

The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities

Project Executive Summary

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Background

Islam has become a major topic of discussion in the United States since September 11, 2001. It has generated a great deal of interest among academic institutions, media outlets, policy makers, think tanks, and various religious groups. Educational institutions across the country are struggling to cope with this increasing interest in Islam as a religion, world civilization, political power, and strategic concern for U.S. national security. Enrollment in introductory and other related courses on Islam and those focused on contemporary Islamic developments has increased substantially at campuses around the country. Several educational institutions have created new positions for teaching Islam in their existing religious studies departments.

Academic circles in the U.S. have also been engaged in two debates in the post- 9/11 environment. One debate focuses on the question of liberal and moderate Islam versus the extremist interpretation of Islam, and who has the legitimate authority to represent and interpret Islam and to exercise *ijtihad* in Islam. The second debate concerns the nature and outcome of Middle East area studies centers. The debate started, ironically, with two contradictory claims. First, Middle Eastern and Islamic scholars have claimed that U.S. study of Islam, the Islamic world, and especially the Middle East has been tainted with anti-Muslim and anti-Arab biases. On the other hand, some think tanks and politicians claim that the academic establishment of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies in the U.S. has been pro-Islam and pro-Arab.

The study of Islam and Muslim societies in the form of area studies programs at American campuses initially arose primarily in response to the post-World War II environment, in which the U.S. emerged as a superpower with immense involvement and political investment in the affairs of the Islamic world. The main objectives of these area studies centers have been to train experts who could do the following: assume positions in government, universities, and in the corporate sectors; inform, educate, and influence the formulation of foreign policy; and produce a body of knowledge that would filter down to public schools and public opinion.

Unlike European universities where the emphasis has been on classical Islamic studies, American universities have remained largely focused on modern Islamic developments. The overwhelming and paradigmatic context of the Cold War defined the programmatic emphasis of scholarly activities in the American academy and procured funds for such activities. Within this context, there was no relevance of traditional scholarship on Islam, such as Arabic philology, textual studies of the Qur'an, hadith, fiqh, and other classical Islamic sciences.

A major failure of Islamic studies and Muslim world area studies programs in American universities has been their total disconnect both from public opinion and the direction and conduct of U.S. foreign policy toward Islamic societies. The intellectual products of the programs have not trickled down to public school systems, popular media, and the public.

School textbooks, popular literature, and media portrayals of Islam, Muslims, and the Islamic world remain full of old (and new) stereotypes, misinformation, outright distortions, and sometimes highly slanderous material.

Project Objectives

In this context, our project sought to undertake a comprehensive examination of the state of Islamic studies in the U.S. today. Social biases and prejudices, the traditions of previous scholarship, and a particular direction of contemporary national policy have all tinted the contents and directions of the field. The current state of relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world, as well the recent debates about Islamic education and study programs in American campuses, have necessitated a thorough and rigorous study of Islam in American universities.

The project, therefore, sought to fill this important need and is intended to achieve the following **objectives**:

1. To understand the historical roots and legacy of the study of Islam and Islamic societies in American academic institutions
2. To critically examine, analyze, and evaluate the current state of Islamic studies in American universities
3. To collect comprehensive data on the programs of Islamic and Muslim world studies in American colleges and universities
4. To prepare case studies of some of the major centers of Islamic studies in the country
5. To critically examine the theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches employed in the study of Islam as a faith, culture, civilization, and history in American academia
6. To disseminate the project's research findings through news articles, panel discussions, academic conferences, brief reports for wider circulation, and a book-length study for broader publication and distribution
7. To stimulate a candid, healthy, and critical debate on the status of Islamic studies in the U.S.

Methodology

Through both qualitative and quantitative research, the project sought to develop an understanding of the origins, history, and growth of the discipline. Our methodological perspective combined an interpretive orientation with the "standard" social scientific approach. That is, besides collecting data through standard social science techniques (review of literature, internet websites, content analysis of selected publications, and structured interviews through questionnaires), we devoted considerable effort to collecting individual narratives of scholars and students through special interviews and informal discussions. These personal narratives, and the interpretive orientation of our research methodology, we believe, was much more enlightening and rewarding in terms of guiding the research and enhancing our understanding of the perception of the actors.

We also achieved a subjectively understandable meaning of their attitudes and behavior regarding conventions of American academic life.

To examine the value and contribution of the Islamic studies programs on American campuses, the project team actively engaged thoughtful scholars, students, and alumni of these programs in panel discussions, focus groups, and dialogue, where they shared their diverse individual and collective experiences. These discussions were held in different U.S. cities.

Through emails, phone calls, and personal meetings, the scholars were asked to provide their syllabi of Islam 101 courses and information on their centers/programs for case studies, and also to answer the questionnaire about the state of Islamic studies in American universities. Some of them were approached to contribute chapters for the research volume.

The project was conducted from May 2004 to December 2007.

Database

A database on Islamic studies in American universities was created, containing 231 programs/departments from 197 educational institutions. They were categorized in three tiers: Tier I offers degree programs in Islamic studies; Tier II offers one or more courses in the field of Islamic studies; and Tier III teaches Islam as a part of world religions or comparative religions courses.

Islam 101

The state of Islamic studies in American universities was analyzed by conducting a survey of 105 introductory courses on Islam (ISLAM 101). The survey report presented an analysis of the characteristics of the instructors, the course goals, required texts and authors, class size for each course, the methods of student evaluation, and the frequency of course offering over the period of semesters or years. The copies of all collected syllabi of the introductory courses on Islam 101 were also included in the report as an appendix.

Case Studies

The project also undertook case studies of selected programs of Islamic studies in representative universities. The information and analyses of the faculty, students, and alumni, source of funding, and impact on the scholarly field was critically examined. Their impact on the religious studies discipline, area studies, linguistic studies, and scriptural studies, international studies, law, history, sociology, political science, and anthropology were also analyzed. The four case studies facilitated our understanding and comprehension of the overall picture of Islamic studies in American academia.

Conversations, Discourse, Dialogue

One of the important parts of the Islamic Studies Project was to assemble groups of prominent scholars in the field and provide them with a forum to discuss the twelve

questions raised in the questionnaire already circulated among them. The questions addressed:

The pertinent issues of comparison of the study of Islam and its intellectual standards with the study of other religions
Focus and subfields of the discipline
Pioneers and their unique contributions to the field of Islamic studies
Role of Christian seminaries, Muslim scholars, emerging indigenous American Muslim scholars, and mainstream professional and academic organizations and learned bodies in the development of the field
Contribution of American scholarship to the field as compared to the contribution of European scholarship
Funding of the programs over the years
The present phase, the future trends, and the impact of 9/11 on the field of Islamic studies

We organized two formal focus group discussion sessions: one at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. and the other at Temple University in Philadelphia. Besides these two formal brainstorming sessions, we mailed the questionnaire to more than seventy professors of Islamic studies. Some scholars were also contacted individually to respond to these questions and share their thoughts, experiences, and observations on the state of Islamic studies in American academia. “Conversations, Discourse, Dialogue” contains the critical thinking and discussion of seventeen scholars on the state of Islamic studies in American universities in a very innovative, systematic, and organized manner. The questionnaire and the list of scholars are also included in the document.

A Research Volume: The State of Islamic Studies in American Universities

A scholarly edited volume was also compiled with twelve chapters, including the introduction. The volume covers a wide variety of topics, including the historical development of the field, Western approaches to Islamic studies, study of Qur’an, gender, and Sufism in Islamic studies programs, conversations with the scholars, and the analysis of Islam 101 courses. The introduction presents a comprehensive overview of the chapters’ findings.

Policy Recommendations

A 22-point policy recommendations document was also created.

Significant Findings

Islamic studies in the U.S. has undergone several stages, and its present state in U.S. academic institutions cannot be understood without taking into account the path taken by the discipline since its early beginnings. There is a general consensus among the scholars that the field of Islamic studies in the U.S., although not yet on par with the study of Christianity and Judaism, has reached a high level of intellectual sophistication in recent years as a result of interventions by a new generation of American scholars of Islam and the Muslim world. This is demonstrated by the body of literature produced in recent years and the consolidation of the various branches within the field.

The discipline of Islamic studies has an assured future in the U.S. due to the following: its own strength as an institutionalized tradition within the American academy; the global status of Islam; and the political, economic, and cultural interests between the U.S. and the Muslim world. The events of 9/11 further created a demand for the growth of Islamic studies in American universities.

Both the consolidation of tradition and the political imperatives associated with Islam and the Muslim world will ensure continued and increased funding for Islamic studies programs by the U.S. government, private foundations, Arab governments, and individual Muslim philanthropists in the U.S.

It was encouraging to note that a general agreement seems to be emerging among teachers as to what should be included in an introductory course on Islam. Themes such as Islamic beliefs and practices, intellectual currents, Islamic history, Islamic sources, and Islam in the modern world were found as the most widely-used course goals in the introductory classes. The gender of the instructor, however, makes a difference of focus in the selection of course topics.

Unlike the general agreement regarding the content of an introductory course on Islam, there was little consensus on the selection of required textbooks for teaching Islam. More than 200 books were used as required texts to cover different parts of the course syllabi. The top four books noted in our analysis were: *An Introduction to Islam* by Fredrick Mathews Denny; *Islam: The Straight Path* by John L. Esposito; *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* by Michael Sells; and *Koran*, translated by N.J. Dawood. Among the authors, Fredrick Mathews Denny, John L. Esposito, Michael Sells, and Fazlur Rahman were found as the top four scholars whose books were used as required texts by the instructors.

There is certainly a strong demand to learn about Islam through academic courses, as the average class size in our analysis was 40-42 students per course. Two-thirds of these courses were offered either every semester or once a year. The methods of evaluating students of these courses seemed fair and comprehensive, as the vast majority of the instructors asked students for active class participation, writing assignments, and mid-term/final examinations.

All instructors teaching an introductory course on Islam have post-graduate degrees from reputable institutions, but many lack genuine expertise and background in Islamic studies as such. Only one out of eight instructors has primary expertise in Islamic studies. The trend to borrow instructors from other disciplines, such as religious studies, political science, history, Middle Eastern languages, and even engineering, is still prevalent in some schools.

The male-female ratio among the instructors was 4:1 and less than one-fourth of the instructors were Muslims.

The study of specialized sub-disciplines within Islamic studies has made considerable strides in recent years, especially in the areas of Sufism, modern Islamic history, Islamic intellectual thought, and contemporary Islamic discourse.

Among the social science disciplines, anthropology seems to have led the way in developing a body of literature with more sensitive, nuanced, and discerning approaches to the study of Islamic societies.

Many scholars noted a new quality primer should be developed to teach an introductory but comprehensive course on Islam, along with a general agreement on a list of quality books as required texts to teach Islam 101.

Recommendations

Some of the pertinent policy recommendations are as follows:

Adopt an Islamic civilization course as part of a general education requirement in all colleges and universities for their undergraduate programs

Develop a new comprehensive primer for introductory level courses (Islam 101) exclusively focusing on the normative structure and Islamic texts with an emphasis on Islam as a living and lived faith

Introduce Islam-related courses in government training institutions such as diplomatic training centers and military academies

Islamic studies programs in American universities and colleges should make proactive efforts to recruit qualified Muslim scholars to teach specialized and advanced courses on Islam and Islamic civilization.

Funding endowment from the American Muslim community to establish at least five chairs in major universities and ten chairs in second-tier universities and reputable liberal arts colleges for teaching Islam and Islamic civilization

In addition, named scholarships for graduate students in Islamic studies and fellowships for dissertation research on topics related to Islam should be sponsored by the American Muslim community through the schools that already have established programs in Islamic studies.

Start a global project for translation of classic Islamic texts and contemporary Islamic literature from major languages of the Muslim world into English

Create exchange programs of Islamic scholars from various parts of the globe with American scholars

Develop a website to disseminate information on the state of Islamic studies in American universities for prospective students, faculty, and interested scholars from all parts of the globe

The project does not claim to have undertaken an all-encompassing and comprehensive investigation into the study of Islam in America in all its facets: religious, cultural, social, economic, and political. What it offers, rather, is a guide to the present state of knowledge about the growth and development of Islamic studies in American universities; an examination of the institutional structures and processes through which the discipline has emerged; and a critical evaluation of the conceptual perspectives and methodological approaches to the study of Islam and the Muslim subject in American campuses.