemination of Islam, providing social and health services to the people and campaigning for, where they are allowed to, contesting election and winning political power without which they cannot implement their agenda of Islamization of politics. The suggestion is that Islamization of knowledge similarly serves to promote Islam but in the academic arena while avoiding politics.

Another aspect of this criticism is that debates to define Islamic knowledge and Islamization of science as viewed by proponents of the Islamization project extend to not just humanities and social sciences but also includes the natural sciences. The purpose is to create normative modern Islamic thought and impart norms and values of religion. It is precisely for this reason that critics of Islamization of knowledge point out that the Islamizers use themes from the ongoing critical debate on knowledge and science that is carried out in the West. Moreover, they express a view on the relationship between religion and science that the

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<sup>24</sup> T.M. Rahmatullah, "Integrating Science and Religion: An Analysis on the Policy of the Government at Senior High School/Madrasah Aliyah." *TARBIYA: Journal of Education in Muslim Society* (1), 2016: 48.

<sup>25</sup> Mona Abaza. *Debates on Islam and knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt*. (London & NY: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>26</sup> See Farish Noor's review of Mona Abaza's book: *Debates on Islam and Knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt: Shifting World*. *H-Gender-Mideast Review August 2003 at this url* <https://networks.h-net.org/node/6386/reviews/6610/noor-abaza-debates-islam-and-knowledge-malaysia-and-egypt-shifting>.

Westerners do not or may not necessarily share. For instance, Abdus Salam rejects the view that a specifically Islamic science exists; for him science and religion are two separate entities.<sup>27</sup> Most unconvincing to such critics is, for instance, Hossein Nasr's claim (stemming from his critique of cultural relativism) that the Qur'an embodies the principles of science and hence it is possible to speak of Islamic science. For them that is not possible as science is a changing body of knowledge with some accepted theories being debunked and new ones proposed. Hence Nasr arguments against science in the West are considered to be over-simplified.

Some argue that the problems that Muslims face lie somewhere else. More specifically, the general crisis of **modernization**, characteristic of most of the Muslim world since the late 1960s, that has been the justification for re-Islamization, also represents an intellectual crisis, in which the questions have been about the relationship of the Muslim to their own past, to the heritage of this past (a contested terrain), and, within this, to Islam itself. They have to determine first what aspects belong to the competence of Islam. Thus this on-going re-Islamization is taking place in a twenty-first century environment, in an over-reaching capitalist world order characterized by an accelerated process of globalization, with Muslims being impacted in an asymmetric position. Their solutions or diagnoses have to take this crisis into consideration.

Beyond that, the secular Muslim nationalist intellectuals as well as the religious intellectuals have both failed to provide an appropriate answer to the problem of the relationship between Islamic authenticity and modernization. There are competing interpretations among Muslims who lack an **organizational** center similar to the Vatican or catholic church whose voice, for the most part, could go unchallenged. What exists are competing interpretations and this should come as no surprise as Islam has always been characterized by diversity. The Saudis have attempted to change this by using their petro-dollars to promote a literalist Islam all over the Muslim world and their efforts received further impetus after the success of the Islamic revolution in Iran that emerged as a major rival to Sunni Saudi Arabia. This further polarization of the Muslim world between Sunni (led by Saudi Arabia) and Shia (led by Iran) has sharpened the divisions, mainly political in nature but projected as Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict.

Other critics have noted that the Islamization of knowledge project/s have not contributed much needed tools necessary for connecting social science with the Islamic knowledge. Their presupposition that the Islamization of knowledge approach may be juxtaposed with a Western approach (for instance, the position of AbuSulayman that borrowing from the west is a temporary measure) with both the Islamic and Western approaches representing two distinct isolatable categories is simplistic, reductionist and unrealistic. As Hanafi put it,<sup>28</sup> "In identifying a *singular* and monolithic "Western" tradition, the Islamization trajectory seemingly ignores the "inter-paradigmatic" diversity such as the axiomatic differences between the Marxist school whose units of analysis is primarily class-based and the Functionalist approach which marginalizes those class-based units of analysis. A cursory glance at the diverse paradigms within so-called "Western" sociology demonstrates that these competing trajectories

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<sup>27</sup> Abdus Salam, *Ideals and Realities. Selected Essays of Abdus Salam*. edited by C.H. Lai (Singapore: World Scientific, 1987).

<sup>28</sup> Sari Hanafi, "Islamization of Social Science: a Critical Assessment." *Almustaqbil al-Arabi*. Beirut: CAUS, issue: 451, 2016: 45-64.

cannot be reduced into one school.” This is also true in the fields of the Islamic social sciences where generalizations cannot be made about all the different fields.

Because of the knowledge gap between the traditionally trained religious scholars (or scholars of the text as Tareq Ramadan calls them) and Muslim social scientists (scholars of the context) Muslim societies have not been as sufficiently involved in the production and consumption of knowledge as have their counterparts in the West. The IIIT and its American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences have attempted, especially in the 1990s, to “indigenize” social sciences (that have an empirical focus involving studying and describing the world as it is) that unlike Islamic sciences do not deal with normative paradigms (informing believers what they ought to do). What is needed, therefore, are humanities and social science scholars who have been trained in the traditional Islamic religious sciences and can deal competently and from different angles with modern issues that Muslims face.

To complicate matters, it is not even clear what it means to Islamize something? Does it mean simply to place a label over what the West has already produced or does it mean to apply theories, methodologies, for instance, of Western economics to Islamic economics (influenced by Keynesian economics)<sup>29</sup> by a bit of tinkering here and there and by attaching an Islamic financial understanding to it? Neither will do and neither advances the Islamic system of knowing. This explains why progress has been slow and the yields minimal. Major research grants and institutional support are needed to further these efforts and to make Muslims important participants in the discourses on Muslims. Yet, as critics have pointed out, these efforts should be devoid of ideology with the first item of business being for Muslims (tapping on the contributions of Muslim classical thinkers) to develop theories that incorporate the ethical and welfare-promoting social sciences that Muslims see as lacking in the Western educational system.

It comes as no surprise that it is not possible to implement Islamization of knowledge as a full-fledged program unless there is a total reconstruction of society as a pre-condition to promoting the Islamization project.<sup>30</sup> The cultural transformation of Muslim society along the lines espoused by reformist-minded Muslims has not even happened. Moreover, Islamization of knowledge is not possible (as some have argued) since Islamic science itself before the period of European ascendancy in different areas was on the path to modern science (whatever that means). For critics the proponents of Islamization want to cast all knowledge into a form of parochial, religiously charged form of knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

At this point it may be asked why, for instance, the IIIT plan has not attracted many natural scientists but mainly those in the humanities and social sciences? This is due to the fact that this think tank considers much of science (with some exceptions such as evolutionary biology) to consist of objective disciplines that do not contravene Islamic principles in contrast to the social sciences that are subjective and have ideological implications.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Syed Farid Alatas, “The Sacralization of the Social Sciences: A Critique of an Emerging Theme in Academic Discourse.” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 40e Année, 91, 1995: 89-111.

<sup>30</sup> Behrooz Ghumari-Tabrizi, Is Islamic Science Possible. *Social Epistemology* (10)3/4, 1996: 317-330.

<sup>31</sup> Toby E. Huff, “Can Scientific Knowledge be Islamized?” *Social Epistemology* 10(3/4), 1996: 305-316.

<sup>32</sup> Jamal Maimouni, “A reply to What Islamization is Not.” *MAAS Journal of Islamic Science* 3(1), 1987: 88.

Some have argued that the way forward for institutions such as the IIT and others in Muslim countries is for creation of new knowledge that calls for freedom of thought and discussion, encouragement of creativity and innovation, and toleration of dissent and diversity. It requires a mindset that can entertain ambiguity, one that does not hasten to discard potential spoilers of legacies long established as sacred. As Fazlur Rahman noted,<sup>33</sup>

*“...we must not be enamored over making maps and charts of how to go about creating Islamic knowledge. Let us invest our time, energy and money in the creation, not of propositions, but minds... My plea, therefore, is that we create thinkers, those who have the capacity to think constructively and positively. We cannot lay down rules for them to think...one can certainly criticize and reject propositions [in Western philosophy and social science] that seem to us incompatible with Islamic principles...one can always do that, but one can and must also do that with the Muslim thinkers of the past...Even then, however, judgement and criticism is not the end but only the first step in the discovery of new knowledge, which is the true goal of an Islamic intellectual.”*

### **Challenges of Islamization**

The Islamization of knowledge project despite its shortcomings is a legitimate response to deepening Euro-American economic, political and military involvement in the Muslim world. Seen from this perspective, Islamization of knowledge is an alternative worldview albeit not well developed to the growing Western triumphalism with its unbounded consumerism, unrestrained militarism and its dominant discourse of liberal capitalism with different reactions in various regions of the world.<sup>34</sup>

There is no denying the fact that Western social sciences are implicated in their supportive role in empire building and in their being associated with efforts to control infrastructure, educational systems, political institutions, social and family relationships and even the religious lives of those who once were part of their empire. They control academic enterprise and the production of knowledge by virtue of which they influence and direct the academic enterprise with a large contingent of its researchers venturing out into the world to expand knowledge for the purpose of control and profit or material gain. The West through its legion of scholars who study and critique other societies, frame and dominate discourses on knowledge.<sup>35</sup> For instance, the Western social sciences are presented as authoritative ways of knowing through their methodologies, theories, structures of inquiry etc. Yet the goals and methods that are associated with this process also included Christian missionary activities, including missionary domination of the educational system in many countries, and Western military occupations.<sup>36</sup>

Social sciences study humans in their natural and constructed environments with specific goals in mind. Control in the production of this knowledge (one of its major goals) allowed for influence and even control of the representation of its subject and public policies. All of this was not done in a social and political vacuum but in the context of efficient surveillance and military control of subjects by colonial governments and later by post-colonial

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<sup>33</sup> Fazlur Rahman, “Islamization of Knowledge: A Response.” *Islamic Studies* (50)3/4, 2011: 449-457.

<sup>34</sup> Noor on Abaza, ‘Debates on Islam and Knowledge in Malaysia.’

<sup>35</sup> See Asad, *Trying to Understand French Secularism*; Mahmood, *Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire*; & Nugent, *Knowledge and Empire*.

<sup>36</sup> Aminah B. McCloud, *Islamization of the Social Sciences: A Personal Reflection*. In Imtiyaz Yusuf (ed.), *Islam and Knowledge: Al-Faruqi's Concept of Religion in Islamic Thought*. (London & NY: I. B. Taurus, 2012): ch 16.

ones that replicated these methods. The West produces knowledge based on its interests to understand itself and other societies that it seeks to influence, if not control outright, and to sell its products to them. Ethical concerns, issues of justice, fairness, compassion and mercy are not the driving motive or principles on which these studies are based.<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, the challenge for institutions such IIT and others like it continues to be how to put the traditional Islamic studies in conversation with the modern academic approaches to the study of subjects in the humanities, social sciences and sciences based on rigorous research, theorizing, advancing knowledge etc that are a key factor in the institutional identity of universities. Hopefully, something has been learnt from past mistakes and the setbacks they have experienced along the way. Today SISS [School of Islamic Social Sciences] does not exist anymore; instead, there is the Fairfax Institute that has more modest objectives compared to SISS. It offers a certificate in Imam and Muslim community leadership in cooperation with the Hartford Seminary. It also offers a certificate of Islamic thought for imams, chaplains, and any interested students. In addition the IIT-run AJISS/American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences continues to publish high quality papers. Moreover, IIT continues to sponsor annual conferences in Herndon, Virginia in which speakers are invited to make contributions on different subjects.

Incidentally, although IIT is seen as being apolitical and hence is not perceived as a threat by those in government; yet after 9/11 2001 its leadership came under increasing scrutiny as part of the process of viewing American Muslims through the lenses of security. For instance, its director, Taha al-Alwani (like other leaders of American Muslim organizations in the immediate post-9/11 era) became a person of interest to FBI and was the target of search warrants, observation and continuous questioning that in the end he decided to leave the country and settle in Cairo, Egypt.

As for IIUM in Malaysia, it has continued to face budget cuts (many of the foreign faculty, have moved on as their work contracts have not been renewed) but continues with its program of offering courses/majors either in the Islamic studies (revealed knowledge) in which fluency in Arabic and English are required or in other subjects related to the humanities, social sciences, the sciences etc with majors in those disciplines being required to take a certain number of Islam courses that are taught in English. While Islamization of knowledge has not been achieved, yet the legacy of those efforts can be seen in the fact that graduates in economics, sociology, and science subjects have all taken certain required Islamic courses and are familiar at some level with normative teachings of Islam, its ethical concerns and its efforts to produce graduates who are professionally and Islamicly oriented. These are all part of the concerted modest efforts to come to terms with modernity (an ideology that carries the values and ideas of triumphant capitalism and secularism) and to counter or respond to Western hegemony and Eurocentric and orientalist order of knowledge. While they still have a long way to go but at least they have produced students who have been trained at the MA and Ph.D. levels in, for instance, Islamic Economics (though it is still not clear what is Islamic Economics) and similar disciplines that did not exist before quite apart from the usual Qur'anic, Hadith, Shariah, and other Islamic subjects. They still need to bring together scholars of the text (fuqaha) and scholars

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

of the context (experts in different fields of knowledge from social sciences to sciences) to deal with pressing modern problems that require new interpretations.

## **CONCLUSION**

This paper concludes by noting once more that the attempts to Islamize the social sciences are still a long way off their intended target or outcome. While the proponents of the Islamization project have produced a modest but growing body of literature that critiques power differentials between the Muslim world and the Western world, nonetheless, they have not succeeded even within the Muslim world in reframing the intellectual/philosophical discourses on knowledge and knowledge production. Moreover, a key and crucial institution of Islamization such as IIUM, as we have suggested, has lost its international footing as financial circumstances have forced it to retreat into a Bumiputera-driven Malaysian policy of promoting indigenous/Malay in employment positions at IIUM. This has weakened IIUM's original pan-Islamic mandate, if we may call it that, to supposedly lead the Muslim ummah in all branches of knowledge. That has not happened whether in Malaysia or anywhere else. To overcome this current state of affairs, therefore, it is suggested that the proponents of Islamization may need to first engage not just the academic scholars of religion/Islam but also broadly Muslim social scientists, humanists, and even scientists by creating, for instance, multiple forums such as annual academic conferences where papers are presented and scholars debate freely with one another and also suggest possible ways forward to frame or reframe this discussion. Perhaps even the label "Islamization" should be considered to be dropped altogether as to some it begs the question as to why knowledge needs to be Islamized. Is there a need to create new "disciplines" that are informed by Islamic teachings and ethics and emerge out of its scriptural worldview? Is this the way out of having to "Islamize" disciplines that have emerged in the West and bear its philosophical, epistemological, and secular imprint? There are no easy answers.

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