



The Reform Project

Progressive, enlightened voices from the Arab Muslim world

Towards a

Model Curriculum

*For the reform of the educational syllabus
in the teaching of the humanities*

Part I:

The Case for Educational Reform

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I - Introduction

Indicators of a crisis

As the tragic events steadily unfolding across the world now show – with great swaths of the Muslim world embroiled in war, insurrection and terrorism, with Muslim-majority countries experiencing six out of ten of the deadliest conflicts that are raging today, and represented in seven out of the ten countries experiencing the highest incidences of terrorism – the Muslim world shows worrying symptoms of chronic political failure. This political failure is accompanied by equal failures in social freedoms. Muslim-majority countries regularly score low on indexes of female and minority rights: seventeen out of the twenty countries with the lowest scores on gender equality are Muslim-majority states, as are seven out of ten countries scoring lowest on minority rights.¹

The performance indicators of failure do not stop there. They embrace shortcomings in economic productivity, evidence of paralysing cultural stagnation and a severe religious and moral stasis that appears to place the Muslim communities on a path that promotes, with a perplexing vigour, anachronistic formulas of exclusion, of social and religious hierarchies and hostilities that have long left history's centre-stage. It is as if the Muslim world is proceeding in an alternative gear to the pace of global modernity, oblivious to its complexity, diversity and interconnectedness, and to the enormity of the influences this modernity wields.

The events of the Arab Spring in 2010 where students and university campuses played a significant role in mobilizing public opinion, seemed at one point to presage a new era of liberty and freedom of conscience in the region, and a possibility that a renewed education sector could contribute not just economic growth, but also to social and political change. Subsequent events have tempered this optimism severely, as regional and global attention has become pre-occupied with containing the fallout from armed conflicts.

Yet, as precisely these conflicts have shown – fed as they are by constantly replenished ranks of youth motivated by wayward concepts of identity, heritage, purpose and the nature of truth – the quality, direction and mind-opening function of critical challenge and exchange that the secondary and tertiary educational syllabuses properly task themselves with inculcating, are proving pivotal to the course of these conflicts.

Even without the disastrous toll on the systems and institutions of education which have become caught in the crossfire,² the Muslim world is faced with an unenviable task: to secure in a mere two to three generations what western Europe took centuries to achieve, with all the unsettling social and cultural shifts that the political and economic upheavals generated over that tumultuous period. The centrifugal forces of change, unleashed on such as scale and pace, mean that the world is a very different place from that which incubated and conditioned the Islamic heritage. With the loss of certainties under an unstoppable globalising wave, the survival of any one culture, and the continuity of its heritage, is dependent upon how supple its intellectual mechanisms have been maintained for the task of adaptation.

For the complexity, diversity and interconnectedness of the modern world cannot possibly match all of the individualised particularities of its constituent cultures down to the last detail. As Dr. Ahmad 'Ibādī, General Director of a Moroccan league of Muslim scholars (*Al-Rābiṭa al-*

¹ Women's rights data from Gender Gap Index 2015, available at: <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2015/rankings/>
Minority rights data from Minority Rights Group International, available at: <http://peoplesunderthreat.org/data/>

² “The impact of conflict in the region can be detected in all the major dimensions of higher education: physical, human, institutional, and social. Higher education institutions, communities, and systems decades in the making have been shattered by war. Despite the fact that rebuilding a depleted higher education system is a complex and expensive task in the aftermath of conflict, little or no attempt has been made to protect these institutions from such harm.” S. Barakat and S. Milton, *Houses of Wisdom Matter: The Responsibility to Protect and Rebuild Higher Education in the Arab World*, Brookings Institution, Washington DC and Doha, 2015, p.3.

Muhammadiyah lil- 'Ulamā') observes, the onus is upon the constituents to harmonise, as far as the cultural and doctrinal sinews of that culture allow, to the global whole:

One of the largest constraints that anyone living in the 21st century lies under, is the absence of a complete identification between the features of contemporary life and the principles that he holds and cherishes ... One of the requirements of living in the present age is, on the one hand, an ability to accommodate these features, and on the other hand an ability to respond to them actively and positively.³

If this capacity fails, the alternative is a self-inflicted quarantine from the course and progress of modernity and an inexorable trajectory of decline.

Manifestations of the crisis – extremism and violence

The alarm bells for that trajectory were rung as far back as 2014 by Egypt's President Sisi. In his address before an audience of Al-Azhar scholars, and pondering the statistics of conflict in Muslim majority states, he warned against complacency and called for an act of collective self-examination:

We must take a long, hard look at the situation we are in. It is inconceivable that the ideology we sanctify should make our entire nation a source of concern, danger, killing, and destruction all over the world ... The Islamic nation is being torn apart, destroyed, and is heading to perdition. We ourselves are bringing it to perdition.

From such a political figure this diagnosis surprised observers in its conceptual depth. Its focus was cultural, it was religious, and it went to the core of Muslim identity as expressed in its accumulated heritage. Pointing to the damage wielded by the intellectual and doctrinal closed circle, he demanded that scholars and educationalists dispense with “that corpus of texts and ideas that we have sacralized over the years” and step outside of them, since

you cannot feel it if you remain trapped within this mindset. You need to step outside of yourselves to be able to observe it and reflect on it from a more enlightened perspective. You must oppose it with resolve. Let me say it again: We need to revolutionize our religion.⁴

The presidential perspective echoed what has increasingly come to the surface in the concerned tones of Muslim intellectuals at forums and conferences convened inside and outside the Islamic world. At the *Forum on the Future of Islam* held at Washington in January 2016, Dr. Mehdi Aminrazavi expressed his impatience with platitudes:

By opening the book, reciting the verses, talking about Islam is peace and peace and so on, it is not going to work. At least, not for the ISISes, and the Talibans of the world as they are reading the same book but they are getting something completely different out of it. ... We are beyond the point of reciting verses, engaging interpretation, exegesis and hermeneutics, and so on. Certainly sugarcoating the problem is not going to work: We are in a serious, serious historical mess—unless we face up to what is really wrong, we are not going to be able to fix it.⁵

Fears of religious failure

The looming sense of failure, of *religious failure*, has occupied the minds of some of the most high-profile Muslim intellectuals, scholars and clerics. The British scholar Shaykh Abdal-Hakim Murad (Timothy Winter), voted as one of the ‘500 Most Influential Muslims’, encapsulated the concern:

There was a time, not long ago, when the ‘ultras’ were few, forming only a tiny wart on the face of the worldwide attempt to revivify Islam. Sadly, we can no longer enjoy the luxury of ignoring them. The extreme has broadened, and the middle ground, giving way, is everywhere dislocated

³ D. A. 'Ibādī, الإحياء (مجلة فصلية تصدرها الرابطة المحمدية للعلماء), حديث الإحياء Vol. 26, November 2007, p.12.

⁴ Speech delivered at Al-Azhar on December 28, 2014.

⁵ Mehdi Aminrazavi speaking at the conference *Forum on the Future of Islam, Muslim Perspectives on Islamic Extremism*, Panel II: *Jurisprudential Roots of Extremism and Ways to Overcome It*, Rethink Institute, Washington, January 2016, pp.38-9.

and confused... If these things go on, the Islamic movement will cease to form an authentic summons to cultural and spiritual renewal, and will exist as little more than a splintered array of maniacal factions. The prospect of such an appalling and humiliating end to the story of a religion which once surpassed all others in its capacity for tolerating debate and dissent is now a real possibility. The entire experience of Islamic work over the past fifteen years has been one of increasing radicalization, driven by the perceived failure of the traditional Islamic institutions and the older Muslim movements to lead the Muslim peoples into the worthy but so far chimerical promised land of the 'Islamic State.'⁶

The 'ummatolatry'⁷ underscored by that chimera, the identity pre-occupation of a Muslim *umma*, sets the Muslim to clash head-on with the global whole. Its expression, as the former mufti of Marseilles Dr. Soheib Bencheikh explains, conflicts with the actual needs and real expectations of the age he is living in:

The faith animating Muslims places them in a true dilemma. Islam can only be fully practiced at the cost of marginalisation, and thus neglecting that practice bequeaths a powerful sense of guilt.⁸

This exaggerated identity preoccupation bespeaks a crisis of self-esteem. The modern world does not have much of an Islamic stamp left on it, at least not in its most readily graspable form of political, legal and social systems, in scientific endeavours, or in the parameters of a steadily globalising culture. The response is a revolt against a modernity which they feel Islam has had no part in shaping. For the Pakistani nuclear physicist Pervez Hoodbhoy, the reaction

is closely linked to the feeling of being a victim of history. Deep down, Muslims feel that they have failed. ... There are around 1.5 billion Muslims in the entire world — but they cannot point to a substantial achievement in any field. Not in politics, not socially, not in the sciences or art or literature. The only thing they do with great devotion is fast and pray. But there are no efforts to improve conditions of life in Islamic societies. Unconsciously, people naturally feel this is a collective failure.⁹

In the Middle East the shrillness of the preoccupation with essentialist, timeless cultural markers and 'achievements,' such as Arabness and all things Arabic, is inversely related to the level of actual contemporary achievement. The point was made, rather tersely, by the Syrian poet and intellectual Ali Ahmad Sa'id, known as 'Adonis':

If I look at the Arabs, with all their resources and great capacities, and I compare what they have achieved over the past century with what others have achieved in that period, I would have to say that we Arabs are in a phase of extinction, in the sense that we have no creative presence in the world ... We have become extinct ... A people becomes extinct when it loses its creative energy and the ability to improve and change the world ... The clearest sign of this extinction is when we intellectuals continue to think in the context of this extinction. That is our real intellectual crisis. We are facing a new world with ideas that no longer exist, and in a context that is obsolete.¹⁰

The response has been violence

It is this introspective depth, and the observation of the 'authenticity discourse' which greets them at the earliest levels of analysis, that convinces Muslim intellectuals to reject the diagnosis of 'external causes' for Islamist violence. It may be a resentment at hegemony, they conclude, but that hegemony is cultural and conceptual, not political, and one that is formed from a deep

⁶ Abdal-Hakim Murad – *Islamic Spirituality – The Forgotten Revolution, The Poverty of Fanaticism*, Nov. 2007. Shaykh Murad is Dean of the Cambridge Muslim College and the Shaykh Zayed Lecturer in Islamic Studies at Cambridge University.

⁷ Abd al-Hakim Murad, *Contentions*, VIII,40: 'Ummatolatry: from Islam to Izlam.'

⁸ Soheib Bencheikh, *Marianne et le Prophète: L'Islam dans la France laïque* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1998).

⁹ Hasnain Kazim, 'Pakistanischer Atomphysiker: "Muslimische Gesellschaften sind kollektiv gescheitert"', *Der Spiegel*, 28 January 2013.

¹⁰ Interview aired on Dubai TV on March 11, 2006, *MEMRI Special Dispatch Series - No. 1121*.

anxiety in the face of the overturning of the natural order, the order of Islamic cultural superiority as ‘*the best community that hath been raised up for mankind*’¹¹.

Unable to absorb psychologically or intellectually this sense of defeat “people tend to curl up within themselves like frightened snails,” the Tunisian intellectual Lafif Lakhdar observed,

so as to brood about their dark thoughts - their catastrophes and their collective obsession with vengeance - and to use them as a pivot that diverts them towards suicidal political and militaristic decisions. They do this instead of using the same circumstances to elevate themselves by way of dignified and creative collective action, aimed at rehabilitating their self-confidence, and triumphing over those thoughts.¹²

The ‘overriding desire for revenge against their many and deep narcissistic wounds, individual and collective’¹³, has hamstrung the development of enough political and cultural self-confidence to treat Western modernization and the new culture rationally and, as President Sisi lamented, has fostered the desire among an unsettling proportion of the Muslim intelligentsia to make of the entire Islamic nation “a source of concern, danger, killing, and destruction”.

The urgent need to investigate the failure

Salafist discourse is becoming dominant

The daily evidence of a discourse that fosters vehemence falling vulnerable to violent distortion underlines how urgent the matter has become. Failing the updating of an Islamic thought and legal heritage established in earlier eras of mutual cultural hostility, the stage-posts on the path to radicalisation have been seen to be logical, coherent and *authentic* enough for any Muslim youth fired up by the reductive simplicity of a culturally pared-down Islam. It is particularly mid-wifed by Salafist religious discourse, which for all its focus on doctrine and religious practice and its apparent rejection of political and civic organisation, exhibits enough of the language of ‘proto-politics’ – the rejection itself of the current social and political structures – for Islamist radicals to be able to embrace it seamlessly.¹⁴ Indeed, it is precisely the Salafist pre-occupation with cultural contamination, a feature that defines their attachment to a superior primordial template for a Muslim community, and its unapologetic promotion of ‘loyalty and enmity’¹⁵ that inculcates a phobia of dissimilarity and a rejection of the Other – ultimately to the point of approving physical annihilation for difference – in effect

degrading the peaceable person into an aggressive one, and the aggressive person into a terrorist.¹⁶

This is due to the lack of any alternative pedagogy that can offer the same badge of authority in an educational climate (as we shall indicate below) which, in the Middle East, is increasingly dominated by Salafist thought.

¹¹ Qur’ān III, 110. آل عمران, ١١٠.

¹² ‘A Tunisian Intellectual on The Arab Obsession with Vengeance’, *MEMRI* May 5, 2003 Special Dispatch No.499.

¹³ Lafif Lakhdar, ‘Does the Islamic right wing have a future?’ *Almuslih.org*.

¹⁴ Politics is not the only way to militancy; extreme puritanism or apocalypticism may also produce violence, as illustrated by the 1979 Mecca siege. The demands made by the leader of the Juhaymān al-‘Utaybī contained the *Saba’ Rasā’il* (‘Seven Letters’) are notable for how they reproduce the Salafist paradigm, including The legitimization of rulership only as one founded on devotion to Islam, based on the Qur’ān and the Sunna and not on the interpretations of the ‘*ulamā*’; The necessity for the Muslims to overthrow their corrupt rulers whose legitimacy is no longer sustainable; The call to disassociate from the mechanisms and institutions of state; The repudiation of a state that “makes religion a means to guarantee worldly interests, puts an end to jihad, and pays allegiance to the Christians”; The duty to establish a pure Islamic community that promotes the mutual solidarity of all Muslims, that protects Islam from unbelievers and does not court foreigners, that is, one that ensures the proper enforcement of the doctrine of *al-walā’ wal-barā’*.

¹⁵ The doctrine of ‘loyalty and enmity’ (*al-walā’ wal-barā’*) is a polarizing doctrine which divides humanity into ‘believers’ and ‘infidels,’ and seeks to establish that the only relationship between them can be one of hatred and enmity. It is constructed upon the basis of scripture such as Qur’ān IV, 144, Qur’ān III, 28 and Qur’ān V, 51 and more explicitly in the following sound hadith narrated in Ahmad: *The most powerful knot of Imān* (‘faith’) *is to love for the sake of Allah and to hate for the sake of Allah*.

¹⁶ Lafif Lakhdar, *Moving from Salafī to Rationalist Education* (paper submitted to the Conference on Modernity and Arab Modernity, Beirut May 2004).

Indeed, poor educational levels, combined with the beguiling element of familiar vocabulary, mean that *the Islamist argument has become the dominant discourse* emanating from the Muslim states. Through this veil of half-familiar, half-obscure themes, the Islamist triumph has been to make not only Muslims, but also non-Muslims concede the debating ground to them, so that the notion that Islam is a total system in which religion and politics are intertwined, the sacred and the profane merged, is now almost universally accepted. And this is despite the warnings and dangers spelled out by progressive Muslim thinkers appalled at the vision of a totalitarianism in their name on the march:

Islamism is a modern ideology and actually has very little to do with religion. It is essentially about the power aspirations of the Islamic elite. Since Islamism is an ideology, it also creates ideological fervor among its recruits. Ideologies are always totalitarian and exclusivist. They do not allow tolerance. When religion is ideologized, it becomes very intolerant. The exclusivist nature of ideologies manifests in Islamists' claims to truth...Islamism offers no solutions to the problems of the Muslims in the world. Islam must rather return to the private sphere.¹⁷

The image of Islam is suffering

Is Islam to be a religion of antiquity or of the contemporary world? This is the question that progressive reformers are posing. Do Muslims want to live in a society that is in constant war with itself in the form of sectarian conflict, at war with the rest of the world through its adoption of an anachronistic enmity and at war with the institutions and ethics of global modernity? To worried intellectuals and educationalists, it certainly looks that way, and is having a measurably negative impact on the faith's image:

Arsalan Iftikhar pointed out a recent poll conducted in Iowa among registered Republicans. Thirty-three percent said that Islam should be illegal, and 24 percent said Muslims should carry a special identity card. As a result of extremist groups like ISIS, Muslims are collectively losing in the global marketplace of ideas. The grey zone of coexistence diminishes every day.¹⁸

More fundamentally they are asking: do fellow Muslims want to live in a society that is *at war with the progress of knowledge*? Is the barrier, legitimised among extremists through Ibn Taymiyya's claim that 'conflict with the infidels is one of the goals of Muslim religious law', really to continue? For among the scholars of conservative orthodox Islam the psychological barrier is certainly there and enacted every day on a host of 'ask the scholar' websites, a barrier that fosters a guilty unease between the Muslim and modern culture, and which

has led to an internalization of the view that the institutions, sciences, universal values, and even technology created by the infidels are like heresy. Everything imported from outside the Arab world has required that there be a *fatwā* permitting it — coffee, running water, Western-style hats, Coca Cola, television, the modern sciences, human rights, and democracy.¹⁹

The lessons of the logic of social, political, scientific and cultural progress, of the dynamic of the modern age and the sheer pace of the changes this age is imposing, demand a new approach to knowledge, to communication and to reform that can no longer be answered by

the Quixotic response of promoting old solutions to new problems, which are less and less capable of being related to them even by the employment of ever more elaborate exercises in analogy.²⁰

¹⁷ *Forum on the Future of Islam*, pp.3-4.

¹⁸ *Forum on the Future of Islam*, Panel III: Extremism and Challenges of Coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims, p.5.

¹⁹ Lafif Lakhdar, 'On the Arab Identity Crisis and Education', *MEMRI Special Dispatch No.576*, September 21, 2003.

²⁰ S. Ulph and P. Sookhdeo, *Reforming Islam, Progressive Voices from the Arab Muslim World*, Almuslih Publications, 2014, p.9.

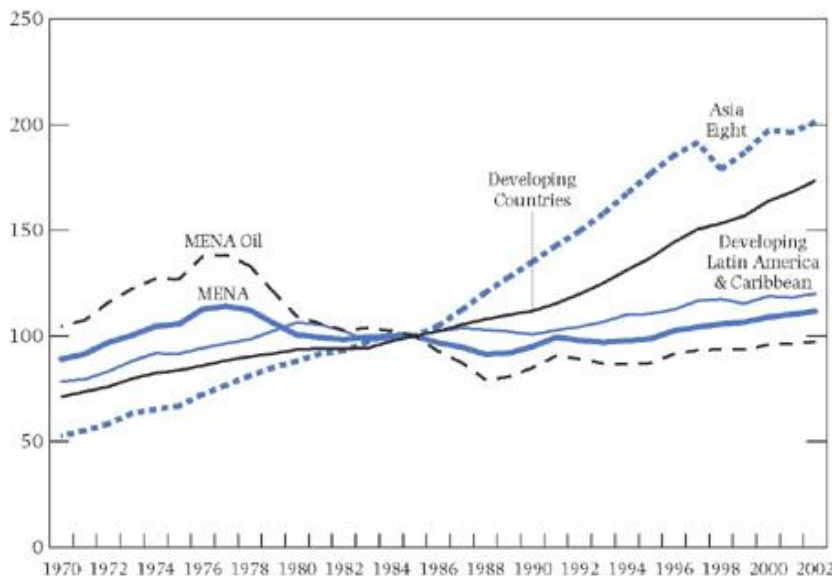
Deeper manifestations of the crisis – underdevelopment

Economic failure

Just how catastrophic this Quixotism is for the contemporary Middle East was starkly outlined by a number of surveys carried out over the last decade, which highlighted the effects of what is being revealed as a mal-adaptation to a changing world. They demonstrated how, for a population that approximates 5 per cent of world population, the Arab region's economic productivity represented only a quarter of that portion. A 2003 *International Monetary Fund* report detailed how the Arab world is in decline, even relative to the developing world. It noted how

the region underperformed since the 1970s and, as a result, did not reap the full benefits of globalization and world economic integration ... What is unique is the extent to which growth rates since the 1970s have been volatile and low relative to other developing countries.²¹

The graph the IMF accompanying these comments demonstrated the position of the Middle East and North Africa (*MENA*) economies with respect to the *Asia Eight* (Hong Kong SAR, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan Province of China, and Thailand) and the developing countries of Latin America and the Caribbean.



Real GDP per Capita Indices (Index: 1985=100)

Sources: IMF, World Economic Outlook; and IMF staff calculations.

It even demonstrated, unexpectedly, the markedly inferior performance of the MENA countries that were oil exporters,²² a situation that was only partially remedied by the oil price boom following the year 2000 and which remains peculiarly vulnerable to the vagaries of the global economy. The Report went on to explain how

the challenges facing the region are daunting. The MENA countries' economic performance remains below its potential, giving rise to chronic unemployment and poor living conditions in large parts of the region

²¹ G.T. Abed and H. R. Davoodi, *Challenges of Growth and Globalization in the Middle East and North Africa*, International Monetary Fund, 2003. <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/med/2003/eng/abed.htm>

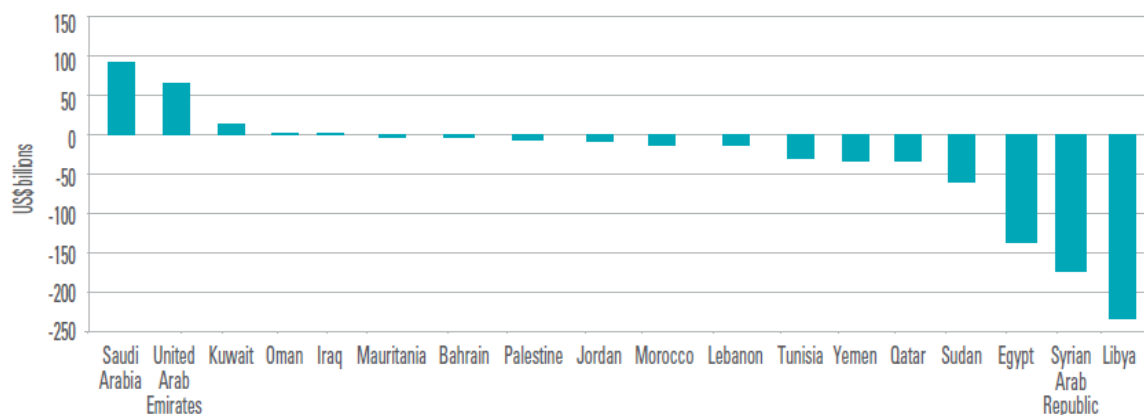
²² A later survey (M. Noland and H. Pack: 'The Arab Economies in a Changing World,' *Peter Peterson Institute for International Economics*, 2007) reported that from 1980 to 2000, Saudi Arabia, the largest GCC economy, experienced a relative per capita PPP decline from 30% richer than the US to less than half the U.S. This implies their average citizen went from a standard of living of New York or London to that of Sao Paulo, Brazil. Economies including Kuwait and Oman further suffered a similar fate of a fall in the standard of living.

and, among the economic policy failings, highlighted the role played by cultural factors such as ‘high population growth and low productivity’, ‘lagging political and institutional reforms’ and an ‘inefficient and inequitable educational system’.²³

While the economic recovery in the region has been further delayed by security concerns and rising political uncertainty, where economic surveys concur in their findings is in the fact that the level of connectedness/globalization across all five types of flows (people, goods, service, financial, information/data) in the region has actually declined over the past fifteen years. While other regions are deepening their knowledge connectedness and further trade ties, the Arab world has not become more globalized.²⁴

The implications of this isolation and under-investment in human and social capital on economic performance are severe. A 2002 study of 192 countries came to the conclusion that human and social capital explained no less than 64 per cent of growth performance. By contrast, physical capital – machinery, buildings and infrastructure – explained only 16 per cent of growth.²⁵

The last decade has seen these developments only worsen as the turmoil unleashed by the Arab Spring has sent the numbers into what appears to be an inexorable trajectory of decline. In the *Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the Arab Region* issued in 2016 by the UN²⁶, the upheaval is shown to have cost the region \$614bn in lost growth since 2011, equivalent to 6 per cent of the region's total GDP between 2011 and 2015. What is more, the expected pattern of economic effect following regime change – whereby analysts suggest that after the initial shock there are usually some potential long-term positive impacts on growth, employment and macroeconomic stability (even without a significant trajectory towards democratisation) – has not been replicated in this region. As the initial positive momentum has degenerated into chaos and insecurity, the macroeconomic balances have been negatively impacted as foreign investment is deterred and trade opportunities dampened. In its train have come other negative social indicators such as debt, corruption, poverty and unemployment.²⁷



Cumulative GDP gains (losses) by country 2011-2016

Source: ESCWA

The unemployment statistics make particularly depressing reading. According to the latest data available, the average unemployment rate for the Arab region as a whole is estimated at about 16 per cent and remains the highest among the other regions of the world. Ominously, the tally of youth unemployment stands the highest in world regions at 28.2 per cent in the Middle East and

²³ G.T. Abed and H. R. Davoodi, *op.cit.*

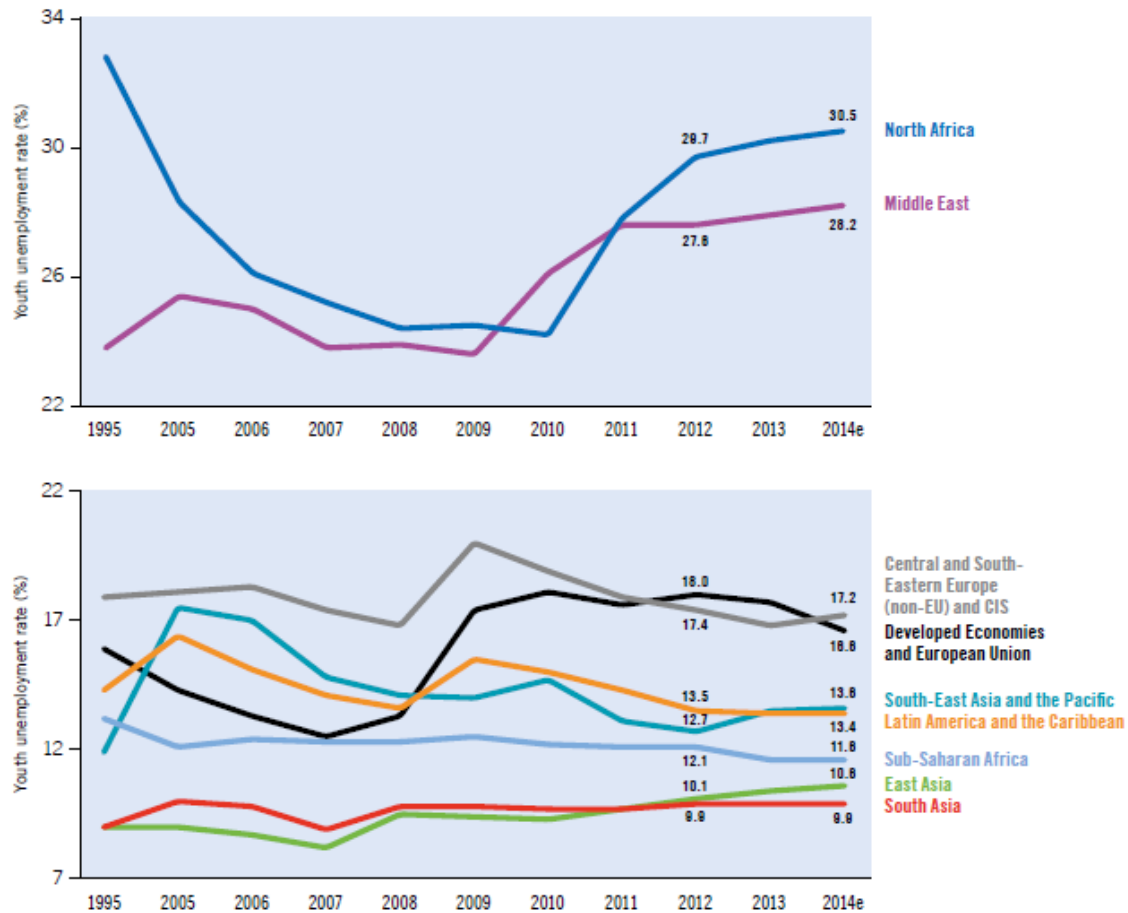
²⁴ ‘Global flows in a digital age: How trade, finance, people and data connect the world economy’, *McKinsey Global Institute* (2014).

²⁵ Figure cited in *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, (AHDR 2002) p.7.

²⁶ *Survey of Economic and Social Developments in the Arab Region 2015-2016*, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, United Nations (ESCWA), Beirut, 2016.

²⁷ *Op cit.*, p.67.

30.5 per cent in North Africa, which is more than twice the global average rate and almost three times the rate for sub-Saharan Africa.²⁸



Youth unemployment rates, by region, 1995 and 2005–14

Source: ILO, Trends Econometric Models, April 2015.

And here university-level education appears to be providing little guarantee against unemployment. In Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia graduate unemployment touches 15 per cent, rising to 22 per cent in Morocco, 32 per cent in Bahrain and a full 43 per cent in Saudi Arabia.²⁹

The fact that the figures for graduate unemployment in the Middle East and North Africa top the global rankings indicates that there is a severe misalignment of educational programming with the development requirements and the opportunities available in the region. The reasons for the misalignment are complex and multidimensional, with geographical, social, political and economic factors adding to the mix. But a UNDP *Arab Knowledge Report* published in 2014³⁰ laid the causes of the failure entirely at the feet of the education sector, summarising these failures as:

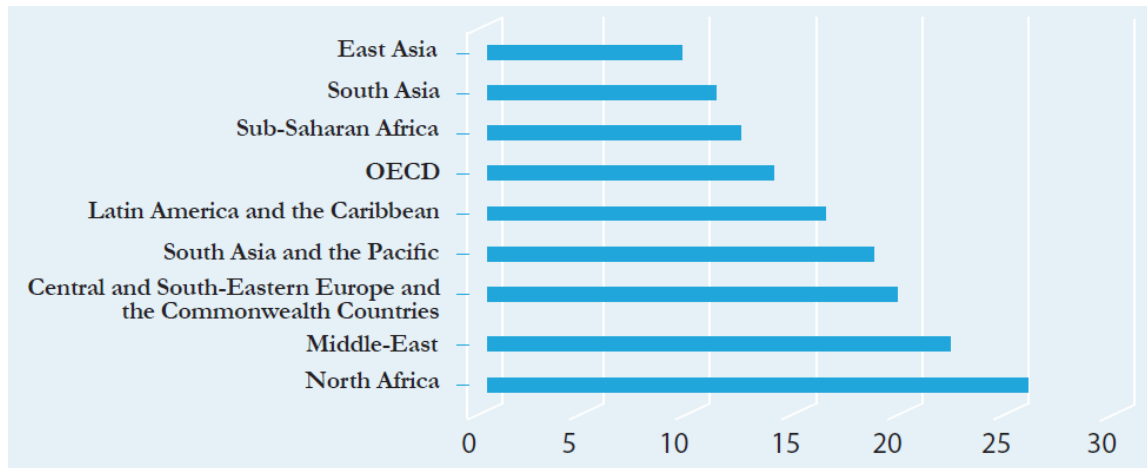
²⁸ According to the estimates of ILO *Global Employment Trends for Youth* (2015) and the *European Centre for Census* (2012); see Mirkin, B, “Arab Spring: Demographics in a region in transition”, Arab Human Development Report Research Paper Series 2013. UNDP.

²⁹ Ahmed, M., Guillaume, D., & Furceri, D., *Youth Unemployment in the Mena Region Determinants and Challenges*. International Monetary Fund. In *World Economic Forum* (2012): *Addressing the 100 million Youth Challenge – Perspectives on Youth Unemployment in the Arab World*. According to a 2011 report the figures are even worse, with the figures given as 21.9% in Tunisia, 24.8% in Egypt, 17.8% in Morocco, and 15.5% in Jordan. See Jaramillo, A. and Melonio, T. (eds.), *Breaking Even or Breaking through, Reaching Financial Sustainability While Providing High Quality Standards in Higher Education in the Middle East and North Africa*, The World Bank, Washington, DC 2011.

³⁰ *Arab Knowledge Report 2014, Youth and Localisation of Knowledge*, UNDP, Dubai 2014 [AKR 2014], pp.100-101.

- the weak quality of higher education in the Arab countries
- the gap between higher education outputs and the requirements of the labour market
- poor skills and their relation to the weak connection between universities and the public and private sectors
- the weakness of the vocational and technical formation and training systems in higher education institutions.

The conclusion was that it was the quality and system of education in the region that was leaving the Arab countries ill-equipped to develop the requisite knowledge society to compete in a globalising environment.



Unemployment of Graduates in Various Regions of the World (%)

Source: Jaramillo & Melonio 2012.

And this deficit is occurring at a time when the Arab region needs to get ready for a post-oil boom period, as even the most well-endowed countries are expected to cease exporting oil within a generation. The luxury of being able to buy off transformative change is disappearing. If previous generations benefited from free education, public sector job guarantees, and strong state support in the form of subsidies and entitlements, for those born in the 1980s and later these institutions are no longer suited to a world where innovation and entrepreneurship are the drivers of economic growth and where all the human assets, female as well as male, are engaged. As a result, young people in the Middle East are falling further behind their peers in other parts of the world.

Levels of social exclusion among the youth are already registering dangerous levels as the implications of long-term unemployment are manifested in what has been termed ‘waithood’³¹, the bewildering time in which large proportions of Middle Eastern youth spend their best years waiting in a feeling of helplessness and dependency, unable to get married or at least develop a life outside their parents’ home. “The psychological impact of the waiting phase”, the *Arab Knowledge Report* underlined,

is also evident, with unemployment leading to apathy, as evidenced in the extremely low youth participation rates. There is also considerable concern that some isolated youth are being targeted by extremist groups who prey upon their sense of hopelessness.³²

³¹ A portmanteau term formed from ‘waiting’ and ‘adulthood’. The phenomenon is comprehensively described in Dhillon, Naytej, and Tariq Yousef, *Generation in Waiting: The Unfulfilled Promise of Young People in the Middle East*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press, 2009.

³² *Arab Knowledge Report 2014*, p.79, quoting as source the UNDP and Institute of National Planning, Egypt 2010.

The Arab Human Development Reports

The cultural factors underpinning this decline were further outlined in detail by a series of surveys carried out by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). In 2002, the first of these *Arab Human Development Reports* had a considerable impact for the starkness of its criticisms. Prepared by Arabs for a readership of Arabs, the litany of failures conscientiously evaluated with impartiality led one Arab columnist to urge “a serious, deep reading” since “no changes will occur without Arabs first facing the facts, however unpalatable they may be”.³³

Technological / scientific failure

They spelled out a catalogue of failures, from the statistical to the conceptual. Over a period of two decades from 1980 the product of research and development in the region, as gauged by the number of patents registered, stood well behind the levels of other countries. The entire Arab region submitted 370, while Chile alone submitted 147. During that period Israel submitted 7,652 and Korea 16,328.³⁴ A broader measure of scientific activity, the number of scientific papers submitted per million inhabitants was even more revealing: in 1995 the Arab region submitted 26 papers per million while Brazil submitted 42. Comparisons with the developed world highlights the gap more starkly – France submitted 840 per million and Switzerland 1,878.³⁵ The figures since that time have not been encouraging. According to the results of the UNESCO Scientific Research Report 2010 which monitored the activities of scientific publication up to 2008, the average production of research per million citizens in Arab countries was only 41, compared to a world average of 147. Over the last five years the situation has not improved: statistics show that the scientific production of the Arab countries is still low and published research only constitutes 0.8% of the global average.³⁶

Several obstacles have been identified that explain these figures. Most important among them is the absence of a culture that supports research and creativity, the absence of comprehensive policies for building integrated systems of research and development and the weakness of funding and human resources.³⁷ Statistics show that the rates of spending on research and development in the Arab countries as a percentage of GDP during the past four decades do not meet the requirements for development of this sector. Fluctuating between a mere 0.03 and 0.73% of GDP (as opposed to a global average of 2.13%) the *combined* share of Arab countries of the global spending on scientific research did not exceed 0.5% of the total global expenditure in 2009, even though Arab countries account for more than 5% of world population.³⁸

³³ Salama A. Salama, ‘Facing Up to Unpleasant Facts,’ *Al-Ahram Weekly*, July 11-17, 2002.

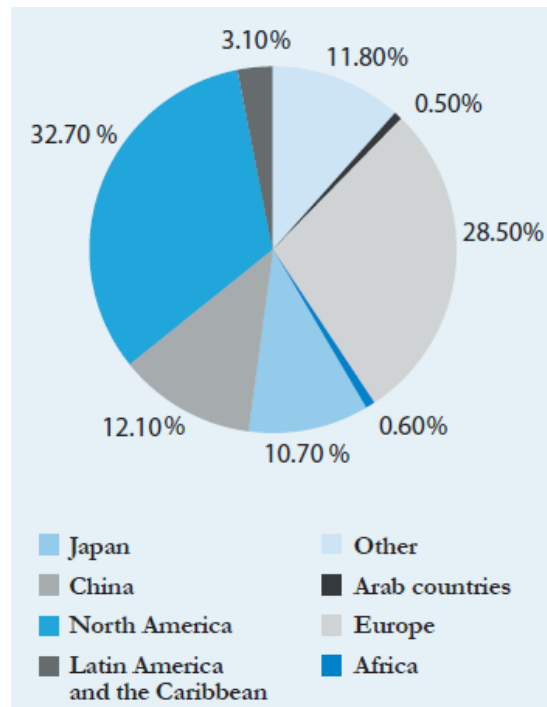
³⁴ *Arab Human Development Report 2003*, (AHDR 2003) p.71.

³⁵ AHDR 2003, p.70.

³⁶ AKR 2014, p.108. Only one of the world’s top 100 highly cited scientists comes from the Arab world (Professor Boudjema Samraoui, a biologist at the University of Annaba in Algeria) and the only Arab Nobel laureate in a scientific discipline is the Egyptian-born Ahmed Zewail who received the distinction for chemistry in 1999 while working at the California Institute of Technology in the USA.

³⁷ *Op cit.*, p.103.

³⁸ *Op cit.*, p.106.



Combined Share of Arab Countries of Global Expenditure on R&D compared to Selected Countries and Regions of the World (2009)

Source: Akoum and Renda 2013

This spending on research and development in the Arab countries is not enough to generate wealth and address the needs related to food, water and energy security or to improve national infrastructure. Most researchers are therefore in agreement that the status of scientific research in the Arab region is still one of the major obstacles hindering the efforts towards building a knowledge society.³⁹ Inevitably there is a further serious cost to this low gear of Arab development in a fast accelerating global environment, one in which higher education and scientific research employment is progressively internationalising. This cost is demonstrated by

the emigration of great numbers of scientific cadres from the Arab region to countries abroad. The absence of education and research environments coupled with low wages has supported the brain drain in the Arab region as people search for distinguished jobs at international corporations and research centres.⁴⁰

This brain drain phenomenon, effectively, constitutes a form of reverse aid from less developed countries to developed ones. For the Arab region it represents a severe crisis as it loses in this way a vital source of education, knowledge and technology, along with the intellectual elements and historical experiences that are essential for ensuring the integration of contemporary approaches to knowledge into the prevailing culture.

A cultural barrier

The AHDR 2003 report early on flagged up this important ingredient in this failure, the fact that knowledge and science *is not being indigenised*. Problems the region was having were

aggravated by the mistaken belief that a knowledge society can be built through the importation of scientific products without investing in the local production of knowledge, and ... without creating the local scientific traditions conducive to knowledge acquisition in the region.⁴¹

³⁹ *Op cit.*, p.103.

⁴⁰ *Op cit.*, p.101

⁴¹ AHDR 2002, Executive Summary, p.5.

In Egypt, for instance, it was a habit initiated by Muhammad Ali in the 19th century, continued by Gamal Abd al-Nasser in the 20th, and one that shows little sign of change in the 21st. The lack of any attempts at infrastructural support and indigenisation was underlined by the mathematician Ali Mustafa Musharrifah, Dean of the Faculty of Science, Cairo University who regretted the tendency to

transfer the knowledge of others and leave it floating without any relationship to our past or any contact with our land. It is a commodity that is foreign in its features, foreign in its words and foreign in its concepts.⁴²

A cultural chauvinism replaces and explains away the gap. The progressive Saudi thinker Ibrahim al-Buleihi laments the cultural isolationism and assumption of superiority, the reduction of western culture to a mere bagatelle of technological wizardry ('a culture of blacksmiths and carpenters'⁴³) and deplores the deeper underlying instincts that condition

our strong sensitivity to co-operating with any form of western thought. We are apprehensive about imported ideas, particularly if they have a political, cultural or social content, and we do not accept from outside anything other than data or ready-made technologies - that is, matters shorn of their philosophical context. As for ideas, we reject them from the outset without attempting to examine them.⁴⁴

The *Arab Human Development Report* summarised the problem as one not only of under-investment but, uniquely among developing countries, one of a *cultural impediment*:

Effective knowledge-acquisition strategies may need to begin with attitudinal change, involving across-the-board commitment at all levels of society, from respect for science and knowledge, to encouraging creativity and innovation ... Traditional culture and values, including traditional Arab culture and values, can be at odds with those of the globalizing world. Given rising global interdependence, the most viable response will be one of openness and constructive engagement, whereby Arab countries both contribute to and benefit from globalization.⁴⁵

This cultural barrier makes its presence felt time and again in economic analyses of the Arab region. The 2014 *Arab Knowledge Report* argued that the influence was not confined to conservative regions of the Arab world but stressed that

regardless of the multiple variations of the Arab youth due to geographical differences, economic levels and cultural affiliations, a strong cultural line runs through them all. It stems from the region's cultural heritage; a line that we call the Arab Patriarchal Phenomenon and that is based on religion, family, race or sect. It is a trend that maintains traditional Arab values and is the strongest trend, particularly in the absence of development [of] cultural policies that renovate culture and values and form a mind-set linked to science and modernity among young people.⁴⁶

Findings by the *Muslim World Science Initiative* similarly underlined this point, and indeed broadened the geographical application, by arguing that 'science education in most OIC member countries was extremely narrow in focus and did little to enable students to think critically'. It observed that cultural constraints were placing a check on openness to knowledge and the choice of materials considered permissible, that 'self-censorship was often practiced in the selection of topics to be taught, particularly regarding controversial subjects such as the theory of evolution'

⁴² Roshdi Rashed, background paper for the *Arab Human Development Report* 2003, p.69.

⁴³ "We treat the people who created this great and lofty civilization as if they were carpenters and blacksmiths. We view them as mere labourers, while we consider ourselves to be men of thought, science, and culture, who embody everything you aspire to in life. This is the exact opposite of how things should be", Ibrahim Buleihi speaking on *Rotana Khalijiya* TV, July 23, 2012.

⁴⁴ Ibrahim al-Buleihi, حصون التخلف ('*Castles of Backwardness*') Manshūrāt al-Jamal, Beirut 2010, pp.110.

⁴⁵ AHDR 2002, pp.7-8.

⁴⁶ AKR 2014, p.72.

and called on students to 'navigate and develop a perspective on these difficult disciplinary boundaries and overlaps.'⁴⁷

The unease with certain areas of scientific endeavour is related to the issue of indigenisation. The perception which still prevails among the traditionally-minded educated class is that science and technology are in some way not 'culturally neutral' and that an uncritical participation in this endeavour is likely to prove injurious.

'Science and technology policy in the contemporary world is heavily influenced by western models', explains Mohd Hazim Shah of the *Muslim-Science.Com*'s Task Force on Science and Islam. He argues that the Islamic world carries 'a greater historical and cultural baggage as compared to the west, which has discarded much of that baggage throughout its history', and that given that modern science is based on a different historical experience,

Muslim countries would do well to reflect on their own historical experience in the relation between science and Islam, instead of slavishly imitating the west. Even if Muslim countries succeed in achieving similar success by adopting those models, it might be at the expense of cultural stability and authenticity based on Islamic values.⁴⁸

Reticence of this nature, according to the *Arab Human Development Report*, was proving to be a barrier that had to be confronted. One of its 10 principles concluding the 2002 *Report* highlighted just this point:

Without denigrating higher values and established creeds, intellectual and cultural heritage should not be immune to criticism and change in the face of scientific evidence. Dialogue should be valued as an indispensable process, one that is as likely to end in agreement as in creative disagreement.⁴⁹

The cultural impediments

Translation inactivity

A following 2003 *Arab Human Development Report* on *Building a Knowledge Society* focused in more detail on the cost of the artificial cultural barriers. Noting the low levels of book production (1.1 per cent of the global total for a population that accounts for 5 per cent), it focused on translation activity, 'one of the important channels for the dissemination of information and communication with the rest of the world', and pointed to some eye-opening statistics:

The number of books translated in the Arab world is one fifth of the number translated in Greece. The aggregate total of translated books from the Al-Ma'moon era [813-833 AD] to the present day amounts to 10,000 books - equivalent to what Spain translates in a single year.⁵⁰

That equated to one book per million people per year, while the corresponding rate in Hungary was 519 books, and in Spain 920 books.⁵¹ As for the USA, despite the fact that almost 85 per cent of the world's scientific production is in English, 'the US makes it a point to translate all scientific publications, as well as the cultural legacy of world civilizations'.⁵²

⁴⁷ The Muslim World Science Initiative, *Press Release*, 29 October 2015. <http://muslim-science.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Official-Press-Release-Report-on-Science-at-the-Universities-of-the-Muslim-World-Oct-29-2015.pdf>

⁴⁸ Mohd Hazim Shah, 'The Relationship between Science and Islam: Islamic Perspectives and Frameworks', *Muslim Science*, August 10th 2015.

⁴⁹ AHDR 2002, p.55.

⁵⁰ AHDR 2003, p.67.

⁵¹ AHDR 2002, Executive Summary, p.4.

⁵² AHDR 2003, p.67.

Parochialism

The results are inevitable: Arabic mono-lingualism is on the advance, spawning ‘a new kind of monolingual professor and researcher ... to replace the kind of bilingual academic who in the past dominated most Arab universities and research centres.’⁵³ With that comes a lack of intellectual curiosity that manifests itself not only in the virtual absence of institutions studying non-Arab, non-Islamic cultures, but also an insularity affecting Arab students pursuing research abroad, the majority of whom concentrate on research topics about their own countries or region:

Few Arab PhD theses earned outside the region deal with the society in which the researcher temporarily resides. On the other hand, students and researchers who come to the Arab world, often do so to become more closely acquainted with the Arab world and to study it. As a result, there is no accumulation of an Arab stock of scientific knowledge about ‘the Other’.⁵⁴

The parochialism is all the more striking, given the external challenges faced by Arab countries, yet the emphasis on the ‘specificity’ of Arab societies and the neglect of anything that is not ‘related to our reality,’ is not only unproductive for an era of change, it actively deprives

Arab scholars of a comparative perspective and the capacity to link the particularities of their context to general structures and trends in the wider world.⁵⁵

The declining quality of education in the humanities

In the judgement of surveys analysing education in the Arab world the most important challenge facing education is its overall poor, and declining, quality.⁵⁶ In February 2014 the Brookings Institution published the report *Arab Youth: Missing Educational Foundations for a Productive Life?* which surveyed the performance of education across the Arab Middle East. It made for discouraging reading. Making allowances for wide levels of variation imposed by the various regional conflicts, the report concluded that, as an average,

more than half of the region’s children and youth are failing to learn, as measured by literacy and numeracy scores on international tests.⁵⁷

It went on to detail that even where attendance at educational institutions was enabled, Arab children and youths overall were not picking up there the basic principles of *how* to learn. The economic and societal effects of the inevitable deficit in foundational skills were only compounded by rapid growth in an essentially unemployable youth population.⁵⁸ A subsequent report published the following year by the Brookings Institute in Doha summarised the overall damage to educational standards that resulted from erroneous decision-making on the structural and organisational levels:

Since the 1990s higher education has in some ways regressed across the region, both in terms of its overall contribution to knowledge creation as well as to nation-building. At the same time, the region witnessed a rapid expansion in the number of universities and enrollment levels, propelled by market liberalization strategies (inviting private, for-profit capital into the sector). Ultimately, higher education systems have become focused on and driven by quantity rather than quality and teaching rather than research. The failure of quantitative expansion to fuel improvements in quality prompted the claim that “no region in the world has invested more in education with less to show for it.” As an indicator of this, only one Arab university was ranked in the top 400 of the

⁵³ AHDR 2003, p.75.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ AHDR 2002, *Executive Summary*, p.2

⁵⁷ L. Steer, H. Ghanem, M. Jalbout, *Arab Youth: Missing Educational Foundations for a Productive Life?* Brookings Institution, February 2014, p.9. The report clarified that “even if they go to and stay in school. We estimate, based on the average scores for literacy and numeracy for the 13 countries for which we have available data, that 56 percent of primary students and 48 percent of lower secondary school students are not learning” (*ibid.*).

⁵⁸ *Op. cit.* p.16.

2014-2015 Times Higher Education World University Rankings. This in a region that is home to 370 million people distributed across 22 states with one-third of global oil reserves and almost 400 universities.⁵⁹

As we have seen, the low performance in scientific and technological research evidences these negative developments, but the decline in quality is of particular concern with respect to the humanities. This decline is put down to shrinking conceptual horizons, under twin pressures of political security preoccupations and the perspectives of ultra-conservative Islam. The pressure is particularly keenly felt in the humanities and the social sciences which, unlike the generality of the exact sciences, are seen to have a direct relevance to people's ideas and convictions and are therefore more intensively supervised or protected by the authorities and bodies in charge of designing curricula and issuing schoolbooks. Political security preoccupations, it has been observed, mean that

the curricula taught in Arab countries seem to encourage submission, obedience, subordination and compliance, rather than free critical thinking. In many cases, the contents of these curricula do not stimulate students to criticise political or social axioms. Instead, they smother their independent tendencies and creativity.⁶⁰

The field of the humanities and the social sciences might seem at first to provide a natural antidote to cultural parochialism and intellectual conformism, but here the picture is somewhat monochrome, and fading. With academic, media and educational sectors dominated by leaders chosen for political, religious, or in some cases tribal loyalties, independently-minded Arab researchers in the humanities and social sciences frequently work in a vacuum, and the common complaint is a lack of an independent institutional infrastructure that can combat the waxing sense of isolation and defeat. 'This isolation', the *Arab Human Development Report* observed,

has led in several cases to observable frustration that has begun to turn into a general mood, reflected in a withdrawal into individual pursuits and a kind of indifference, not only to public affairs but also to questions of knowledge per se.⁶¹

At the colloquium *Amplifying Muslim Voices for Reason & Reform* held in Rome in December 2012 by the *Almuslih* organisation,⁶² the damage to the cause of reform by this isolation, was re-enforced:

The tradition of institutional activity and team spirit has not yet become sufficiently rooted in the prevailing mindsets ... All that is left is individual, and necessarily disorganised initiatives. In the absence of this institution there is only a fragmentary understanding of reform, instead of a comprehensive understanding for all of its aspects.⁶³

⁵⁹ S. Barakat and S. Milton, *Houses of Wisdom Matter*, p.2.

⁶⁰ AHDR 2003, p.53. Commenting on the *Arab Human Development Report 2003*, one journalist rendered a particularly scathing commentary on standards in the Arab world: "In the Arab world of today, the word 'intellectual' has come to refer to a person who reads newspapers regularly. An 'educated' person is someone who holds a high school diploma. So-called 'ulemas,' a word that literally translates as 'scholars, scientists, or people of knowledge' has come to mean bearded, turbaned men whose only formal instruction was in theology and who occupy their days explaining to the faithful the ways of seventh-century Islamic scriptures and how to wage jihad." (Y. Ibrahim, 'The end of education as we know it,' *The New York Sun*, May 21, 2007.

⁶¹ *Arab Human Development Report 2003*, pp.75-6.

⁶² The Almuslih Rome Conference in December 2012 hosted discussions between a selection of intellectuals, Arab and western, on the issues of reform. The conclusion of the colloquium was 1) that intellectual restructuring would have to precede any meaningful reform on the ground, and 2) that the isolation and precariousness of the position of reform-minded thinkers demands that their profiles should be promoted in the West and their work financially supported, on the model of the *Almuslih* organisation. The website of the organisation – www.almuslih.org – has made an important step in this direction by promoting a two-way traffic through its publication of Arab Muslim intellectuals' articles in two languages, Arabic and English.

⁶³ Lafif Lakhdar, 'Detailed response to the *Almuslih* table of questions', *The Rome Colloquium, Amplifying Muslim Voices for Reason & Reform*, p.27. The full report is available online at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/244144216/The-2012-Rome-Conference-Report>.

High levels of illiteracy

The outreach of reformist-minded thinkers is further hampered by the persistence of illiteracy rates in the Arab world. These are higher, and educational enrolment rates are lower, than those of dynamic less developed countries in East Asia and Latin America and in most cases below the global average of 86.3 per cent (99.2 per cent for developed nations). The reality of these statistics induces an understandable mood of pessimism among educationalists in the region:

It is sad that we are talking about a very basic level, which is illiteracy, while we have a lot to cover in terms of progressive education and proper learning environments and student-centered pedagogy and all these different learning theories that we are so behind on ... We can't even start to think about them right now because we lack basic education.⁶⁴

And as if pedalling in reverse gear, the rate of illiteracy in the region continues to rise, to the extent that Arab countries embark upon the twenty-first century burdened by over 60 million illiterate adults, the majority of whom are women.

Intimations of religion being at the heart of the problem

With these levels of illiteracy, book publication rates are understandably lower than the global average. But the one up-tick in the tally is the number of works on religious themes. Here the Middle East uniquely bucks the trend, with religious books cornering 17 per cent of total book production, over against a global average of 5 per cent of total book production.⁶⁵

This in itself is a highly indicative statistic, one that points to a tendentious quantitative focus and set of priorities among educationalists and administrators, and a worrying conflation of the purposes of education in the humanities with pre-occupations and sensitivities of identity and heritage. The same conclusion was hinted at in the 2003 *Arab Human Development Report* which courteously but convincingly demonstrated the damage caused by a conception of knowledge that has become derailed by a confusion concerning the relationship between religious faith and the applications of human endeavour in the social, political, juridical and even scientific fields:

In being connected with and at the same time contradictory to knowledge, Arab intellectual heritage nowadays raises basic knowledge problems. Its link with knowledge comes from its connection with language, religion, sciences and culture. Its contradiction with knowledge arises because heritage is not usually viewed from a scientific standpoint but is rather closely surrounded by emotion, passion, desire, wishes, glorification and sometimes a disregard of reality and discomfiting facts.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Mohammed Rizkallah, assistant professor at the American University in Cairo who has researched illiteracy, cited in R. Faek and S. Lynch, 'Illiteracy: A Stubborn Problem in Many Arab Countries', *Al-Fanar Media*, 27 October 2014. <http://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2014/10/stubborn-problem-many-arab-countries/>

⁶⁵ AHDR 2002, *Executive Summary*, p.4.

⁶⁶ AHDR 2003, p.114.

Indications of religious control of education being the cause of the crisis

Extremism and the educational deficit – the example of Jordan

Ever since the *Arab Human Development Reports* sketched out the Middle Eastern educational scene with a broad brush, educationalists across the region have taken the cue to look inwards and take a new look at the content of the curricula applied in their educational institutions. One interesting example of this process has taken place in Jordan, and it is worth examining closely here their analysis and their findings.

As a result of evidence of Jordanian students fighting in the ranks of ISIS across the border in neighbouring Syria and Iraq, some extended soul-searching was carried out among politicians and educationalists as to the reasons for this phenomenon. Jordan's former minister of culture, Sabri Rbeihat warned that

Many politicians ignore the fact that the problem today lies in the emergence of a new culture that hates life, celebrates death, and attacks and quickly eliminates anything symbolizing liberty, life, and happiness.⁶⁷

while the former minister of education Ibrahim Badrān called on educationalists to undertake 'a comprehensive, profound examination of the issue of curricula as a matter of urgency.'⁶⁸ Former Prime Minister Ma'rūf al-Bakhīt went on to sponsor a workshop in which the participating specialists concurred that the school curricula in the first and second year grades were indeed in need of reviewing, since they contained materials 'that deny the Other and reject women, and promote extremist ideology,' while some of them even considered that the current curricula imported 'ISIS ideas'. The *Al-Ghad* editor-in-chief Jumāna Ghunaymāt went so far as to publish an article titled "*Close The Jordanian Branch Of ISIS!*" in which she noted that

our schools spread extremism, as do our universities. Sometimes, a child or youth returns from school or university with horrid ideas that shock even his parents.⁶⁹

This in turn spawned a contribution by writer and educator Zuleikha Abu Risha, who deplored

an educational system that opposes creativity and asking questions, sanctifies the past, does not deviate from its [rigid] path, detests logic and anything new or innovative, levels accusations of heresy, and incites to hatred, violence, and killing – to the point where students have become robots who recite prayers to keep themselves from harm, instead of investing efforts in finding solutions.⁷⁰

The most thorough investigation on this issue of educational shortcomings was carried out, on behalf of the *Al-Ghad* newspaper, by education specialist Dr. Dhuqān 'Ubaydāt in his extended *Analytical study: ISIS-ism in school curricula and textbooks*.⁷¹ In this study he noted that 'ISIS behaviour' in the curricula was to be located in two axes:

Firstly in the absence of art, music, logical and scientific thinking; and secondly in the continuous talk of jihad and that which awaits the *mujāhidīn* in the afterlife ... the Muslim is called to wage jihad the world over, and there is continuous talk of the torment of the grave, heaven and hell, the

⁶⁷ Sabri Rbeihat, *صناع الموت.. وعشاق الحياة* ('Crafters of Death ... Lovers of Life'), *Al-Ghad*, November 15, 2015. <http://www.alghad.com/articles/903624>

⁶⁸ A. Mazhar, *خبراء: المناهج لا تحفز التفكير وتعاني من الحشو* ('Experts: Curricula that do not stimulate thinking and suffer from padding'), *Al-Ghad*, July 14, 2015.

⁶⁹ Jumāna Ghunaymāt, *أغلقوا فرع "داعش" في الأردن* ('Close the Jordanian Branch of ISIS!'), *Al-Ghad*, December 14, 2014. <http://www.alghad.com/articles/842060>

⁷⁰ Zuleikha Abu Risha, *وبعدين معك يا تربية؟* *Al-Ghad*, November 17, 2015. <http://www.alghad.com/articles/904061>

⁷¹ Dhuqān 'Ubaydāt, *دراسة تحليلية: "الداعشية" في المناهج والكتب المدرسية* ('Analytical study: ISIS-ism in school curricula and textbooks') *Al-Ghad*, June 30 2015.

absence of positive law, and excessive talk about the wife's obedience to her husband, without any reference to the wife as a human being.

What was taking place, the *Al-Ghad* research uncovered, was the functioning of what was effectively a 'hidden curriculum':

a dogmatic cultural system, circulated and taught to the student in a covert manner. It emphasizes, in the school, the mosque and in cultural forums, an unfortunate singularity of viewpoint on the Self and on the Other.⁷²

In this covert syllabus, everything appeared to be passed through the filter of an overtly religious blanket. This filter even coloured matters more usually the preserve of biology:

Students were required to adduce certain evidence on the torment of the grave. As for the method of determining the cause of death, this was given as something decided by Fate alone, without reference to causes from sickness or anything else.⁷³

In fact the scientific enterprise was conspicuous not only by its absence but rather, as 'Ubaydāt noted, by its outright repudiation, in that the curriculum's lessons claimed that

modern science has its benefits in agriculture and others, but it occupies people in troublesome matters, is destructive to civilisation and spreads secularism and materialism It distances people from worship, religion, the family, nature, honor, love and friendship. It increases divorce, the use of drugs and destroys the environment.⁷⁴

The damage to scientific thinking does not stop there, but inflicts a veritable epistemological dislocation upon the student by presenting, as the starting point of the syllabus, a claim that

the greatest knowledge is that which comes from Revelation, since it hails from outside the human being ... the weakness of the philosophers continues to this day due to the impossibility of gaining spiritual knowledge thereby.⁷⁵

This curious conception of scientific endeavour is actually mirrored across the Muslim world. Pervez Hoodbhoy, for instance, notes how millions of Pakistanis have studied technical, science-based subjects in college and university, but most of them — including science teachers — remain unable to handle 'even the simplest science quiz'.

How did this come about? Let's take a quick browse through a current 10th grade physics book. The introductory section has the customary holy verses. These are followed by a comical overview of the history of physics. Newton and Einstein — the two greatest names — are unmentioned. Instead there's Ptolemy the Greek, Al-Kindi, Al-Beruni and Ibn-e-Haytham ... Local biology books are even more schizophrenic and confusing than the physics ones. A 10th-grade book starts off its section on 'Life and its Origins' unctuously quoting one religious verse after another. None of these verses hint towards evolution, and many Muslims believe that evolution is counter-religious.⁷⁶

The *al-Ghad* articles advocated purging the school curricula of ideas that aggrandize death, promote extremism and accuse others of heresy. Just how much damage to the ethical infrastructure of the youth was being perpetrated by these ideas was indicated by educationalist Dalāl Salāma, who pointed out that in the textbooks the evaluation of others was made according to a curious criterion:

⁷² Samar Dūdīn, المنهج الخفي الذي يحرم الفنون ('The hidden curriculum that outlaws the Arts'), *Al-Ghad*, July 28 2015.

⁷³ Dhuqān 'Ubaydāt, "الداعشية" في المناهج والكتب المدرسية, *Al-Ghad*, June 30 2015.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Pervez Hoodbhoy, *Is it science or theology?*, www.dawn.com May 07, 2016.

The curriculum requires that the student evaluates others on the basis of how far they are committed to the rulings of Islamic law, without any reference to legal or moral responsibilities or an individual's moral judgment.⁷⁷

The abandonment of the Arts / humanities

Most conspicuous of all the omissions, according to Samar Dūdīn⁷⁸ was the role of the 'Arts, philosophy and studies in culture' in the curricula of the schools and other educational institutions:

Why do [educational institutions] not focus on this in teacher training, or employ it as an active means of instruction in the development of pupils' attitudes and abilities to study and create new, more open arenas of knowledge? Why are many schools preventing openly, or covertly and silently, the teaching of music as if this were something taboo, and holding the arts in general (and music, theatre and dance in particular) as something that merely stirs up desires and excites lust, thereby impelling us all towards moral collapse?

Those who maintain that the Arts are forbidden by Islamic law and that expressing oneself freely through the Arts is something that should be stopped through some act of intellectual terrorism carried out by the forces of extremism and obscurantism, are sowing the seeds of exclusion, and establishing a form of cognitive, social tyranny that vouchsafes all manner of violence. Today, more than at any other time, we are in need of establishing a bold, dogged, long-term civil action to demand that philosophy and the Arts be included as core courses in education.⁷⁹

Implications of the prevalent educational methodology (of rote-learning)

The *Al-Ghad* investigation went on to conclude that there was in the Jordanian school curricula overall a lamentable lack of educational methodology worthy of the name. The materials 'did not attempt to bear any link with the students or call for critical reflection or maintain their interest' or provide anything that could compete with international standards. In the curricula and the textbooks reviewed,

no intellectual standpoints were noticeable. Materials are presented in narrative form and the evaluation taking place at the end of the lesson was simply: 'now learn this'!⁸⁰

The contrast with educational systems of advanced and dynamically developing countries could not be more boldly drawn. Where western children are subtly, and often overtly, exhorted to challenge authority, the child under this system is simply drilled to be excessively deferential and obedient to authority. 'Alā' al-Dīn Abū Zayna commented on the political and social implications of this methodological deficit:

If we want a dynamic country, one that is far removed from extremism and both intellectual and practical inertia, change must start from the means that fashions the intellect and social behavior, and indeed political and administrative behavior.

What is *not* required is for curricula to continue to cram the minds of students with data that will be forgotten the following day or month. Rather it should train the mind to process information by deconstructing it and reconstructing it so as to produce new knowledge. The capacities of the mind must be founded upon doubt and experimentation, and upon the ability to shift fixed positions, and accommodate diversity and openness in all its various identities and interpretations. It should be able to adapt to change, devise new solutions and free itself from fear of proposing something new. In the end, it will consist of a national intellect possessed of a flexible

⁷⁷ Dhuqān 'Ubaydāt, *الداعشية في المناهج والكتب المدرسية*, *Al-Ghad*, June 30 2015.

⁷⁸ Samar Dūdīn, المنهج الخفي الذي يحرم الفنون ('The hidden curriculum that outlaws the Arts'), *Al-Ghad*, July 28 2015.

⁷⁹ Samar Dūdīn, *ibid.*

⁸⁰ Dhuqān 'Ubaydāt, *الداعشية في المناهج والكتب المدرسية*, *Al-Ghad*, June 30 2015.

methodology, one that is free from intolerance and authoritarian traits in matters of opinion and attitude.⁸¹

Abū Zayna's summation corresponds with accounts of pedagogic sterility across the region, in which the overall conception of education approximates more to 'an industrial production process, where curricula and their content serve as moulds into which fresh minds are supposed to be poured' and where, out of a range of formats such as lectures, seminars, workshops, collaborative work, laboratory work and others, the prevailing Arab model is the lecture format, in which

communication in education is didactic, supported by set books containing indisputable texts in which knowledge is objectified so as to hold incontestable facts, and by an examination process that only tests memorisation and factual recall.⁸²

Islamist domination of the education sector

The Jordanian research demonstrated the problem: an educational sector dominated, to the point of ruin, by Islamists. Since the 1970s this domination has rooted itself deep enough to be able to exclude all representatives of other currents of thought in the planning and formulation of educational curricula and activity.

A parallel story obtains for Egypt, where the roots of extremism in the education sector go back several decades and the influence of Islamists made possible as a result of specific policies adopted by the government. Under the policy of *infīṭāḥ* ('liberalisation') the slogan "science and faith" was articulated as the basis of Egypt's progress and renaissance. In an attempt to neutralise the waxing political influence of the Muslim Brotherhood members of Islamist organizations were duly released from prison and empowered to influence education and dominate community associations. This included control of university campuses and greater enrolment in faculties of education. In so doing Presidents Sadat and Mubarak believed that affording political Islam a greater influence would strengthen their regimes as well as relieve some of the burden of public expenditures. As it turned out, it failed to immunize either of them from assassination or revolution and led to a severe deterioration in state institutions and in the quality of the education provided. To compensate for this poor quality there was a growth in private schools and private tutoring, much of it supported by Islamist associations that also offered grants to poorer families, in addition to a rapid growth in private Islamic schools providing additional Islamic curricula and activities.⁸³

After the wave of terrorist attacks in the early 1990s, the regime did take measures to loosen the hold of extremists on educational institutions by removing teachers accused of extremism, but these measures were not accompanied by real changes in textbook orientations or school activities. A renewed attempt at curricular reform was made in 2014 with the aim of purifying textbooks from material that feeds extremism and violence, administered by a high-profile national curriculum reform committee that included scholars of Al-Azhar and the Ministry of Awqāf, and which 'seems to be largely overseeing the same mechanisms and expertise that have led to the current situation in the first place.'⁸⁴ Observers also reported that no broad changes have been made in the kinds of topics students must study, and indeed noted the poor quality and superficiality of the textbooks that had been 'reformed'.

Education across the Muslim world wrestles with this twin-track phenomenon. Tunisia, for instance, is held aloft as a picture of relative progressiveness in the Arab world. Yet since the events of the Arab Spring the picture of Jordan and Egypt has been mirrored there:

⁸¹ 'Alā' al-Dīn Abū Zayna, يجب تغيير المنهجية والمناهج معاً ('We have to change the methodology and the syllabuses too'), *Al-Ghad*, August 12 2015.

⁸² AHDR 2003, pp.53-4.

⁸³ H. Sobhy, 'To get rid of extremism in education, understand its roots', *Al-Fanar Media*, November 6 2015.

⁸⁴ H. Sobhy, *Ibid*.

After the loss of the State's authority; many institutions became hotbeds conducive to terrorism. ... Since 2011 areas of concern where radical ideas and destructive methods have developed arose in education ... As a result of Decree No. 88, dated 24 September, 2011, a thousand religious associations have come into being. ... Illegal Qur'anic schools have mushroomed under the guise of associations ... What is being offered at these educational institutions is a scholastic religious education, that denies history, and is focused mainly on sex-segregation ... Singing, dancing and games are banned. Any image or any artistic representation of any animated being is deemed haram (illicit). ... In spite of the 1992 reform that instituted the study of comparative religion, the teaching of the humanities, social sciences, foreign languages and human rights; the teaching curricula continue to ignore critical thinking and the study of other cultures.⁸⁵

The characteristic features of Islamist education

A search for 'authenticity'

Taking a broad overview of the nature of education in the Middle East, analysts perceive that the common thread is a propensity towards Islamic *archaism* as a badge of identity, the preoccupation with an opaquely defined 'authenticity' which sidelines, and prohibits, any discussions on how to bring Islamic thought up to date with the modern era, and its values. The archaism is remarkable, and the Tunisian scholar Chiheb Laalāi sets this feature in contradistinction to the situation outside of the Muslim world:

How does one explain the impossibility of a Descartes emerging in the Islamic world? If the West, ever since the original Greek impetus, has been motivated, as Bachelard⁸⁶ put it, by the logic of the 'liquidation of the past' – for what ontological or historical reason is it that Islamic culture, even when she engages in reform, continues to accord the past a respect for tradition that Islamic culture historically or in the future will never deny?⁸⁷

This reversion may be laid squarely at the door of this Islamist domination of the educational sector, a domination underpinned by a Salafist conception of religious authenticity and their programme of 'reform'. Such a reform, however, can only be retrograde, since that is its stated purpose. As if to recreate the Arab tribal culture into which Islam was born, its ethnocentrism, xenophobia, cultural chauvinism, patriarchy, machismo and prioritisation of form over content provides the conditioning template for everything and sets the barrier up before all other religious or intellectual trends within and outside of Islam, and even against the epistemological foundations underpinning modernity. Reverence for the paradigm set by these *Salaf*, or 'ancestors'

is manifested in the modernity-phobia which dominates the Arab mentality, modernism being regarded as heresy or imitation of Jews and Christians.⁸⁸

A pre-occupation with decontamination

The conflation between 'Arab' and 'Islamic' is significant. Given that this ancestor-worship necessarily understands perfection as something past and earlier (there can be no improvement, only deterioration) there is an in-built, xenophobic dynamic of suspicion of external forms and an antipathy to new ideas. This antipathy is purportedly sacralised by Islamist educationalists with the famous Hadith: "Every new matter is an innovation, every innovation is misguidance and every misguidance is in Hellfire"⁸⁹ and invigorated by Ibn Taymiyya's explicit exegesis:

⁸⁵ R. Benslama, مؤتمر المثقفين التونسيين ضد الإرهاب - حتى نكون مسؤولين وفاعلين - تقرير أولي ('Conference of Tunisian Intellectuals against Terrorism - For an Ethics of Responsibility and Action, Preliminary Report'), 22 September 2015.

⁸⁶ Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) was a French philosopher who characterised the history of science as preceding, on the one hand, along a clear, rapid progression of '*positivités*', by means of a 'liquidation of the past', and on the other hand, a slower, negative, historical process. He demonstrated how the progress of science could be blocked by certain types of mental patterns, and created the concept of the 'epistemological obstacle'.

⁸⁷ Chiheb Laalāi, 'The position of reason, the will and the person in Islam', *Almuslih.org*

⁸⁸ Lafif Lakhdar, *Moving from Salafit to Rationalist Education* كيف تنتقل من المدرسة السلفية إلى المدرسة العقلانية? *Al-Hiwār*, 24th May 2004.

⁸⁹ As narrated from Jabir by al-Nasa'i with a fair chain.

Our forefathers used to say: if one of our ‘*ulamā*’ deviates, it means he is imitating Jews, and if one of our ordinary people deviates, he is imitating Christians.⁹⁰

Ibn Taymiyya goes on to add:

Act differently from them, for stressing an absolute differentiation serves to negate any accordance that might take place in some matters, or indeed equally in all matters ... Because being different from them [i.e. the Jews and Christians] brings us benefits and good in everything we do. Even the perfect things they do in their lives could be harmful to us in our Hereafter, or even more importantly in our daily lives, so remaining different from them will bring us goodness.⁹¹

The pre-occupation with decontamination with all that is deemed outside the Islamic tradition and its intellectual framework, therefore makes the approach of applying non-Islamic models problematic. We can see this in the writings of 19th century scholars who were faced with the dilemma of imported systems of education and governance that were attracting the attention, and oftentimes admiration, of the flock. How could this be reconciled, they argued, with the doctrine of *al-walā’ wal-barā’*, of loyalty to all things authentically Muslim and renunciation of everyone, and everything, extraneous? ‘Abd Allāh al-Ahdal (ob. 1855) attempted a resolution of this conundrum, but only at the cost of abandoning logic. He argued that acquiescence and appreciation of such systems that were not found in the Islamic historical tradition constituted an attack on Islam itself, in that if foreign systems proved ‘just’ they would have to be applied – since all justice emanates from Islam – but that would imply that Islam was contradictory and in opposition to itself, for not having itself generated such systems. They therefore have to be rejected in favour of an Islamically authentic system, however less effective it might be.⁹²

Modern education as ‘western Colonialism’s intellectual and conceptual assault’

The Islamist approach to pedagogy is strongly informed by this attitude. Western education in particular is held to be the cause of Islam’s current political weakness – the equation being made is that the education system is diverting Muslims from authentic Islam. Far from being confined to the reactions of extremist groups (such as the self-definition of *Boko Haram* – ‘Western Education is Forbidden’) the rejection of contemporary systems of education is raised to the level of criminalisation as a form of ‘colonialism of the mind’. “Enclosed, atavistic, fundamentalist thought”, laments Hashem Saleh,

predominates in our schools and universities, and not merely in our traditional institutions and colleges of Sharī‘a. This thought predominates over the entire Arab Street from the Atlantic to the Arabian Gulf, and indeed the Islamic Street as a whole, from the Far West to Pakistan,⁹³

and the product of the predominant atavistic, fundamentalist thought is the underpinning it provides for

the resurgence of movements of self-isolation that pronounce excommunication upon any opening up to the modern, enlightened philosophy on the grounds that it is Western – that is, a ‘Satanic abomination’.⁹⁴

The perception of ‘western’ education as a form of evangelization

For an indication of the analytical depth that Islamists have invested in the de-contamination exercise, one could take the example of the work by the Saudi scholar Bakr ibn ‘Abdallāh Abū

⁹⁰ Ibn Taymiyya, الصراط المستقيم لمخالفة أصحاب الجحيم (‘Cleaving to the Straight Path means Opposing the Inhabitants of Hell’), Minbar al-Tawhid wal-Jihad, 1994, p.3.

⁹¹ Ibn Taymiyya, *op.cit.* pp.39 and 43.

⁹² See ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Bārī al-Ahdal, السيف البتار على من يوالي الكفار (‘The Slicing Sword Against the One Who Forms Allegiances with the Disbelievers’), tr. At-Tibyān Publications, 2009.

⁹³ H. Saleh, speaking at The Rome Colloquium, *Amplifying Muslim Voices for Reason & Reform*.

⁹⁴ H. Saleh, *ibid*.

Zayd Āl Ghayhab: *The Secular, Foreign and Colonialist Schools: Their History and Dangers*.⁹⁵
The introduction gives a flavour of the standpoint:

The life of the Muslim nation over the last 1300 years was based on the principle of *al-walā' wal-barā'*, ('loyalty and disavowal') loyalty towards Islam and the Muslims and disavowal of disbelief and the infidels, and on the principle and *love and hatred for Allah's sake* – a love for Islam and the Muslims and hatred for disbelief and the infidel. Between these and the infidel there is a barrier of faith ... It is no wonder that they should greet with refusal that which Islam refuses, in addition to what it rejects and destroys its existence.

One of these things being refused are 'foreign, colonial, evangelisation schools' imported by Christian propaganda missions for the purpose of sinking their colonial claws into the body of the Islamic nation. The first step made in preparation for this was the rise of 'self-colonisation': rational, intellectual and cultural colonialism through 'education' starting from Kindergarten, and expanding to the education of girls, the spread of schools, to higher education in colleges and universities, and the intensification of their expansion in Muslim countries.

Abu Zayd does not speak in his work of any inculcation of any overt Christian doctrine in these schools, so much as an inculcation of knowledge by means of an education system and methodology brought forth in an alternative epistemological climate, the result of which will 'destroy the Islamic consciousness':

If a people adopts an imported education system based on a belief other than their own, or ethics which are not their own, it leads to results that are reflected in belief and ethics, in politics and society, in mindsets and deviations that conflict with those upon which his own in faith, belief and behaviour are built, leading to the shaking of one's belief and to apostasy in thought and religion. The life of the nation descends into divisions and fragmentations, to clashes and conflicts ... An imported education system works against the rock of unity and society, splitting it up into a state of anarchy and conflict that is difficult to control, so that it all becomes the beginning of the end.

The apotropaic function of Islamist education

This issue of the claimed 'assault on the cultural front' resonates deeply in the mindset of the Muslim world today, and forms a central feature of Islamist programmes focusing on education. Under this scheme the entire course of Muslim history is taught as if it were one slow progression of decline through contamination, from internal Islamic heresy to alien Hellenistic rationalism, until finally the Islamic world's ability to define the military, economic, cultural and intellectual geography of the world slipped from its hands. The Muslims, they argue, have been misled by the superficial differences of the enemy, and the superficial differences in their tactics. For Muhammad Qutb (the brother of the more famous Sayyid Qutb), it is

the diversion of Muslims from holding to their Islam which is the most dangerous thing the enemy has perpetrated. And they have succeeded in this. This is what we might call the 'intellectual onslaught' or the 'psychological attack' or what you will. This is what we are suffering from the most today, even if we are able – at least at some points – to resist the military, economic or political onslaught.⁹⁶

Indeed, for Islamist thinkers, culture outside the Islamic heritage lacks outright legitimacy and credibility. Sayyid Qutb was keen to make this distinction,

Islam considers that - excepting the abstract sciences and their practical applications - there are two kinds of culture; the Islamic culture, which is based on the Islamic concept, and the *jāhili* culture, which manifests itself in various modes of living which are nevertheless all based on one

⁹⁵ Bakr ibn 'Abdallāh Abū Zayd Āl Ghayhab: *المدارس العالمية الأجنبية الاستعمارية: تاريخها ومخاطرها* (*The Secular, Foreign and Colonialist Schools: Their History and Dangers*). 1st Ed. 2000. The author was the one-time head of the international Islamic Fiqh Council and member of the Saudi Arabian Permanent Committee for Islamic Research Available for download at <http://www.saaaid.net/book/open.php?cat=83&book=349>.

⁹⁶ صرّف المسلمون عن التمسك بالإسلام ... إن هذا هو أخطر ما فعله الأعداء، ونجحوا فيه ... هو الذي نطلق عليه اسم الغزو الفكري ... أو الغزو الروحي ... أو ما نشاء Muhammad Qutb: من الأسماء، وهو أكبر ما نعانیه اليوم، حتى إن استسلمنا - في بعض المواقع على الأقل - مقاومة الغزو العسكري أو الإقتصادي أو السياسي الصراع بين الفكر الغربي والفكر الإسلامي (*The Conflict Between Western and Islamic Thought*), Minbar al-Tawhīd wal-Jihad, n.d. 7.

thing, and that is giving human thought the status of a Allah Almighty so that its truth or falsity is not to be judged according to Allah's guidance.⁹⁷

The preoccupation of the Islamist educationalist is therefore to weed out *al-'ulūm al-dakhīla* – the ‘interloping alien sciences’ and according to Qutb’s spectrum impose a distinction to be made between permissible and impermissible fields of study, whereby the Muslim is to be *disqualified* from participating in certain fields. While the Muslim was permitted to adopt the findings of science, when it came to matters of the ‘philosophy’ underpinning these sciences a choice had to be made:

As far as the interpretation of human endeavour is concerned, whether this endeavour be individual or collective, this relates to theories of the nature of man and of the historical processes. Similarly, the explanation of the origin of the universe, the origin of the life of man, are part of metaphysics (not related to the abstract sciences such as chemistry, physics, astronomy or medicine, etc.); and thus their position is similar to legal matters, rules and regulations which order human life. These indirectly affect man's beliefs...⁹⁸

Philosophy, the interpretation of history, psychology, ethics, theology and comparative religion, sociology (excluding statistics and observations) - all these sciences have orientations which in the past or the present have been influenced by jāhīlī beliefs and traditions. That is why all these sciences come into conflict, explicitly or implicitly, with the fundamentals of any religion, and especially with Islam.⁹⁹

If western sciences are based on a premise of man’s ability to reason and govern his own actions, and his consequent detachment of his science from God, this conception for the Islamist educationalist simply reeks of *jāhiliyya*.¹⁰⁰ If man uses reason as his authoritative guide it means he is being allowed to act as an autonomous being; he will therefore obey only himself and rebel against the sovereignty of God. For this reason the Moroccan fundamentalist Ṭaḥa ‘Abd al-Raḥmān voiced strong suspicion of the translation of western works on epistemology or the promotion of Arab philosophical works since ‘their birth certificate was written in the blood of Hellenizers’ who were bearers of a culture that had ‘severed the mind from the Unseen (*al-ghayb*) and knowledge from practical application’, as opposed to ‘the rightly-guided Islamic mentality that, in contradistinction from this error-saturated Greek mentality, supports divine revelation.’¹⁰¹

Much of Islamist education therefore serves an apotropaic function, to quarantine the student from the challenges of modernity, against collaboration with ‘un-Islamic’ intellectual, social and political arenas, since modern sciences are seen ‘to destroy the fundamentalist genealogical tree of authority.’¹⁰²

The ubiquitous religious filter

The task is therefore to filter out these ‘western’ concepts from the mental universe of the Muslims and remove the dangers they pose to their creed, knowledge and language. To do this, fundamentalists insist upon the necessity of studying the tradition exclusively by means of the tradition itself, and religion by means of the religion itself, not via the doctrines or sciences elaborated by thinkers outside the Islamic heritage. The filtering is all-encompassing, to the point

⁹⁷ Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, Ed. A. al-Mehri, Maktabah, Birmingham 2006, p.123.

⁹⁸ Sayyid Qutb, *op.cit.*, p.122.

⁹⁹ Sayyid Qutb, *op.cit.*, pp.122-3.

¹⁰⁰ For this the Islamist argument most frequently cites *sūrat al-Baqara* where God ‘taught Adam all the names of things’ and mankind had ‘no knowledge saving that which Thou hast taught us’ [Qur’ān II,31-2].

¹⁰¹ Ṭaḥa ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, *فقه الفلسفة، فلسفة الترجمة* Vol. 1 p.15.

¹⁰² Lafif Lakhdar, *إصلاح العربية* (*The Reform of Arabic*) Al-Jamal Publications, Beirut, Baghdad, 2014, p.23.

of ascribing an Islamic origin to the most unusual fields of experience. Hania Sobhy has observed this process accelerating in Egypt during the Mubarak era. She noted how there was

a clear change in textbook discourse, which increasingly revolved around a particular vision of Islam as a key political frame of reference. Even love of the nation was presented as a value promoted by Islam. Democracy was good because Islam had pioneered it. Discussions of human values and the values of work and family as well as lessons on science, medicine and industry were framed in Islamic terms.¹⁰³

Justice, under this scheme, has no connection with positive law, but with “governing by what God has decreed” and even in the fields of history and civics, or the broader Arabic language curricula, the Islamist frames promoted by the Muslim Brotherhood dominated the interpretation proffered to students.¹⁰⁴ It is a thoroughgoing saturation, and one that has transformed school education out of all recognition:

School activities now revolve mainly around Islamic themes, such as Quran recitation and memorization contests. School radio programs have also become saturated with a particular religious orientation. Pressure was placed on female students and teachers to wear the hijab and girls were increasingly excluded from sports. Cultural, artistic and music activities also began to disappear from schools. Overall, the vibrant, high-quality public schools that earlier generations recount became a distant memory.¹⁰⁵

The Jordanian research demonstrated the ubiquity of this religious filter running through the pages of the textbooks. This doctrinal tint, ‘Ubaydāt explained, permeates the entire syllabus and manifests itself in a constant religious textual preoccupation, an omnipresent scriptural vocabulary colouring the entire syllabus:

In the book of *General Culture*, more than 85 Qur’ānic verses, and dozens of hadith were amassed within the space of a single study unit, all of which bore no relevance to the subject being discussed – in this case philosophy and science ... Twenty modules out of 46 in the Arabic language unit were seen to reinforce Islamic culture and religious thought and ... lessons on the Arabic language or on national public education and culture were barely distinguishable from specifically religious issues ... Each book began with Qur’ānic verses and hadith of the Prophet, at the expense of literary or poetic texts ... in Arabic language exercises expressions and grammatical parsing and grammatical rules were replete with openly religious terms.¹⁰⁶

The result of this filtering, and indeed main features of this educational system may be witnessed in the preponderance for prioritising texts over against the intellect, the shoe-horning of analysis of political and intellectual standpoints on current events into doctrinal frameworks, and tendentiousness in doctrinal, jurisprudential and intellectual conceptions.

Not only do these Islamist dominated syllabuses pass everything through a religious filter, but in matters of religious teaching itself, in the lessons on Islam, it is a vehement, uncompromising interpretation that is on offer. ‘Ubaydāt observed the theme of overt jihad studies continuing throughout the schooling years, with the Islamic education textbooks portraying jihad as an individual duty (*farḍ ‘ayn*) which was incumbent upon the Muslim to pursue unimpeded ‘unless they have a real reason not to do so.’ In Egypt one analyst expressed particular concern at the ambiguous attitude taken to Islamist violence in school textbooks, such as in the following definition given of Islamist ‘extremism and terrorism’:

¹⁰³ H. Sobhy, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁴ “One example of this is the novel *Wa-Islamah*, taught in general secondary education throughout the Mubarak era and until the present. The novel was written by Ali Ahmad BaKatheer, who is reportedly affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. It highlights the central idea of political Islam that “abandoning Islam” (with Islam being defined primarily as personal ritual observance) leads to foreign occupation and the misery caused by it, while “returning to Islam” reverses this national decline.” H. Sobhy, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ H. Sobhy, *op. cit.*

¹⁰⁶ Dhuqān ‘Ubaydāt, “الداعشية” في المناهج والكتب المدرسية, *Al-Ghad*, June 30 2015.

These are human phenomena, and we should teach the student about these in a fair and balanced way, so that when he encounters these themes he is neither attracted to terrorism nor unduly fearful of the terrorist ... In this day and age we often come across images of extremism; we should not be troubled by this or falsely understand that there are some Muslims who are terrorists, since to be extreme is human nature.¹⁰⁷

The implications of this approach are troubling – that religious violence is not *per se* to be unequivocally excluded, since it is part of the fabric of belief. In general, as the Jordanian research concluded, the teaching of Islam in such works ‘increases fanaticism and the expulsion of the ‘Other’. As for concepts such as homeland, nation, citizenship or Arab national identity, these are summarily expunged

in favor of a despicable and phony religious identity based on a culturally-depleted Islam.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ I. Raslān, رؤية داعشية في مناهج التربية الدينية الجديدة, (‘ISIS views in the new religious education syllabuses’) *Al-Shorouk*, October 12 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Zuleikha Abu Risha, وبعدين معك يا تربية؟, *Al-Ghad*, November 17, 2015.

II - The damage wrought by Islamist education

Ethical quarantine

The culturally depleted Islam taught in the schools has come about through a pre-occupation with matters of religious *identity* over matters of ethical *substance*. This is primarily the result of Islamist reaction to the stresses of contact with global modernity, whereby the archaism of their response has been to reactivate anachronistic preoccupations for achieving ‘a perfect dissimilarity with the non-Muslims’.¹⁰⁹

Progressive Arab scholars have noted with interest the way that Islamist religious education parallels 20th century political totalitarian pedagogy, equating ‘religious narcissism’ to ‘national narcissism’ for their employment of the same logic: turning the historic gap between cultures and nations into a gap that is presented as natural and inherent in nature. Just as race narcissism seeks to expel and destroy ‘inferior’ races, Islam as the ‘one true religion’ is called to triumph over the other religions that are ‘false.’ The values of those ‘false’ religions are therefore to be expelled, irrespective of any worth they may contain. “Stricken with madness for vengeance upon ‘the Jews and Crusaders’ at any price,” argued Lafif Lakhdar, the paradigm of the Muslim hero is given by figures such as Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb:

What is alarming is that his words are learned by heart by elementary school children, with the aim of sowing among the children the inability to recognize reality, to force them to close up... and to force them into extreme distancing from the other, to lead them to Paradise bound in chains, to infect them with the madness of the purity of Islamic identity, and to lead them towards megalomania, fanaticism, self-segregation, and terror¹¹⁰

The afterlife of an ethnocentric tribal culture

For all the universalist claims of the Islamist programme, their archaism inevitably imports a strong afterlife of the Arab tribal cradle of primitive Islam, a catalogue of mindsets that characterise the ethically closed-off fundamentalist: masculism, isolationism, suspicion of the other and self-aggrandizement, all immunised from challenge by a sacralising ancestor-worship.¹¹¹ Soheib Bencheikh lamented the ‘sclerotic theology’ that Islamists were inculcating to justify this, a theology which was

conceived for tribal societies ... meant for times when nations hardly came into contact with each other – and if they did, it was in a spirit of rivalry for dominance. This theology could not care less about living in harmony with other cultures.¹¹²

For a part of the world that hosts significant religious minority populations, this heedlessness is particularly destructive to social cohesion.¹¹³ The Arab Middle East has a particular problem when it comes to ethnocentric instincts for these are ambiguously compounded with Islamic identities. The legacy of cultural supremacist sentiment may be personified in the famous dictum

*If we are not in primacy over all others, it is better for us to die*¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ This is done on the grounds that similar existential challenges exist today as existed when Ibn Taymiyya uttered those words in the 13th century.

¹¹⁰ Lafif Lakhdar, ‘On the Arab Identity Crisis and Education’, *MEMRI Special Dispatch No.576*, September 21, 2003.

¹¹¹ Abd al-Hamid al-Ansari’s essay gives a good analysis of this catalogue. See A. Ansari, ‘*A critique of the Muslim mind*’, *Almuslih.org*.

¹¹² Soheib Bencheikh, *Marianne et le Prophète: L’Islam dans la France laïque*, Part III, Chapter.3 : ‘*La relecture de l’islam*.’

¹¹³ “Respect for other cultures is particularly important in countries with minorities, as is the case in most Arab countries. Such respect needs to go beyond mere tolerance and incorporate a positive attitude to other people.” *Arab Human Development Report*, 2002, pp.8-9.

¹¹⁴ From the poet Abū Firās al-Ḥamdānī (932-968 AD).

and this legacy is folded into a tacitly assumed, if not overtly stated, *religious* supremacy, typified by the controversy over the famous Hadith which reports the Prophet as saying:

*Love the Arabs for three reasons because: I am an Arab, the Holy Qur'ān is in Arabic and the tongue of the dwellers of paradise shall also be Arabic.*¹¹⁵

While the 'weak' status of the hadith religiously delegitimizes its validity, the ethically impoverishing ethnocentric instinct that gave birth to it lives on in the awarding of Arab Muslims the role of 'referent' for the Qur'ānic declaration: *You are the best of the nations raised up for the benefit of men* (*Āl 'Imrān* 110)¹¹⁶ and the disparagement of non-Arab Islam.¹¹⁷ Educationalists lament the effect of his ethnocentric force of gravity in perpetuating ethical primitivism:

The criterion of peoples' progress from savagery and their natural state to civilization... is their transition from an ethnocentric perception to a perception of human harmony, from a state that is the foundation of racism — with a belief in inherent differences among ethnic groups, cultures, and religions — to a state in which the only distinctions emanate from the degree of historical advancement. Only thus can there begin a healthy transition from glorifying the individual and society to criticizing them... from blind faith and consensus to critical thought and disagreement.¹¹⁸

The loss of the individual and his conscience

As the religious supremacy of the Arab Muslim translates in turn to cultural supremacy, the authority of this supreme culture, of this 'desert Islam' — with its norms of dress, religious practice and cultural exclusivism — inexorably fosters homogenisation and the destruction of the individual. For in Muslim societies, argues Lafif Lakhdar,

the individual has yet to make its appearance. The individual remains to a great extent dissolved in the nation and does not think for himself ... and instead resorts to the traditional shaykh and the Mufti.¹¹⁹

He is instead enveloped in a heavily 'public' culture, in the sense that

one's private life lies entirely under the yoke of a public life punctuated by reverence for the precepts of the faith, so that the sphere of privacy is still perceived as a sphere of evil.¹²⁰

Under such a pressure, the importance given by Islamist theorists to the education of women, associated *par excellence* with that troublesome sphere, is predictably negligible

Pre-occupations with cultural and intellectual contamination, ethnocentrism, supremacy and deference to 'classical forms' of religious practice, have generated an anti-universalist ethical hierarchy. The influence and consequences of the damage that this has wrought can be seen in the way Islamists strenuously oppose in their programmes what they actively dismiss as the progressive 'ethicisation' of Islam as a distraction from the dynamic of a larger war against 'western' values.

¹¹⁵ Hadith no. 5751 (Bayhaqī, *Mishkat*, No.5997).

¹¹⁶ On the basis of the text of this verse: *You are the best of the nations raised up for the benefit of men, you enjoin what is right and forbid the wrong and believe in Allah*, Ismail al-Faruqi formulated, following syllogism: "To enjoin good, forbid evil and believe in God is to be ethically the best; The Arabs enjoin the good, forbid evil and believe in God; therefore, the Arabs are ethically the best.". He contended that 'Arabness' (*'urūba*) or Arab consciousness was the vehicle for the divine message and was thus central to the history of religion as a whole. See J. Esposito and J. Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, Oxford University Press, 2001, p.25.

¹¹⁷ The following statement is typical: "Those Muslim societies that are ignorant of Arabic are in general less knowledgeable about Islam. This ignorance has in turn made them more prone to stray from the straight path." See 'The Importance of Arabic, Key to Understanding the Qur'ān' available at <https://quranicarabic.wordpress.com/2010/04/06/arabic-the-key-to-the-quran/>.

¹¹⁸ Lafif Lakhdar, 'On the Arab Identity Crisis and Education', *MEMRI Special Dispatch No.576*, September 21, 2003.

¹¹⁹ From the author's correspondence with *Almuslih* in Autumn 2012.

¹²⁰ Chiheb Laalāi, 'The position of reason, the will and the person in Islam', *Almuslih.org*. The citation is from Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'The world is my world: this is manifest in the fact that the limits of language (of that language which alone I understand) mean the limits of my world'.

As a result of the intellectual and ethical failures of this pedagogic system the individual is yet to emerge fully out of a collective (and often ideologised ‘*umma*’) consciousness. He is presented with an artificially constructed fault-line between a conscience-based, and a textually-based ethics and is steered in the direction of the latter. This ethical deficit presents a significant barrier to entering into modernity, since for as long as being *atextual* is considered worse than being *amoral*, a common ground for discussion and for development, in line with the needs of a modern citizen, will fail to present itself.¹²¹

Political quarantine

The Jordanian and Egyptian analyses flagged up the divergent trajectory of Islamist education policies in schools on the question of identity and citizenship. Hania Sobhy observed how

one of the most blatant manifestations of the control of public schools by extremist forces under Mubarak was the replacement of the national anthem with religious chants in many schools,¹²²

– a substitution that was taking place on many levels, indicating that a parallel conception of political structures to those adopted by the rest of modernity was being taught. It governs, for instance, an entirely divergent interpretation of the vocabulary of ‘patriotism’, ‘pluralism’ and ‘secularism’ and of governance and law.

A new ‘patriotism’

In this linguistic contest, the single most brilliant strategic achievement of the Islamist educationalists is the conflation of two things, *Arab* and *Muslim*, an achievement only reinforced by a second conflation of even greater ingenuity – the conflation of ‘patriotism’ with ‘authenticity’. At a time when the political order in the Middle East has suffered serious blows to its infrastructure, their domination of the educational sector is bringing up a generation demanding a new structure in which the political legitimization of Islamism is assured on the basis of the ‘patriotism’ of the people, expressed in terms of the nation’s ‘rising up from the ashes of dictatorial repression.’

The patriotism is also expressed in the language of *cultural pedigree*, whereby the population is to shed the legacy of ‘western cultural domination’ and its institutions and systems, using the argument that there is no reason to follow the path of liberation according to the western model, for it is a different political heritage that is supplying the models. The force of the argument has an almost invincible formula. “It is patently obvious.” argues Egyptian commentator Abdel-Moneim Said,

that at every turn in the political road our Islamist intellectual friends will be the first to spout the pieties of cultural specificity, political identity and civilisational autonomy as the rhetorical bulwarks for the universalist mission of covert and overt Islamist groups and movements.¹²³

On top of this, as the logical extension of this cultural pedigree, there is the *religious pedigree* of the people as expressed in the ‘authentic patriotism’ of the ‘Arab, Muslim’ people in demanding an Islamically authentic political system. The argument here is that Islam has been prevented from taking its true determining role, with all its implications this has had for the dignity of the Muslim, a dignity and self-confidence which will now be restored.

¹²¹ “This new individual – a believer as a person, but secular as a citizen – is the only one who is qualified to effect a reconciliation with the world he lives in, divested of any hysterical fears or delirious denunciations of others as ‘infidel’ ... The birth of such an individual *en masse* constitutes the promise that every contemporary reformist project holds, or should hold.”

Lafif Lakhdar, *The reform of Islam is both necessary and possible*. Paper submitted for the 1st Almuslih Conference ‘*Amplifying Muslim Voices for Reason and Reform*’ held at Rome, December 7-8 2012.

¹²² H. Sobhy, *op.cit.*

¹²³ Abdel-Moneim Said – ‘Of Cabbages and Kings’, *Al-Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 842 26 April - 2 May 2007.

This slogan of ‘political freedom, our way’ has an unassailable ring to it. It is modern, it is post-imperialist, it is authentic, it is *patriotic*. Patriotic in a way that any identity under the ‘western-supported dictators’ could never be. Under the unstoppable logic of the new patriotism it is difficult to see how the Arab publics will be able to understand the distinction – at the visceral level – between an Arab and a Muslim identity.

Islamists thus show considerable subtlety in negotiating the territory. By absorbing the forms of democratic participation – the price paid for public acceptability – they can infect, by a process of osmosis, the language of national discourse with their own ‘culturally authentic’ versions of pluralism, tolerance and one law for all.

An ‘Islamic’ pluralism

With this appeal to authenticity, the Islamists can counter the calls for pluralism very effectively with a ‘more authentic’ pluralism of an Islam that is appropriate for all the peoples and faiths of the Middle East. For just as secularism is the system chosen by the Europeans to resolve the internecine diversities inflicted by the unenlightened Church (so the argument runs), Islam as the source of all enlightenment will, unique among faiths, sit squarely with the diversity of the nation’s people, sheltering them under its benign dispensation, just as it did for centuries before the European imperialist contagion confused the ‘Arab, Muslim’ peoples into renouncing their heritage and cast them into the servitude from which they are only now emerging.

A primary casualty of this subtle conflation is the progressive Muslim reformer. How, for instance, will he make his case for complete equality of citizenship, for full, undiscriminated equality before the law, for the dialogue of faiths, all conducted under the protecting, neutral shelter of secularism – without appearing in some way *unpatriotic*? Yet the new-old vocabulary of Islamist political discourse – the ‘*jizya* tax’, the ‘*dhimma* communities’, the *Sharī‘a* – betrays the ultimate intention towards a hierarchically conceived citizenship.

The contradiction was deftly summed up by Sayid al-Qemany in his article *Al-‘Ār* (‘The Shame’) in the heat of the Arab Spring, commenting on the events surrounding the Al-Qadisayn church massacre in Egypt:

Shame to the Shaykh of al-Azhar attending the consolations in the cathedral, when he is the one restoring the terrorist methodology of *fiqh* to the curriculum in al-Azhar ... Shame to the *mufti* that attends the condolences at the cathedral while his *fatwas* and those of his institution take the stance ... of Islam being the supreme religion ... and declares openly that anyone consenting to the construction of a church is like one who consents to the construction of a brewery or a pig sty; Shame to the media that its discussion and the language of its discourse, and indeed that of drama and songs, are addressed solely to Muslims, as if the nation were devoid of any others ... Shame on us all when ... you find the Muslim Brethren walking today behind a funeral cortege of their own crimes.¹²⁴

Anti-secularism

In an Islamist educational environment unchallenged by alternative progressive currents, their welding together of *Arab* and *Muslim* makes the association of treason with apostasy almost inexorable. Their task is to conflate apostasy from the *faith* with treason against the *community* of the faithful, and the technique employed is textualism of the most tendentious kind. Qur’ānic citations such as *Al-Mā’ida*, 33¹²⁵, with its punishment ‘disgrace in this world’, are made to take on more physical sanctions, and applied to vaguely enunciated accusations of “insulting Islam,” “imitating Christians,” “dissension from religious dogma,” “insulting religious authorities,” and “propagation of spiritual liberalism.”

¹²⁴ Sayid al-Qemany, راعى, *Aafaq*, January 5 2011. On January 1st 2011 the Coptic Al-Qadisayn Church in Alexandria was the target of a bomb attack that resulted in the deaths of 23 worshippers, with 97 injured. It followed a period of growing anti-Church sentiment in the country.

¹²⁵ *The recompense of those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and do mischief in the land is only that they shall be killed or crucified or their hands and their feet be cut off on the opposite sides, or be exiled from the land. That is their disgrace in this world, and a great torment is theirs in the Hereafter.*

The Islamist association of renegation of one's faith with treason is any easy conflation to make given the weight of historical precedent on this issue and the tradition of adopting aggressive interpretations of Qur'ānic verses such as *al-Mā'idā*, 54¹²⁶, and *al-Aḥzāb*, 57¹²⁷ and *al-Tawba* 11-12.¹²⁸

Yet the punishment for apostasy actually has weak Qur'ānic foundation. Though the Text condemns apostasy as one of the most grievous sins (*ḡabā'ir*) it does not prescribe a punishment for it *in this world* (in the way it does for other social crimes like theft, murder, violence and rioting and adultery). And Ibn Taymiyya himself, one of the more influential figures for the Islamist universe, denied that disbelief *as such* could make it lawful to kill a disbeliever – in that there must be an element of hostile aggression also associated with it.

The dogged pursuit of the apostasy/treason argument eloquently highlights the ethical damage of Islamist discourse. Shaykh al-Qaradawī's argument in support of it underscores the moral bankruptcy of the Islamists' conception of the purpose of religious faith. If Christianity is supported by 'armies of monks, nuns and evangelists' independent of the state, he argues,

this contrasts with what would happen if the Islamic state did this. The result would be that the faith would be left without any authority to support it, or force to maintain it.¹²⁹

The presentation of the apostasy punishment as the faith's lifeline in the modern world is the ultimate denigration of the reputation of Islam.

However, the pull remains strong. In a region where Islam is increasingly shaping political vocabulary, the issue of apostasy and religious freedom presents progressive thinkers with their greatest challenge. It has taken two world wars for the Europeans to get a destructive, narrowly nationalistic form of patriotism out of their system. The Middle East has yet to fully practice the concept of the democratic nation state in all its implications, and has not yet exhausted the identity formulas loaded onto the term *tawḥīd* 'unity' to denote the unity of a faith, the unity of a heritage, the unity of an – Islamic – state.

A change of political vocabulary cannot provide an answer to the quarantine. Contrary to claims of there being 'moderate' forms of Islamism that can take their place in the contemporary political spectrum, its core ideological foundations – the reshaping of the religious, intellectual and political complexion of Muslims towards a more pristine, authentic form – means that it must stand in a relationship of hostility with the principles of a modern state and the demands of global co-operation. For all the reasons associated with historical experience, economic under-performance, inherited political and cultural antipathy, and tendentious education, the citizens of the Arab Middle East remain vulnerable to the Islamists' case.

Intellectual quarantine

The ability of Arab Muslims to extricate themselves from stagnation is equally closed off to them by the ultimate application of the authenticity pre-occupation. Spurred by the threat of having the

¹²⁶ *O ye who believe! Whoso of you becometh a renegade from his religion, (know that in his stead) Allah will bring a people whom He loveth and who love Him, humble toward believers, stern toward disbelievers, striving in the way of Allah, and fearing not the blame of any blamer*

¹²⁷ *Lo! those who malign Allah and His messenger, Allah hath cursed them in the world and the Hereafter, and hath prepared for them the doom of the disdained.*

¹²⁸ *But if they repent and establish worship and pay the poor-due, then are they your brethren in religion. We detail Our revelations for a people who have knowledge. And if they break their pledges after their treaty (hath been made with you) and assail your religion, then fight the heads of disbelief - Lo! they have no binding oaths - in order that they may desist.* Maududi's interpretation of this verse and his glosses on the terms 'repent' ('of their disbelief') and 'treaty' ('i.e. their covenant to accept Islam') are illustrative of what progressive Muslim reformists have to challenge. For the more standard interpretations of 'repent' تابوا and 'their treaty' عهدهم are political, not confessional.

¹²⁹ Yusuf al-Qaradawī, الإسلام والعلمانية وجهاً لوجه ('Islam and Secularism Face to Face'), section: مبررات ظهور العلمانية في الغرب المسيحي: ('The Justification for the Appearance of Secularism in the Christian West'). Maktabat Wahba, Cairo 1997, p.49.

mental grammar stolen away from them, the Islamist educationalists have assiduously applied themselves to expelling the modernity virus from the public's very perception of knowledge.

Their task is an ambitious one since they are having to challenge an edifice accelerating at a dizzying rate across the globe with a quantitatively weak, and culturally highly specific, legacy of scientific endeavour. The prestige of modern science is problematic. Muslims, to the chagrin of Islamist thinkers are placing their faith

in materialistic philosophies like scepticism, agnosticism, rationalism, atheism, profiteering, hedonism, libertinism, permissiveness and evolution theory, and doubt religious beliefs and principles. Even if these people live in Muslim houses and environment, their minds are westernised to the extent that the West haunts their behaviour, thinking and living. This is also a form of apostasy. It can well be termed as 'mental apostasy'.¹³⁰

Out of a conviction that a science midwived in the West must forever bear the particularizing cultural stamp of western thought – specifically dispensing with a 'certainty-based science' (*'ilm al-yaqīn*) in its instrumentalisation of skepticism and doubt – education on science and technology must be subjected to a filter. It may well be that western sciences "may be recommended to meet the needs of Muslims for their livelihood, or indeed obligatory if it is a question of the means to wage war on the Infidel" but the freethinking that lies at the base of "mathematics, physics, medicine, astronomy, engineering and suchlike mundane sciences" is damaging to the faith.¹³¹ Science and knowledge has to be Islamised.

Legitimate, and illegitimate science

Accordingly the Islamic filter is to be applied to what it is that constitutes 'legitimate' research for Muslims to undertake and how knowledge itself is to be acquired. In his treatise *Summary of Advice Insisting upon Holding to One's Faith and Warning of Foreign Schools* Shaykh 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Nāṣir al-Sa'dī underlined how:

One must distinguish between useful modern sciences which do not wield any damaging influence upon religious beliefs, and modern sciences which are founded upon erroneous, worthless theories that are not for us, which are built upon ignorance and waywardness, and which contradict the sound teachings of the religion of the Prophets. For so many of these sciences are injurious due to their ugly influences and results, and so many of them have ruined those who are less discerning.¹³²

Certain fields of endeavor in particular elicit their suspicion, namely, sociology, philosophy and psychology, but the Muslim teacher, as instructed by a work entitled *The Gift of the Monotheists*,¹³³ is to be particularly wary of the secular subversion, and set himself to

demolish atheist theories based on the point of view of experimental science, in which the atheists exclusively place their belief ... For it happens that people who are strangers to the Faith set down these materials and methodologies, so that it is the duty of the Muslim teacher not to teach scientific materials merely as such, but to reveal these errors ... to link these sciences with Islam

¹³⁰ Sheikh Mohammed Shihabuddin Nadvi, *Rise and Fall of Muslims in Science*, www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/SN_science/default.htm

¹³¹ "As for learning the other sciences, such as mathematics, physics, medicine, astronomy, engineering and suchlike mundane sciences, they are founded upon freethinking (lit. 'permissiveness'), although they may be recommended to meet the needs of Muslims for their livelihood, or indeed obligatory if it is a question of the means to wage war on the Infidel ... But the view that everything the Infidel achieve in the sciences must be learned and mastered by the Muslims, this is mistaken, since what is incumbent upon man is that he places all his concern in the afterlife, not in the pleasures and sciences of this world."

Shaykh Samīr al-Mālikī, *رد على من عظم الفلاسفة الملاحدة، ابن سينا، الرازي، الفارابي ... وأشباعهم* ('A Response to Those Who Extol the Atheist Philosophers, Ibn Sina, al-Razi, al-Farabi and their Followers') n.d. Section 'On Learning the Mundane Sciences', p.17.

¹³² 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn Nāṣir al-Sa'dī: نصيحة مختصرة في الحث على التمسك بالدين والتحذير من المدارس الأجنبية (*'Summary of Advice Insisting upon Holding to One's Faith and Warning of Foreign Schools'*), ed. Dr. 'Abd al-Salām ibn Barjas Āl 'Abd al-Karīm, Dār al-Imām Ahmad, 1st Ed. 1426 (2005), p.18.

¹³³ تحفة الموحدين في أهم مسائل أصول الدين, *The Gift of the Monotheists on the Most Important Questions concerning the Fundamentals of the Faith*, prepared by the Gazan 'Jurisprudential Committee in the *Jamā'at al-Tawhīd wal-Jihād*', with an introduction by Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and published by Minbar al-Tawhīd wal-Jihād, September/October 2009.

and purge them of suspicious elements, so as to be at one and the same time a *dā‘ī*, a preacher and a guide.¹³⁴

The perception of ‘wrong theories’ has ranged from denials of heliocentrism, as we shall see below, to the aggressive attitude adopted towards evolution – for which there is a fast growing industry of work by Muslims geared to refuting the theory,¹³⁵ despite the valiant efforts of Dr. Rana Dajani and others in indigenising evolution theory to the Islamic heritage.¹³⁶ Such a prospect, as scientist and Imam Dr. Usama Hasan has discovered to his cost, is still fraught with peril even in the homeland of Charles Darwin.¹³⁷ At present, among Muslims in the Middle East brought up in Islamist-dominated education sectors, the prospects of evolution being indigenised are not fully encouraging.¹³⁸ Ibrahim al-Buleihi worries about the prospects for the future of Muslims from this pre-occupation, inherited from Sayyid Qutb, with *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* – the permissible and the prohibited – in Arab Muslim intellectual activity. “Our culture” he laments,

has focused now, as in the past, with questions of what is *ḥarām* and what is *ḥalāl*, on Belief and Disbelief. The Islamic heritage may have attained to its religious greatness but now, as in the past, we have neglected to nurture our life down here on earth. Our culture has instead occupied a single wing, but after all the unique transformations that have come upon human civilisation, it now needs to occupy another wing so as to embrace the pressing issues of growth.¹³⁹

A jihad on epistemology

The transformational nature of Islamism is therefore not merely about power; it is, as it were, a *jihad* on epistemology too. The duty of the Muslim, according to *The Gift of the Monotheists*, is equally to

Islamize all methodologies, including scientific, so that all scientific methods are carried out in the framework of the service of Islam, so that the goal is not purely one of science. This should be the sole aim of teaching this science, and given that our faith is from God and nothing false can issue from it, and given the fact that scientific discoveries are created by God, there therefore cannot be a conflict or a contradiction between science and faith.¹⁴⁰

This *tawḥīd*-ing of all that is with the Maker of all that is, according to the Islamist theorist Abū al-‘Alā al-Mawdūdī, is to be explicitly rehearsed at every opportunity in order to fend off the encroachments of objective scientific observation and the assumptions of a cause and effect relationship that excludes God. When designing a curriculum for ‘scientific’ education,

no phenomenon or fact should be mentioned without referring to the benevolence of Allah ... Effect must not be related to physical cause. To do so leads towards atheism ... It is un-Islamic to teach that mixing hydrogen with oxygen automatically produces water. The Islamic way is this: when atoms of hydrogen approach atoms of oxygen, then by the will of God water is produced... No laws should be named after scientists. It is un-Islamic to speak of Newton’s Laws, Boyle’s Law, and so on because this is tantamount to *shirk* (idolatry) ... God should be introduced into

¹³⁴ *Gift of the Monotheists*, p.71.

¹³⁵ The most notorious being Harun Yahya, author of the glossy Creationist encyclopedia: *Atlas of Creation*.

¹³⁶ Dr. Rana Dajani is Associate Professor of Biology at the Hashemite University, Jordan. Her position on evolution is detailed in U. Hasan and A. Osama (Edd), *Islam & Science, Muslim Responses to Science’s Big Questions*, Muslim World Science Initiative, 2016, pp. 142-150.

¹³⁷ ‘Imam who believes in evolution retracts statements’, *BBC News website* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12661477>), March 7th 2011.

¹³⁸ The PEW research conducted in 2013 revealed a mixed tally for support of evolution: “At least six-in-ten Muslims in Lebanon (78%), the Palestinian territories (67%) and Morocco (63%) think humans and other living things have evolved over time, but Jordanian and Tunisian Muslims are more divided on the issue. About half in Jordan (52%) believe in evolution, while 47% say humans have always existed in their present form. And in Tunisia, 45% say humans have evolved, 36% say they have always existed in their present form, and 19% are unsure. Iraq is the only country surveyed in the Middle East-North Africa region where a majority rejects the theory of evolution (67%).” See *The World’s Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society*, The Pew Forum on Religions & Public Life, April 30, 2013, p.132.

¹³⁹ Ibrahim al-Buleihi, ‘*Castles of Backwardness*’, p.63.

¹⁴⁰ *Gift of the Monotheists*, p.70.

science classrooms ... A chemistry book should necessarily be entitled: 'The Holy Qur'an and Chemistry' ... A science textbook should be written only by a man who believes strongly in Islam ... The birth of all sciences should be traced to the Muslim period.¹⁴¹

Since it is the Islamists' view that all science and knowledge is essentially Islamic – on the grounds that Islam is held to be the source and conduit of all Truth – the science of the modern world, that pays no heed to the *tawhīd* of knowledge and faith, must necessarily be a fraudulent construction, and therefore should be treated with contempt, repudiated and dismantled.

The wariness is not in itself an exclusively Islamist pre-occupation, since there are more progressive scholars that caution about wholesale importation, on the premise that science and technology policies in the contemporary world are heavily influenced by western models, based as they are on a different historical experience. "Muslim countries would do well", argues Mohd Hazim Shah

to reflect on their own historical experience in the relation between science and Islam, instead of slavishly imitating the west. Even if Muslim countries succeed in achieving similar success by adopting those models, it might be at the expense of cultural stability and authenticity based on Islamic values ... because the past is still very much with us. We carry a greater historical and cultural baggage as compared to the west, which has discarded much of that baggage throughout its history.¹⁴²

But there is a difference between on the one hand remaining aware of cultural contours and approaches, deriving potential benefit from alternative viewpoints (an entirely legitimate process in scientific research) and on the other hand attempting to re-construct the acquired empirical experience of centuries and shoe-horn them in to a universal conditioning framework.

The 'Islamisation of knowledge'

Yet the 'Islamisation' of science has become a serious, well-funded and strengthening enterprise as the weight of traditional heritage has made itself felt upon the shoulders of Muslim revivalist scholars seeking to resolve the conundrum of authenticity and modernity. The field shows some considerable disarray. Unlike the globally accepted consistency of scientific methodology, there is no agreed upon 'Islamic way' of science. For all the myriad scholarly prescriptions, of varying degrees of sophistication, the practice of scientific endeavour in the Islamic world diverges into three broad disciplines:

- *The Scientific Autonomy* approach (what is customarily understood as the arena for scientific research across the globe)
- *The Ethical Science* approach (characterised by the writings, for instance, of Ziauddin Sardar who has critiqued the Scientific Autonomy approach and sought to import Islamic ethics to the enterprise of scientific research)
- The *Metaphysical/Traditionalist* approach (a fully Islamised science championed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Syed Naguib al-Attas whereby *scientia* – human knowledge – is to be regarded as legitimate only so long as it is subordinated to *sapientia* – divine wisdom, a hierarchical relationship between intellect and reason 'that prevents the establishment of a rationalism independent of the revelation'¹⁴³).

A distinguished proponent of the ethical science approach was Ismail al-Faruqi (1921-1986) who presented the conception of *tawhīd* as the principle of history, of knowledge, ethics, aesthetics

¹⁴¹ Abdus Sami, M and Sajjad, M, *Planning Curricula for Natural Sciences: The Islamic Perspective*, Institute of Policy Studies, Islamabad, 1983, p.31.

¹⁴² Mohd Hazim Shah, The Relationship between Science and Islam: Islamic Perspectives and Frameworks, *Muslim Science*, August 10th 2015.

¹⁴³ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*. ABC International Group, Inc., Chicago, 2001, p.39. As "a culture whose spiritual values are inextricably tied up with mathematics and with metaphysics of a high order", the epistemological challenge of this *Metaphysical/Traditionalist* approach extends to the field of mathematics, which must now accommodate not only the 'syllogistic-rationalistic school of the followers of Aristotle' but also the 'Hermetic-Pythagorean school' whereby the natural sciences are to depend also upon the symbolic and mystic interpretation of numbers and phenomena."

and the political, social, economic order of the *umma* (and of the world). With the express aim of resolving Muslim concerns about a conflict between religion and science¹⁴⁴ he founded an organisation – the *International Institute of Islamic Thought* headquartered in Virginia. His ‘plan of action’ – the *Islamization of Knowledge, General Principles and Work Plan* – set the tone of urgency:

It is our present generation that first discovered this conflict as we live it in our own intellectual lives. The spiritual torture this conflict has inflicted upon us caused us to wake up in panic, fully aware of the rape of the Islamic soul taking place before our very eyes in the Muslim universities.¹⁴⁵

Fearing the effects of contemporary social sciences and humanities, as products of the western mind that are “in conflict with the Islamic perspective”, the methodology of al-Faruqi’s *Work Plan* focused on re-examining in depth these western methodologies so as to restore the comprehensive character of Islam and regain contact with the genuine sources of Islamic thought with its roots in revelation and reason.¹⁴⁶ This radical de-construction and re-assembly of the building-blocks of modern science was seen as a fundamental pre-requisite of the programme if it were not to remain a superficial window-dressing:

[For] what purpose is served by breathing Islamic spirit into disciplines that are shaped by other people’s perceptions, concepts, ideologies, languages and paradigms? Does that constitute Islamization of knowledge or the westernization of Islam?¹⁴⁷

The task ahead of them, according to Syed Naguib al-Attas, was long:

[it] must involve a critical examination of the methods of modern science; its concepts, presuppositions, and symbols; its empirical and rational aspects, and those impinging on values and ethics; its interpretations of origins; its theory of knowledge; its pre-suppositions on the existence of an external world, of the uniformity of nature, and of the rationality of the natural processes; its theory of the universe; its classifications of the sciences; its limitations and inter-relations with one another of the sciences and its social relations.¹⁴⁸

To effect this transformation the *Work Plan*, along with its various emendations and adjustments penned by later scholars, proposed a methodology and a schedule of activities which effectively come down to the following overriding tasks:

1. The examination and mastery of the nature of modern ‘western’ epistemology and its sciences
2. A critical assessment of the Islamic legacy (the Qur‘an, *hadith* and works of scholars) and its defining features
3. The sifting out of the Islamically acceptable from the unacceptable in modern science through a process of ‘cataloguing, organizing, rearrangement and reinterpretation’, so as to form ‘a unified integral theoretical framework’¹⁴⁹
4. Synthesizing the two by the ‘infusion of Islamic elements and key concepts into all branches of knowledge’.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ J. Esposito and J. Voll, *Makers of Contemporary Islam*, Oxford, 2001, p.30.

¹⁴⁵ Ismail al-Faruqi, *Islamization of Knowledge, General Principles and Work Plan*, 2nd Edition, Revised and Expanded, International Institute of Islamic Thought, Herndon, Virginia, 1988, p.19.

¹⁴⁶ *Islamization of Knowledge*, p 73.

¹⁴⁷ Muhammad Aslam Haneef, *A Critical Survey of Islamization of Knowledge*, Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Press, 2005. p.27.

¹⁴⁸ Muhammad Aslam Haneef, *op.cit*, p.19.

¹⁴⁹ Ibrahim Ragab, ‘Creative Engagement of Modern Social Science Scholarship: A Significant Component of the Islamization of Knowledge Effort’, *Intellectual Discourse* 5, No. 1 (1997): pp.35-49.

¹⁵⁰ Thus al-Attas in Muhammad Aslam Haneef, *A Critical Survey*, p.38.

The focus of no.2 and no.3 is interesting, since it indicates the dilemma of the modern Muslim intellectual who is deemed to lack this assessment as a result of the domination of western education models. “The process of Islamisation cannot occur”, argues al-Attas,

unless the one who is undertaking it knows what needs to be ‘isolated’ and what needs to be ‘infused’, what are acceptable or not and what alternatives are acceptable or not and why this is so.¹⁵¹

For most theorists of the Islamisation of knowledge, this is the sticking point. What is required are scholars who have “a profound grasp of the nature, spirit and attributes of Islam as a religion, culture and civilization *as well as* western culture and civilization”.¹⁵² Islamic knowledge, therefore, is to be re-constructed by means of western knowledge, and has to be brought to a level of competency comparable to western standards.¹⁵³ This fundamental flaw in the ‘starting point’ formed the subject of Ziauddin Sardar’s criticisms of the approach of the *Work Plan*. He argued for an Islamisation of knowledge that took its point of departure from the Islamic heritage, so that Islam would become the definer. Nevertheless, Sardar has recently registered his disillusionment at this approach, due to the absence of much in the way of a scientific culture in the Muslim world and the fact that ‘Islamic Science’ is coming to be associated either with *i’jāz al-Qur’ān* – the idea that modern science exists in the Qur’ān – or that of the mystical version promoted by Seyyed Hossein Nasr.¹⁵⁴

Lack of a consistent definition for the Islamisation of Knowledge

There remains a persistent confusion as to what is, and what is not, to be ‘Islamised’. Imad al-Din Khalil concedes that the Islamisation of knowledge is more readily applicable to the humanities and cannot imply the construction of rules on “mathematical or chemical equations or interfering with laws of physics or biology or amending atomic theory” and says that the pure and natural sciences would therefore “escape the scope of Islamization”.¹⁵⁵ All of which would indicate that the purpose of an ‘Islamised’ science appears not primarily to advance science, but to protect Islam from its ‘corrosive effects’.¹⁵⁶

As opposed to the applied manifestations of that enterprise: the ‘Islamisation’ of educational textbooks by prefacing and illustrating with scriptural texts and the selection of staff according to their Sharī‘a training – with the results we have seen above – what an ‘Islamised knowledge’ exactly is therefore remains opaque. For Ibrahim Ragab it is “some sort of integration of knowledge based on Islamic sources and that generated by modern social science methods” but something more than “a simple-minded addition and subtraction process.”¹⁵⁷ As for al-Faruqi’s

¹⁵¹ Muhammad Aslam Haneef, *op. cit.*, p.19. According to Ibrahim Ragab (*On the Methodology of Islamizing Social Science. Intellectual Discourse* 7, No. 1 (1999): “Modern western trained Muslim social scientists are not able to appreciate these philosophical and methodological issues underlying their own disciplines, let alone having any meaningful exposure to the Islamic legacy. Their training has created, in many cases, ‘second class’ western scientists, who sometimes even fail to grasp the essence of their disciplines, not to mention any ambition of mastering their disciplines. In other cases, their training may have created ‘masters’ of modern disciplines, who have also, maybe unconsciously, become entrapped in the existing frameworks of those disciplines, i.e. they may not see things from an Islamic perspective.”

¹⁵² Wan Mohd, *Islamization of Contemporary Knowledge: Theoretical Dimensions and Practical Contributions* in *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas*. Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1998, 291-369.

¹⁵³ Ziauddin Sardar *Rediscovery of Islamic Epistemology in Islamic Futures: The Shape of Ideas to Come*, Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk 1988, p.4.

¹⁵⁴ Commenting at the 1st Sharja Conference on Islam and Science, June 2011.

¹⁵⁵ ‘Imad al-Din Khalil. *Islamization of Knowledge: A Methodology*. Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1991.

¹⁵⁶ “Whatever devout Muslim scientists may believe as individuals, they cannot prevent their activity as modern scientists from emptying the Islamic intellectual universe of its content unless this science is shorn away from its secular and humanistic matrix where it has been placed since the Renaissance.” See S. Nasr in S. Azzam (ed), *Islam and Contemporary Society*, London, Longman, 1982, p.180.

¹⁵⁷ Ibrahim Ragab, ‘On the Nature and Scope of the Islamization Process: Toward Conceptual Clarification’, *Intellectual Discourse* 3, No. 2 (1995): 113-122.

Work Plan, this has come to be viewed as “psychologically and intellectually overwhelming”¹⁵⁸ and one of the leading proponents of the programme, Taha Jabir Al-Alwani, admitted that

the [Islamisation of knowledge] school is not blind to the fact that it may take decades before the methodological and epistemological issues involved in this proposition are clarified in a definitive manner.¹⁵⁹

This Islamisation enterprise elicits suspicion from Muslim scientists unimpressed by the obscurity and vagueness of the programme. Pervez Hoodbhoy,¹⁶⁰ who has made a study of the pretensions to an ‘Islamic science’, argues that the whole exercise is not only un-historical, it is ‘as clear as mud’ and in the case of the Metaphysical/Traditionalist approach obscurely elitist since it is “obviously contingent upon finding interpreters of the Divine intellect, who are presumably to be chosen from among the holy and the pious”.¹⁶¹

For the proponents of the Ethical Science approach initiated by al-Faruqi there is a sense in their writings that the project has reached an *impasse*. The emotive rejection of concepts, theories and views, simply for their western origin, is now discredited as is the approach of either “applying cosmetic surgery to existing bodies of knowledge or to grafting existing bodies into Islamic frameworks.”¹⁶²

The main lesson gained from 40 years of the [Islamisation of knowledge] project is that we have not really discussed and understood the philosophical and methodological issues of the modern disciplines we have been trying to Islamize. Also we have not sufficiently dealt with our own legacy ... [Nevertheless] shortcomings and disappointment in the [Islamisation of knowledge] should not make us despair and lose hope.¹⁶³

Failing an intellectually nuanced programme that can negotiate the difficult terrain of indigenising modernity into the Islamic world, on terms that satisfy the Islamist educationalists’ desire for ‘authenticity,’ the isolation of the contemporary Muslim continues. By holding the sciences of modernity at arm’s length the fantasies of the fundamentalist have taken their place. Under this fantasy the sciences (‘*ulūm*, in the plural) may be expelled, but ‘*ilm*’ (‘wisdom’ in its comprehensive singularity) is there to fill the gap, with all the ambiguity and immunity from examination that this implies. This ‘*ilm*’ has no need to deliver measurable results and absolves the scholars of the Muslim world from over half a millennium of failure. The Islamists’ response to the hiatus is simply to divert the gaze onto some ‘qualitative difference’ from the objective, rational disciplines of western-originated science:

Islamic science, by contrast, seeks ultimately to attain such knowledge as will contribute toward the spiritual perfection and deliverance of anyone capable of studying it; thus its fruits are inward and hidden, its values more difficult to discern. To understand it requires placing oneself within its perspective and accepting as legitimate a science of Nature which has a different end, and uses different means, from those of modern science.... It can only be understood, and should only be judged, in terms of its own aims and its own perspectives.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁸ Louay Safi, ‘The Quest for an Islamic Methodology: The Islamization of Knowledge Project in Its Second Decade’, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences (AJISS)* 10, No. 1, 1993, pp.23-48.

¹⁵⁹ Taha Jabir al-Alwani, ‘Islamization of Knowledge: Yesterday and Today’, *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences (AJISS)* 12, No. 1 (1995): pp.81-101.

¹⁶⁰ Pervez Hoodbhoy is professor of nuclear and high-energy physics at Quaid-e-Azam University, Islamabad, Pakistan and has written extensively on the plight of science in the Muslim world. See his excellent work, *Islam and Science, Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality*, Zed Books, 1991.

¹⁶¹ Pervez Hoodbhoy, *op.cit.*, p.73.

¹⁶² Muhammad Aslam Haneef, *op.cit.*, p.66

¹⁶³ Muhammad Aslam Haneef, *op.cit.*, p.70.

¹⁶⁴ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, p.39.

An Islamisation programme that detaches students from modernity like this by denying its constituent ingredients can only leave contemporary Muslims foreigners to the present, roaming helpless in a state of epistemological alienation,

as if the Muslims were a race apart of mankind with a different mental make-up, one which needs a different reasoning method.¹⁶⁵

The educational results on the ground - the Qur'ān as a science book

For all the nuances of the 'Islamisation of knowledge' the manifestation on the ground of this *tawhīd*, in the present usage and syllabuses of schools and universities, lacks these nuances. Islamist ideologues now openly proscribe western science on the grounds that it blinds Muslims from discovering the sciences which God has placed in the Qur'ān. The reference to the Qur'ān as a source of knowledge, beyond the dimension of religion and ritual, is significant, since it underlines where Islamist education is perpetrating an egregious abuse of both faith and science. If there is no division but a *tawhīd* between religious knowledge and physical laws, under the perception of Islamist educators the student is impelled towards accepting a logic of the identity of the two fields within one and the same volume. The logic is easily imposed since it is already deeply rooted in the Islamic tradition¹⁶⁶ from the doctrine of *i'jāz al-Qur'ān* ('the inimitability and miraculousness of the Qur'ān') and is effectively the continuation of their medieval predecessors' war against "the interloping sciences" which "do not accord with God's Book".

Given that almost all science fails to accord with God's Book they have been expelled either from the school system or from the Muslim consciousness through their proscription. Something even more disastrous results upon this: the terrors experienced by a cross-section of young students at the sciences they are studying (even in western universities) in that they are constantly aware that these conflict with 'scientific' *religious* truths.¹⁶⁷

Conversely, if knowledge derives from the Qur'ān, then the explanation for failure must perforce be a religious explanation. If Qur'ānic truths corresponded absolutely with scientific truths, then what scientific research can do to access these truths Islamic Revelation can do too. The argumentation runs like this:

We were defeated because we dispensed with our faith and so God dispensed with us; now the West took their scientific knowledge from the Qur'ān while we did not, because our leaders deviated from God's Law, so God punished them by veiling the secrets of the Qur'ān from them ... The day when those who govern us apply the Sharī'a we shall discover in the Qur'ān new sciences far in excess of what the West has taken from it."¹⁶⁸

The educational results on the ground - the denial of heliocentrism

The perception of the Qur'ān as a source of all knowledge – since an omniscient God could not produce otherwise – and the *fons et origo* of all future Muslim resurgence, generates a number of problems. Several Qur'ānic verses¹⁶⁹ indicate something other than a heliocentric system, but the full force of doctrinal rectitude is brought to bear on the wayward belief. Most notable are the Salafist *fatwās* hailing from Saudi Arabia, such as *Fī jaryān al-shams wa-sukūn al-arḍ wa-takfīr man khālaf kalāmah* ('On the Motion of the Sun and the Stasis of the Earth and on Declaring as Infidel Anyone who Opposes His [i.e. God's] Words') by Shaykh 'Abd al-'Azīz ibn Bāz (1910-1999) and that of *Al-adilla al-Qur'āniyya 'alā an al-shams hiyya allatī tadūr ḥawla al-Arḍ wa-*

¹⁶⁵ M. al-Sanduk, *The Islamization of science and its intellectual problem*, *Almuslih.org*.

¹⁶⁶ The authority for this type of thinking goes back to pre-modern thinkers such as Ibn al-Qayyim and al-Suyūṭī who sought to demonstrate that all science that exists is contained in the body of the Qur'ān. In his work: *Al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* ('Mastering the Sciences of the Qur'ān') al-Suyūṭī (1445-1505) devoted a whole section to 'sciences extracted from the Qur'ān', and states there: "As for the types of sciences (in the Qur'ān) there is no chapter nor issue that the Qur'ān does not give indications of."

¹⁶⁷ Lafif Lakhdar, *Is the Qur'ān an encyclopædia of science?* *Almuslih.org*.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ For instance the following Qur'ānic verses: XV,19; XX:53; XLIII:10; L:7; LI:48; LXXI:19; LXXVIII:6; LXXIX:30; LXXXVIII:20; and XCI:6.

laysa al-'aks ('The Qur'ānic Proofs that it is the Sun that Revolves around the Earth and not Vice Versa') by Shaykh Muḥammad Ibn 'Uthaymīn (1925-2001).

In this most conservative of Islamic societies the quarantining process is at its most extreme and resilient in the face of physical evidence, as can be seen from the following 'question-and-answer exchanges from concerned believers:¹⁷⁰

Question: I know someone who lives in Norway and he speaks of a country where the sun shines at midnight, and says that during the summer it never sets and in winter it never rises. What is the ruling of the Sharī'a on someone afflicted with this madness?

Shaykh 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Barrāk's response: Muslims should be wary of these ignorant people. How can anyone believe that the sun appears at midnight? And where does it go to throughout the winter? – Unless it departs to some other planet to illuminate its inhabitants and returns after finishing its task!

Question: My younger brother has enrolled in the faculty of science and has started to learn strange things about a 'big bang' and 'galaxies' and 'millions' of stars. He startled us by saying that the earth we are living on is very small, a finite speck wandering about in the universe, spinning around itself and revolving around the sun. What are we to do about him?

Shaykh 'Abd al-'Azīz Ibn Baz's response: You should remove your brother from the faculty and enroll him in the Sharī'a faculty before he gets embroiled in more fantasies. For the earth is the centre of the universe and is larger than any planet or star. It is supported on two horns of a bull and shakes whenever the demons sneeze. As for the sun, it descends from the sky to the sea floor and is soaked through. When it rises from the opposite direction it is initially weak until it dries off.

The recent celebrated dismissal of the heliocentric system by the younger generation of Muslim Shaykhs, such as Bandar al-Khaibari (otherwise planes could not catch up with the airport) shows how the quarantining remains in full vigour.¹⁷¹

Science – is it a corpus of learning or a method?

The implications of this *tawḥīd* are therefore important for research and knowledge-acquisition. It places the spotlight on what the scientific enterprise is perceived to be. Is it, for instance, the search for new knowledge or new approaches to knowledge? Or is it a process of uncovering through a pious, assiduous discovery of the Divine Will? Is knowledge a finite body of data to be ingested, or is it an attitude of mind? It is something that contemporary Arab Muslim scholars have pinpointed as the centre of the crisis. Dr. Munā Abū al-Faḍl sums up the issue:

What has escaped us is that science is a method before it is a result or a content, and that the content and the subject of the methodology in the field of social and human sciences are made up partly of personal and cultural experiences which can have meaning and significance for all humanity, and partly of individual specialism in a specific branch and something whose validity is limited to the stage of its own development. ... The balance between the relative and absolute dimensions of the human sciences is a fine, difficult one, on which one avoids saying the last word.¹⁷²

This is the fundamental difference. Modern education follows the latter course, seeking to inculcate habits of analysis and questioning, to replace the deadening weight of '*ilm al-yaqīn* or 'certainty-based science,' with a combative and productive diversity and a constructive doubt.

¹⁷⁰ 'Alī 'Ujayl Manhal, ؟ تركّز عليهما الفتاوى الدينية الوهابية السعودية ، ('Sex, Graves and Coffins: Why have Saudi Wahhabist religious Fatwas concentrated on these?') Al-Ḥiwār al-Mutamaddin, April 26, 2011. <http://www.m.ahewar.org/s.asp?aid=256651&r=0>

¹⁷¹ The video of Sheikh Bandar al-Khaibari is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xn3G7kx2A4> . Sheikh Bandar has previously stated that NASA never sent humans to the moon, rejecting the lunar landing videos as a Hollywood fabrication. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/saudi-arabia/11419428/Watch-Saudi-cleric-tells-students-Earth-does-not-rotate.html> .

¹⁷² Dr. M. Abu al-Faḍl, الإحياء - مفهوم الأمة وأزمة الفصام بين العلوم الإسلامية والإنسانية , Vol. 29, January 2009, p.88.

But it is precisely this currency of constructive doubt that accounts for the ambiguity – if not outright hostility – of Islamist educationalists towards modern systems of education and their entirely different demands on the intellect.

In Islamist-dominated education skepticism is considered inappropriate, since Islam is seen to be the origin of knowledge. The teacher therefore does not see his role as one of inculcating doubt, but rather of inculcating certainty, the certainty of absolute truth. Since this knowledge ultimately has a divine origin, the student is therefore better employed to ingest the words of the teacher – often literally in the sense of the rote learning of Qur’ānic texts in Arabic irrespective of the whether the student has been taught its language and grammar. One either knows these absolutes, or one does not. Speaking at the January 2016 conference *Forum on the Future of Islam*, Dr. Imad ad-Dean Ahmad lamented how

knowledge is seen in the Muslim world as memorization, not as research. Even in the fields where Muslims are becoming really good in modern sciences, in medicine or engineering these are fields of practice not of research ... You have to break out of that context to think that knowledge is just memorization, and to think if I want to learn about the West then I go and look at what the Qur’an says about the other and that would apply.¹⁷³

Good scientific pedagogy requires the deliberate inculcation of a spirit of healthy questioning in the classroom, particularly questions of method such as: How do we know? What is the evidence? What is important to measure? How can we check the correctness of our measurements? How are we to make sense out of our results? What would invalidate our findings? Is there a counter-explanation, or a simpler one? Islamist education has yet to grasp these fundamental concepts of questioning and constructive doubt.

The implications of a parallel knowledge universe

The formula that no knowledge exists outside the realm of religious thought, has set the Arab Muslim world on a curious trajectory and is the reason that the Arab peoples remain passive spectators of the progress made by the rest of the world.¹⁷⁴ As Hoodbhoy observes, “you will seldom encounter a Muslim name as you flip through scientific journals, and if you do the chances are that this person lives in the West.” The *UN Arab Human Development* reports highlight how an unchallenged and fossilised Arab intellectual heritage is raising basic knowledge problems due to a collective ‘disregard of reality’ and ‘an abandonment of the scientific and intellectual basis that underpinned the Arab classical cultural experience.’¹⁷⁵ This anachronism will have serious consequences not only on the level of science, but on the products of rationalism: political pluralism, social cohesion and the rule of rational, man-made law. At issue, warns Bassam Tibi, is a state of mind inculcated by Islamist educationalists that can only promote the perpetuation of backwardness and isolation:

In the name of authenticity, Qur’ānic instructions are called upon to replace all scholarly methodology... This effort results in a cultural self-isolation of the Islamic world under the conditions of globalization.... The call for “Islamic social science” resembles – as anti-science – the call for a “German physics” under Nazi rule.¹⁷⁶ This expression of “anti-science” not only

¹⁷³ Imad ad-Dean Ahmad, speaking at the conference *Forum on the Future of Islam, Muslim Perspectives on Islamic Extremism*, Rethink Institute, Washington, January 2016, p. 47.

¹⁷⁴ Mohammed al-Sanduk, ‘Intellectual self-isolation and the prospects of constructing a culture’, *Almuslih.org*.

¹⁷⁵ AHDR 2003, p.118.

¹⁷⁶ The parallelism could also be made to the efforts of the politicisation of science in the Soviet Union under the dominating influence of Trofim Lysenko. Here too the dismissal of pure and theoretical research as ‘an indulgence’, and that scientists had to serve pragmatic ends alone, ended up creating deformities every bit as illusory as ‘calculating the speed of Heaven’ (it is receding from the earth at one centimetre per second less than the speed of light based on Qur’ānic verses), ‘calculating the angle of God with respect to the earth’ (it is π/N , where $\pi=3.1415927$ with N not defined), ‘calculating the formula of reward / prayer’ and ‘establishing the chemical origins of Jinns’ (probably ‘methane’). See, Pervez Hoodbhoy, *Islam and Science, Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality*, pp. 140-150.

hampers any effort by Muslims to come to terms with the Islamic predicament with modernity, but also alienates them from the rest of humanity.¹⁷⁷

The scientific failure in the Arab Middle East can therefore not be written off merely as a quantitative problem. It is the very nature of the Islamist-dominated syllabus (which all Muslim reform organizations seek to establish) that is setting up, unapologetically, the barriers to knowledge transfer and isolating the Muslim student from his future.

Cultural quarantine

Historical revisionism – the western ‘theft’ of Muslim science

This effective ‘parallel universe’ of knowledge that is being promoted by Islamist theorists has a broader cultural dimension, for an important element in Islamist education is a particular reading of history which is employed to underpin an entire infrastructure of cultural superiority. Al-Mawdūdī’s demand that “the birth of all sciences should be traced to the Muslim period” reflects a generalised assumption, successfully inculcated, that the scientific and technological gap between modernity – specifically western modernity – and the orthodox model for Islamic culture they are championing is an illusion. The process of gaining further acquaintance with this modernity and the effort to grasp its scientific and civilizational potential should therefore, as explained by al-Faruqī’s *Work Plan*, only be undertaken by first showing how deeply it is indebted to Islam and Islamic civilization:

Current scientific and technological achievements are based upon the ideas, methodology, and skills that were borrowed from Muslims and were unknown prior to them... Because Muslims are one of its architects, they are rightly expected to transcend it, to rescue it, and to guide its course afresh for improvement, progress, and growth. But, at the same time, they must be aware of the flaws and defects that science and technology have picked up while being developed by non-Muslims.¹⁷⁸

If there are few who would dispute that civilisations are blends of what came before and what surrounds them, the relationship of Islamist educationalists to this question is confused and oscillates between the poles of repudiation and transformation. The issue of absorption in particular is warily received, since this appears to impact on the assumption of purity. Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabahānī (the founder of Hizb al-Tahrīr) represents this ambiguous relationship. He argued against the opinion of ‘Orientalist-influenced’ Muslim scholars

when they claim that foreign cultures such as the Persian, Roman, Greek and Hindu cultures had an effect on the Islamic culture... The suspicion that the Islamic culture was affected by non-Islamic cultures comes from the deliberate distortion undertaken by the non-Muslims with respect to changing the meanings of things ... the Islamic culture did benefit from and make use of various foreign cultures. It used them as means for its own productivity and growth. However, this does not constitute effect (*ta’aththur*) but rather deriving of benefit (*intifā’a*) from them.¹⁷⁹

Al-Nabahānī went on to demonstrate how the ‘core’ of Islamic culture – jurisprudence – was untouched and that “the mentality of the Muslims remained a pure Islamic mentality.”

The valuable contributions that were made by Arab scholars to the progress of science have been the subject of justified pride among Muslim historians. They point to the influence of Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sīnā and al-Rāzī (‘Averroes’, ‘Avicenna’ and ‘Rhazes’ to the Europeans) on the West at a time when its scientific development was quickening pace. But under the influence of western historians who at times cast a negative light on the Byzantine and pre-Renaissance periods of

¹⁷⁷ Bassam Tibi, *Islam’s predicament with modernity: religious reform and cultural change*, Routledge, Oxford and New York, 2009, p.92.

¹⁷⁸ *Islamization of Knowledge, General Principles and Work Plan*, pp.68-9.

¹⁷⁹ Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabahānī, الشخصية الإسلامية (The Islamic Personality) Part One, Hizb al-Tahrir Publications, Dar al-Umma, Beirut, 6th ed. 2003, p.274.

European history, the pride is most often transformed into an uncritical dualism of Christianity/backwardness, Islam/enlightenment and a resentment that Westerners do not express their gratitude for Islam's gift to them vociferously enough.¹⁸⁰ Less ideologised Muslim authors and those with a more analytical training, are unimpressed by this standpoint. Noting that the work of these scholars had no impact on the subsequent development of the Muslim world itself, the Saudi reformist thinker Ibrahim al-Buleihi encapsulated the contradiction:

The great individuals which we at times vaunt, such as Ibn Rushd, Ibn al-Haytham, al-Rāzī, al-Kindī, al-Khawārizmī and al-Fārābī were not the product of Arab culture, but rather students of Greek thought. Our societies did not welcome them since they considered them to have come from outside, and so they repudiated them as dangerous weeds to be rooted out. Conversely, when Europe learned from them it benefited from a body of knowledge which was originally its own because they were an extension of Greek culture ... Moreover, they were working as individuals scattered here and there and they did not come together to constitute a trend in society. Each of these individuals was a product of his own self and not the product of a school of thought that perpetuated earlier voices or continued on after them ... We should not claim that the West took their worldly enlightenment from us ... When the West acknowledges the superiority of the Arabs over them and celebrates our civilisational role, they are actually referring to those extraordinary individuals who were repudiated by their own environment but who were welcomed by Europe.¹⁸¹

Significantly, the energies put into highlighting the historical role upon Europe of Arab science and philosophy are not matched by what might be considered a more pertinent endeavour for educationalists today, as Mohammed al-Sanduk observes:

Today in the West many purported academic institutions in traditional Arab and Islamic sciences are proliferating, financed by Arab and Islamic states. Their intention is perhaps to study these scientific achievements which are of historical value, but there is no single centre specialising in the study of the reasons for the *collapse* of this scientific activity.¹⁸²

A tendentious use of history

History as practiced by Islamist educators appears to have a specific purpose: to support their interpretation of essentialist western enmity to Islam, expressed in terms of the 'theft' of Islam-originated knowledge. This type of approach is demonstrated by the Azhari-trained Shaykh Ibrahim al-Khouli:

When they entered Andalusia, they got Europe out of the darkness of the Middle Ages. They established a civilization for which the Spaniards still long today. Spain found itself under the burden of the fanaticism and racism of Ferdinand, Pope Urban, and others, and so the Spaniards lament the loss of that heritage. The Jews who immigrated and founded America excelled in comparison with the other immigrants, because they stole the heritage of the Muslims. In Andalusia, which you say, the Muslims conquered by the sword, they left a civilization unparalleled throughout history to this day. Western civilization is not really a civilization.¹⁸³

The sweeping claims contained in this comment, though perhaps a highly personalised interpretation, nevertheless indicate the effects of a superficial approach to the study of history, an approach of fixed perceptions derived, as Ibrahim al-Buleihi argues, from "the lack of reading our own history critically and with scrutiny, or reading the history of others objectively and

¹⁸⁰ A typical product of this standpoint is Ahmad Bakir Tarabishy's complaint that "one of history's greatest crimes is the almost complete omission of the debt the West owes to Islam and the Muslims", while virtually all of his cited sources for this crime are Westerners themselves. See A. Tarabishy, "Why Have Muslim Scholars Been Undervalued Throughout Western History?" Islamic Research Foundation International, Inc. www.irfi.org

¹⁸¹ Ibrahim al-Buleihi, *حصون التخلف* ('Castles of Backwardness') 2010, pp.53-55 and Ibrahim al-Buleihi, *Dīn and Dunyā and the failure of Arab enlightenment*, *Almuslih.org*.

¹⁸² Mohammed al-Sanduk, Reform: a discourse of intellectuals or a rehabilitation? *Almuslih.org*.

¹⁸³ Debate hosted by *Al-Jazeera TV* on October 30, 2007 on secularism and Islamism in the Middle East with Syrian author Nidhal Na'isa and Egyptian cleric Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Khouli. Transcript of sections available at <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/2458.htm>.

fairly.’¹⁸⁴ He notes how the cultural supremacist tone of the Islamist historian relies heavily upon the writings of western historians for testimony, since

it is part of the Westerners’ nature to be courteous towards other cultures in matters that lie outside the field of scientific research. As a fruit of their ethical advance we see them proactively denouncing any standpoint that hints of the failings of other cultures, and apologizing for even the slightest disparagement of other civilisations that one of their number might chance to make ... We find Westerners continually giving different cultures more credit than is their due.¹⁸⁵

Other scholars have expressed themselves more truculently on this tendentious approach to the writing and teaching of history:

At a time when the world is opening up its doors to criticism in all its colours and stripes (since it is the door to the future and the skylight for continual reform of affairs for the better), and progresses precisely because of this – we base ourselves on the principle of concealing and embellishing Islamic history and defending it from all comers. One of these defence methods is to stop ‘letting the cat out of the bag’, on the grounds that any criticism will simply add to the stockpile of enmity against Islam.¹⁸⁶

The historiographic dimension

Buleihi’s call for a mature, objective approach to the discipline of history places the spotlight on the considerable weakness in the teaching of history in the Middle East. A number of features characterise this deficit, which may be summarised as:

- The fetishism of the inaugural moment
- The prohibition of objective history
- Its replacement with a sacralised history

The authenticity pre-occupation of the Islamist educator focuses his didactic efforts on a dynamic of decline from a perfected model, and on elucidating the earliest pattern of this ideal. This, of course, is the defining feature of the ‘Salafist’ doctrine of the Islamist educationalist, an ancestor-worship of *al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*, the ‘righteous predecessors’ whose patterns of behaviour, down to the last detail, are set as the paradigm for the Muslim’s ideal life, attitude and polity. The effect of this paradigm is something more than a ‘fine example’ for Muslims to follow, and instead constitutes an ever fixed mark against change, a ‘mental blockage’ that Chiheb Laalāi laments has been imposed on the Muslim, for whom

the future can be none other than an eternal re-emergence of this inaugural moment ... which by closing off and culminating within itself all that constitutes the Good, leaves nothing else to be pondered, nothing to events; that is to say, to the emergence of anything new, or the importation of any sense or orientation that can open up human life.¹⁸⁷

The prohibition of objective history

Such an ideologised approach to heritage and history lacks the fundamental attribute of the critical historian: skepticism regarding testimony. The suspicion cast over history extends to sociology and the humanities in general, since these disciplines have a tendency to relativise human knowledge, which sits uneasily with the Islamist priorities. Sayyid al-Qimny noted this antipathy to an objective approach to historical research:

At a time when historiography has become an informative science founded upon the scrutiny of chemical apparatus, tools and compounds, aided by geology, topography, linguistics,

¹⁸⁴ Al-Buleihi, *Op. cit.* p.53.

¹⁸⁵ Al-Buleihi, *Op. cit.* p.61.

¹⁸⁶ Sayyid al-Qimny, ‘Is Islam the reason for Muslim backwardness?’ *Almuslih.org*.

¹⁸⁷ Chiheb Laalāi, ‘The position of reason, the will and the person in Islam’, *Almuslih*.

palaeography and anthropology to determine one by one the veracity of documents, so that we can see history as far as possible as it actually was in its time – our shaykhs are banning such endeavour in the case of Islamic history, they are refusing the scrutinization of it, and are criminalizing the description of things with their true names, after having distorted history in favour of their particular denomination and sect.¹⁸⁸

The Tunisian reformist intellectual Abdelmadjid Charfi deplores this prevailing interpretative approach and flight from reality, and notes how the Islamist historian – for whom “it is unthinkable to resign himself to accepting the distance that has opened up between the Qur’ān and everyday reality” – is entirely capable of instrumentalising his unhistorical wishful thinking to “change reality and restore the golden age of the early Muslim community.”¹⁸⁹ Indeed, in the absence of an objective historical awareness among Arab schoolchildren and students subjected to Islamist-dominated education programmes, this skilful manipulation of mytho-history and the suppression of alternative voices provides political radicals with strong cultural support.

The censorship is comprehensive. In Muslim countries the writing of history has traditionally reported what is of use to illustrate the positive achievements and prestige of the temporal or spiritual leader, and the consensus of the religious scholars, re-enforcing what already is assumed in the collective living memory. In matters of faith and religious tradition there are few authors who would attempt to cast new, counter-intuitive light on the collective conception. The analytical quality of such works is weak, and they provide no useful insight into economic drivers, the in-working of political and social pressures or human motivation. To read the historical writing by Islamists after a perusal, say, of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides’ introduction to his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, written about 400 BC, provides an object-lesson in failure.¹⁹⁰

It is thus highly important to make a distinction between on the one hand having an awareness of the accumulated cultural heritage of the past and, on the other hand, with the living humanities – of which historiography, with all its branches of study and examination, is a part. As the *Arab Human Development Report* warned:

History is based on methodology, on an objective approach and on maintaining an intellectual distance from the past. The goal of any historian of a great civilisation, while sympathising with and understanding the subject of research, should always be the quest for facts. The temptation to fall in love with the heritage must always be resisted.¹⁹¹

The sacralisation of history

Since to date this separation has not been observed, objective, multi-dimensional historical research is in poor supply in Middle Eastern education. There is a dearth of scientifically trained historians in the region who can undertake this research, undermine the weak foundations of the Islamists’ mytho-history and provide useful insights that account for the shaping of the world the student is living in. The inevitable lacunae in the record have been filled by examining the Arab Islamic legacy through the eyes of observers from outside the tradition, in particular by the work of western Orientalists, with all the strengths and failures of these sources deeply influencing the discipline of Middle Eastern historiography.

One counter-intuitive feature of this outsourcing was the adoption of a ‘philological reliance’ in the study of sources of the heritage, an inevitable focus of western historians and scholars who, while highly advanced in the skills of historical and literary criticism, naturally lacked the

¹⁸⁸ Sayyid al-Qimny, ‘Is Islam the reason for Muslim backwardness?’ *Almuslih.org*.

¹⁸⁹ Abdelmadjid Charfi, *Islam, Between Message and History*, Ed. Abdou Filali-Ansary and Sikeena Karmali Ahmed Tr. David Bond, Edinburgh University Press, 2009, p.56.

¹⁹⁰ Thucydides (c. 460 BC – c. 395 BC) has been dubbed the father of ‘scientific history’ because of his strict standards of evidence-gathering and analysis in terms of cause and effect without reference to intervention by the gods, as outlined in his introduction to his work.

¹⁹¹ AHDR 2003, p.114.

broad, organic ‘lived’ experience of an Islamic environment with all its multi-faceted intellectual and folkloric contours. Progressive Arab intellectuals today deplore the tacit acceptance by those western historians of the canonical, sacralised version of history yielded from their study of the classical sources. “Orientalist scholarship long contented itself with transferring to European languages the ideas of the dominant Sunnī Islam, before doing the same with Shi’i Islam”, Mohamed Arkoun complained, something which accounted for a curiously uncritical ‘exceptionalism’ in their examination of the Muslim heritage.¹⁹² When added to the fact that most Orientalist historiography, at least until the 1970s, relied uncritically on the classical Muslim written sources (to the exclusion of non-Muslim sources or the potentials of archaeology, epigraphy and numismatics, for instance) the result, as Hassan Mneimneh observes, was a near exclusively *textually* focused corpus of research for the Islamist historian to borrow:

The philological efforts of Western Orientalists, relying primarily on the output of the [Muslim] scholastic tradition—and corresponding chronologically to the reordering of the political forms of Muslim societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—provided a textually biased view favoring the normative reading [of Islamic history]. Islamist thinkers today still productively utilize this work to confirm components of their own ideology.¹⁹³

They have accordingly capitalized on the ‘feedback loop’, as Hassan Mneimneh terms it, that was created by the European study of Islam “to elevate their orientation, previously one functional component of a complex system, to the level of the core and essence of the system.”¹⁹⁴ Henceforth Islam was to be validated by the evidence of the written source alone.

Thus Islamist educationalists, for all their apparent repudiation of western Orientalist research, are in fact some of their most faithful imitators. The difference, of course, is that while the textual premise is assumed – albeit restricted in span – current Islamist history projects an aura of scientific completeness and accuracy that rejects the historico-critical methodology.

What exists now in its place is a historiography dedicated to the cult of tradition and ancestor-worship and which, in its unchallenged form, barely rises much above the level of hagiography or of sacred history unfolding according to a pre-determined scheme of a perennial struggle against the forces of Disbelief. It has constructed, as Mohamed Arkoun observed, a ‘dogmatic enclosure’¹⁹⁵ of textual, ‘logocentric’ reasoning. In place of the modern historico-critical methodology for the establishing of the record, it resorts to arbitrary procedures in pursuit of its objective, basing its argumentation on a number of axioms, such as:

‘A Companion of the Prophet cannot lie’,

‘The (Muslim) Community cannot be in agreement about an error’,

‘The Companions know every detail of the life and teaching of the Prophet’,

‘A contradiction between the Qur’ān and the Sunna can only result from the alteration of a text by human agency.’¹⁹⁶

This is where the inherent danger in this false historiography lies. A history that leaps from axiom to axiom cannot interpret reality, only set up a hostility to it and elevate a substitute reality in its

¹⁹² Mohamed Arkoun, *Islam: To Reform or To Subvert?* Saqi Books, London 2006, p.86.

¹⁹³ Hassan Mneimneh, ‘The Islamization of Arab Culture,’ in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* vol. 6.

¹⁹⁴ Hassan Mneimneh, *The Loss of the Universal? Radical Islamic Theology and Its Implications for the Elusive Peace of the 21st Century*, The Nexus Institute, October 2014.

¹⁹⁵ “The concept of *dogmatic enclosure* applies to the totality of the articles of faith, representations, tenets and themes which allow a system of beliefs and unbeliefs to operate freely without any competing action from inside or out. A strategy of refusal, consisting of an arsenal of discursive constraints and procedures, permits the protection and, if necessary, the mobilisation of what is uncritically called “faith”. Mohammed Arkoun, *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert?*, Saqi, London, 2006, p.87.

¹⁹⁶ Mohammed Arkoun, *op. cit.*, p.163.

stead. It is a self-contained, self-referencing echo chamber, a dogmatic enclosure where the wellsprings of creativity run dry, so that what remains of intellectual endeavour

seems to seek refuge in ideological headlines that either take the form of slogans to glorify and effect a nostalgic revival or that encourage self-pity, blame others for adversity and do not do justice to Arab societies.¹⁹⁷

It is in such an environment, tendentiously filtered for challenges to the sacralised narrative, that the historical fictions of Sharī‘a and the Caliphate have been allowed to endure unchallenged.

‘Jāhiliyya’: A war against reality via history

There is a further, perhaps more damaging result. A history that expels alternative sources from outside the dogmatic enclosure, or promotes a hermetically sealed “Islam against the Rest” narrative, sets up a barrier not only against the out-group but also against its own past, and to the ingredients that brought about the very ‘inaugural moment’ the Islamist educationalists emphasize.

The key – artificial – frontier in this process is ‘*jāhiliyya*’ – the ‘Age of Ignorance’ that purportedly separated off not only the world of the pagan Arabs from the Arabs of the Muslim era, but the world *as such* that pre-dated the coming of Islam or lay outside of its development. All events prior to the coming of Muhammad belong to this era and are seen by Islamists as having no relevance or value. With an assumption that Islam constitutes the primordial, default truth of mankind, the Islamist-influenced education systems of the Middle East therefore leave no space for an unmediated history of what came before Islam, or what existed contemporary to Islam’s emergence or influenced its development. The historical record given of Islam is thus “smothered to make it appear something above history or superior to it, or even without any relation to history altogether.”¹⁹⁸

Such a process not only ignores the evidence of deep Romanization of the northern Hijaz and of Greater Syria, it ignores what an objective reading of the Qur’ān itself reveals: a text framed to an audience whose education and culture was an integral part of the shared Hellenistic and Levantine civilisation of Late Antiquity. If Islam emerged in an environment of tribal tradition, tribal laws and pagan rules, argues Dr. Naṣr Hāmid Abū Zayd, these did not magically disappear overnight:

They came together into a new kind of tribe, one that from the beginning was locked in conflict with other tribes. They had to defend themselves. All of this formed the Koran. The Koran is very much a product of its formative influences. This is why we cannot understand the Koran without knowledge of the historical background.¹⁹⁹

Nor can any history worthy of the name restrict itself to ‘internal’ sources. Muslims were not the only people living through this period; others had eyes to observe and conceptions to contribute. Dr. Abū Zayd noted, for instance, how the 8th century Christian theologian John of Damascus

showed the relationship between the Muslim and the non-Muslim world, a relationship that was deeper and more historical than we realise. The idea of two separate worlds divided from one another is wrong. Such worlds have never existed.... Civilisations are like waves – always in movement: coming from Africa or the old Iraq, to Greece and from there to the Middle East. There was the Hellenistic period, when Alexander the Great tried to spread his rule through the entire region. Then came the Islamic civilisation. And finally the Renaissance and the modern Western civilisation. This type of exchange, which emphasises the importance of dialogue between the civilisations and religions, began in the 7th century.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ AHDR 2003, p.44.

¹⁹⁸ Hashem Saleh, ‘[Orientalism and the historicization of the Islamic heritage](http://Almuslih.org), *Almuslih.org*.

¹⁹⁹ Erhard Brunn, *Interview with Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid*, Qantara.de, 2008.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

The give and take process carried on to construct, *pace* al-Nabahānī, the roots of Islamic classical thought, with philosophy originating from Greek tradition, state administration from Persian tradition, and with the adoption of ‘*urf*’ / principle and ‘*āda*’ / tradition from Roman law.²⁰¹

Muslims as cultural orphans

By rooting out any contamination from the *jāhiliyya* (the ‘ignorance’ being conceived both as a state and a historical phase), Islamists render themselves immune from challenges of this sort posed by history and comparative religion. Indeed, one of the characteristic aspects of Islamising education is its substitution of Islamic history for the history of the areas Islam came to dominate. It effectively stifles the curiosity of people toward the history of their pre-Islamic ancestors, or the history of their minority populations, by declaring such history worthless. Pre-Islamic art, literature, music or archaeological artefacts are all deemed not only unimportant, but potentially dangerous, to Islam.²⁰² This means that there is little or no awareness, for instance, of minority cultures in the Middle East – a deliberate amnesia that only impedes the development of an inclusive national heritage and perpetuates sectarianism. “Shame to the education sector”, declares Sayyid al-Qimny,

that it is characterised, even in scientific study, by an Islamic imprint, and indeed casts six centuries of Egypt’s history into the garbage bin – since this is the Coptic period – as if history were the nation’s enemy.²⁰³

The result of this historiographic cut-off has been to make Muslims cultural orphans. There is a low degree of perception among Muslim students today that Islam sits squarely in the historical and ideological context of Late Antiquity and its ferment of ideas.²⁰⁴ As a result of the deficit of indigenous, objective history the world of the pre-Islamic cultures of the Middle East, of Ancient Egypt, Phoenicia, Anatolia and Mesopotamia, becomes revealed to their contemporary heirs exclusively – and at times traumatically – through the offices of western archaeologists and philologists.²⁰⁵

The loss of a historical embedding is a disastrous feature of Islamist, sacralised history. The denial of continuity and the view that history begins only with the advent of Islam perpetuates among Muslim students a sense of ‘specialness’ and a ‘disconnect’ with the rest of the world. “If you study the way they think,” al-Qimny argues,

you will find that they believe there was no role for human beings at all in preparing for this Islam – as if it were a court decision with no connection to the reality of social movement from below... Because it is a mode of thought that cuts, it not only breaks with the past but with reality itself. This ‘cutting’ mode of thought has made us lose our memory when it comes to our own history.²⁰⁶

The disconnect is enforced, in the face of contrary evidence, by ‘abrogation.’ The concept is familiar from the ‘abrogated *suras*’ of the Qur’ān, but this abrogation principle applies more widely too, on the level of civilisations and cultures. Under the Islamist perception, Islam is not a

²⁰¹ Soheib Bencheikh, ‘*We Need Dearabization of Islam*’, December 4th 2006. <http://islamlib.com>.

²⁰² In 1994, a council of Saudi clerics issued an edict asserting that preserving historical sites “could lead to polytheism and idolatry.”

²⁰³ Sayyid al-Qimny, راعى, *Aafaq*, January 5 2011.

²⁰⁴ During the High Caliphate of the ‘Abbasids, the scholar Thābit ibn Qurra, a Sabāean working under the patronage of the Caliph al-Mu’tadid (reigned 892–902) made this very same case: “Who made the world to be inhabited and flooded it with cities except the good men and kings of heathenism? Who has constructed harbours and conserved the rivers? Who has made manifest the hidden sciences ... It is they who have also made to arise the medicine for bodies. And they have filled the world with the correctness of modes of life and with the wisdom which is the head of excellence. Without these products of heathenisms the world would be an empty and a needy place and it would have been enveloped in sheer want and misery.” See R. MacMullen, *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries*, New Haven and London, 1997, p.19.

²⁰⁵ The field of archaeology still meets with resistance. In 1991, following news of Kemal Salibi’s thesis of Biblical origins in the Arabian Peninsula, the Saudi response was to bulldoze the ancient buildings in these villages identified as Jewish. As for philology, the overwhelming domination of Arabic and the sense of its essential superiority as a language made it impossible for anything resembling the sophisticated linguistic scholars of Europe to emerge.

²⁰⁶ From “In search of what went wrong,” a censored, unpublished article from the *Middle East Times*, November 10, 2004.

‘culture’ like any other, since this would imply moral and intellectual equivalence. Islam has come to ‘abrogate’ other cultures, not to engage with them. According to Aziz al-‘Azme

positive and religious sciences of people other than Islamic, are ignored... because the religion of Islam and, by implication, all the sciences that give its support of articulation, stands to other religions of the Book as the Qur’ān stands to other Holy Books and as the prophecy of Muhammad stands to the prophecies of his predecessors. This is one described by the term *naskh*, which denotes abrogation without invalidation and hence has the sense of supersession.²⁰⁷

As with the abrogated *suras*, the intellectual element underpinning abrogation is the avoidance of evaluation. Islam simply *supersedes* Judaism, Christianity and, needless to say, all other religions and systems of thought – a position we have seen elaborated above in the Islamist programme to ‘Islamise modernity’.

The instrumentalisation of history

Without an evaluation yardstick, Islam in its widest conception of a cultural, intellectual and political whole is alone off-limits to the recognition of faultiness, as if acknowledgement of error were an act of Disbelief. The effect is to place the Islamic record safely outside of history. In the absence of an objective history, the detachment of Islam’s foundational texts from the realities of time and place lends authority to that estrangement and grants the scholar-narcissists free rein to mold their reading of scripture to their pre-conceptions, and to their will. Mohamed Arkoun highlighted how contemporary scholars, ‘*ulamā*’ and militant believers alike remain unaware of Islam’s own history and are

unable to grasp historical reasoning about the changing epistemological postures of reason in each given culture and at each stage of a long historical development.²⁰⁸

The absence allows Islamist educationalists to promote in its place an ideology of the *umma*, with its paradigmatic ‘unblemished’ history of Muslim leadership presented as a panacea to Muslim ills, instead of the reality – a Muslim world historically divided into a multiplicity of Islamic states overwhelmingly dominated by dynastic rule, and in which Sharī‘a was never able to be enforced in its entirety, without concessions to the political realities of the day. The defining feature of Islamism’s revivalist movement is its glorification of Islamic history, but those features which it is glorifying, and which it seeks to emulate, are revealing, for the traditional values that the Islamists aspire to reviving are overwhelmingly those that prioritise warrior, pastoralist values over agriculturalist values, or celebrate domination over against co-operation and symbiosis. By regaling the student with a catalogue of crude opposites: the authentic versus the inauthentic, local versus foreign, continuity versus rupture, Arab history in effect is narrated “as though it had been solely one of alienation and corruption.”²⁰⁹ Something is ‘at fault’ and needs to be mended. Historical education is thus no longer an exercise in opening up to other eras or the interplay of currents, or a revelation of the weft of events, personalities and cultures that have built the contemporary world in which the student is living; it is now a political programme to reconstruct and re-shape, to instrumentalise and, ultimately in the hands of some, to weaponise.

In every country the history textbook is a core implement of education, perhaps the primary instrument that shapes the personality of the student, for the contours it sets to his identity and to his relations with the contemporary world. Pedagogical weakness – rote learning and the memorisation of tracts of text – ensure a hermetically sealed solidity to the prescribed uncritical narratives that it promotes. The failure to see history and heritage as living, ongoing and self-renewing human processes, where the march of progress is never complete, is “misleading and therefore harmful to present and future generations.”²¹⁰ A false, tendentious historiography is

²⁰⁷ A. al-Azme, *Muslim Kinship, Power and the Sacred in Muslim, Christian and Pagan Politics*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, 1997.

²⁰⁸ M. Arkoun, *Islam: To Reform or To Subvert?* p.205.

²⁰⁹ AHDR 2003, pp.42-44.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

therefore replete with peril and injury to the schoolchild and the student. It effectively calls them to the defence of another, *cultural*, quarantine, which will bear its inevitable cost. For if the world is inhabited by other nations

that do not believe that history has reached its end, humanity is thus divided into two worlds that are not in sync with one another.²¹¹

Cultural one-dimensionalism

The result of this historiographic failure manifests itself in the single-dimensional character of education. It is true that, historically, Islamic culture has long set aside the dispassionate intellectual curiosity and openness that marked the era of the High Caliphate, when illustrious scholars such as Abū Rayḥān al-Bīrūnī (973-1048) could compile a compendium of India's religion and philosophy in his *Taḥqīq mā lil-Hind* ('Investigation into things Indian')²¹² or al-Shahrastānī (1086-1153) a scientific heresiological study *Kitāb al-Milal wal-Niḥal* ('Book of Sects and Creeds'). With the clerical class subsequently vindicated as arbiters of the centre of gravity of Islamic culture, even rare luminaries such as the historian and pioneer of sociology Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406) belied what appeared to be his curiosity on "the reports of the philosophical sciences greatly cultivated in the land of Rome and along the adjacent northern shore of the country of the European Christians"²¹³ with the dismissal of the developing applied sciences:

we must refrain from studying these things, since such (restraint) falls under (the duty of) the Muslim not to do what does not concern him. The problems of physics are of no importance for us in our religious affairs or our livelihoods. Therefore, we must leave them alone.²¹⁴

But the cultural 'resurgence' of the mid-19th century appeared to have repeated the process. Early enthusiasm for the intellectual underpinning of apparent triumph of the colonial powers has succumbed, under political pressures and the waxing Islamist domination of the education sector, to a renewed 'transplant rejection'. "Not one of the hundreds of Egyptians who obtained their doctorates from British universities", observes Tarek Heggy,

bothered to read basic literary works as those of Shakespeare, Chaucer, Byron, Wordsworth or Dickens. It is also safe to bet that none of them became anywhere near as familiar with the treasures of museums as they did with the layout of department stores.²¹⁵

The author argues that the self-imposed isolation of Egyptian post-graduate students studying abroad and their refusal to taste from the host country's opportunities is all the more true of their counterparts at home, who have little or no exposure – other than on a superficial level – to other civilizations or to the new ideas that these offer out of "a misplaced belief in their cultural superiority and the sense that they can do without 'Western' ideas." For all the defensive dismissal of western perceptions of Islamic culture (perceptions which exhibit the full gamut of culturally sympathetic academic analyses to crude stereotypes), the cold shoulder to the underpinnings of the 'culture of blacksmiths and carpenters' is patent. "What is really intriguing", muses the Lebanese intellectual Ghassān Salāmé,

is the laughableness of Arab Occidentalism compared to western Orientalism. The study of western society and thought among Arabs and the epistemological principles and values for science that the West embraces is almost non-existent in the Arab world"²¹⁶.

²¹¹ Mohamed Houni, *The Arabic Dilemma*, www.mettransparent.com March 10, 2005.

²¹² The dispassionate cultural curiosity is indicated in the full title: *تحقيق ما للهند من مقولة معقولة في العقل أم مردولة* ('A Critical study of what India says, whether accepted by reason or refused').

²¹³ Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddima*, Section 13, *On the Various Kinds of Intellectual Sciences*.

²¹⁴ Ibn Khaldūn, *op. cit.*, Section 24, *On the Refutation of Philosophy and the Corruption of those Studying it*.

²¹⁵ Tarek Heggy, *Selected Works, Essays on the Egyptian Cultural Dilemma*. Section 22: 'The Tragedy of Education and Culture in Egypt.' <http://www.tarek-heggy.com/books/egypt/15.htm>.

Others have raised their observations on the current state of education and cultural awareness to the point of serious concern. The rupture with the ‘Other’ which ignorance of their culture implies, argued Shaker al-Nabulsi, has a knock-on effect on knowledge of Islamic culture too:

This is because we only know ourselves via that ‘Other’; for what we know of our culture and history deriving from the works of Orientalists – sincere or otherwise – is many times more than what we know from ourselves and our own scholars. The ‘Other’ knows about us much more than we know about him.²¹⁷

The one-dimensional system of education signalled by this repudiation of the culture of the ‘Other’ indicates that a serious cultural complacency has taken root in education. Dr. ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Ṣaghīr, Professor of Philosophy and the History of Islamic Thought at Morocco’s Muḥammad V University, agrees on the dangers of this complacency when he signals that ignorance of the Other, and the latter’s perceptions on Muslim culture, actually hampers the ability of the Muslim to understand what it is that is distinctive of Islamic culture or that makes him culturally ‘Muslim’:

Without a constant following of what others are producing at the level of concepts and methodologies, without the practice of compiling continuing dossiers on what is written, said and published about us, we will not be in a position to grasp what the specificities of Islamic culture are or the specificities of its concepts, perceptions and values. That is, grasping the structure and the essence of Islam’s intellectual activity demands a parallel grasp of the nature and specificity of thought and culture of the Christian West in particular.²¹⁸

Keeping the philosophical, religious, intellectual and social history of the West at arm’s length, he argues, is a ‘childish frivolity’ indulged in by Arab Muslim scholars and thinkers in the hope that the necessity to do so will somehow eventually pass, and “the ploughed furrow of Islam and its heritage will be a ‘passport’ to a post-modern age”.²¹⁹ If the *fiqh* of this heritage is already suited to its market, the scholars of Islam can simply turn their backs on the task of presenting a renewed reading of Arab Islamic heritage:

As far as I see it, most of those who promote what they call ‘new readings’ of Islam are actually playing around within this phenomenon: the state of cut-off of today’s Muslim scholars from the sciences and innovations of the West. Let us then prioritise observing the methodologies and instruments in use among those other than us, first of all to adopt them, and secondly to grasp their nature and how far they can be applied. This way no one will be able to carry on trading on our ignorance and betting on its persistence to construct some fantasy vision of the future in ‘strategic studies’ centres dedicated to manipulating Islamic societies.²²⁰

An élite unacquainted with world culture

The bulwark against an exploitation of this kind is an educated class that can interact with modernity on its terms. The training of such a class assumes an education in human intellectual creativity from all fields of knowledge and exposure to broad arenas of human history, political thought, philosophy, psychology, literature and the arts – all of this in addition to specific areas of specialisation. “It is inconceivable”, argues Tarek Heggy,

that the intellectual training of a prominent individual in modern society should remain unacquainted, for example, with the achievements of ancient Egyptian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Greek civilisation or that it should lack any recognition of the achievements of human creativity in the age of the *Nahḍa*, or be unaware of the historical role played by French Enlightenment figures such as Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau and Montesquieu in preparing the ground for the rise of

²¹⁶ Ghassān Salāmé, التراث وتحديات العصر في الوطن العربي (*Heritage and the Challenges of the Age in the Arab Nation*), مركز دراسات الوحدة العربية, 1985, p.353.

²¹⁷ Shaker al-Nabulsi, ‘Islamism as a Khwāja complex’, *Almuslih.org*.

²¹⁸ A-M. al-Ṣaghīr, الإحياء, استئناف المراجعة النقدية التحليلية لتراثنا الإسلامي مطلب ديني وعقلي في نفس الآن, Vol. 26, November 2007, p.42.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

modern political and constitutional systems and institutions in civilised societies. Similarly, one cannot imagine that they should be intellectually unaware of any of the fruits of human creativity in any of the other fields of applied, social and human sciences as have occurred over the last two centuries.²²¹

Yet the single-dimensional focus of current education programmes, focusing on Qur'ānic studies, the Hadith, the *sīra* and *fiqh*, for example, means that those with the potential to become the nation's opinion-formers are left peculiarly impotent to function in the modern world and understand the motivations of its movers and shakers. As we have seen above, the sidelining of philosophy and comparative religion is not an inadvertent omission, or the result of a natural cultural pride in indigenous currents of thought, but is rather an active censorship methodically promoted by the strategic direction of a 'hidden curriculum' which is fast undoing the work of the 19th century *nahḍa*:

This hidden curriculum continues to erode education. Along with this it carries the seed of rebellion against enlightenment thinking which holds freedom of thought to be an exalted, fundamental value for the progress of civilization, and which has been promoted in our time by modernist thinkers such as Butrus al-Bustani, Farah Anton, Qasim Amin and Taha Hussein.²²²

The absence / sidelining of the arts

One of the results of this one-dimensional intellectual education, and the lack of a clear distinction being made between religious truth and scientific truth, is the perennial stasis on issues such as the rights of woman, freedom of conscience and, curiously, the *permissibility* of the arts.

Why the arts? The to-and-fro debate between progressive and fundamentalist scholars on the Prophet's attitude to poetry, to music and to imagery, is not the totality of the issue. More illuminating is a casual perusal of the names of leaders of Islamist movements. This will yield a catalogue of degrees and doctorates in engineering and medicine, but no graduates in social sciences, linguistics or philosophy, let alone literature, art history or music. Applied sciences that are based on physics or chemistry hold no terrors for them since, as we have seen, these constitute 'legitimate' fields of study, and in any case are simply accessing, via the modern researcher, the knowledge that ultimately 'goes back to Islam.'

But as for the humanities, for history and the social sciences, these disciplines have a troubling tendency to relativize human knowledge. They also defy ideological characterisation since their effects cannot be measured, beyond a vague distrust of something that 'intoxicates' the mind in some way. They lie outside their conceptual framework, they are open-ended and do not fit the pattern of a progressively uncovered, static, divine *tawḥīd* of knowledge.²²³ They are too complex to be encompassed by a few textually demonstrable guiding principles, and are therefore a threat. If a Muslim cannot go to any source other than God in human affairs, values and standards, or in principles of economics or political affairs or the interpretation of historical processes' or if, in line with Sayyid Qutb's thinking, it is 'not permissible for a Muslim to learn them from anyone other than a god-fearing and pious Muslim, who knows that guidance in these matters comes from Allah'²²⁴, this artificial polarity amounts to a blanket prohibition against the humanities and the arts.

²²¹ Tarek Heggy, 'A one-dimensional mentality', *Almuslih.org*.

²²² Samar Dūdīn, المنهج الخفي الذي يحرم الفنون ('The hidden curriculum that outlaws the Arts'), *Al-Ghad*, July 28 2015.

²²³ The 'staticness', for those Islamic traditions that accept the arts and sciences, is given a theological explanation: "The arts and sciences came to possess instead a stability and a "crystallization" based on the immutability of the principles from which they had issued forth; it is this stability that is too often mistaken in the West today for stagnation and sterility ... The arts and sciences in Islam are based on the idea of unity, which is the heart of the Muslim revelation. Just as all genuine Islamic art ... provides the plastic forms through which one can contemplate the Divine Unity [*tawḥīd*] manifesting itself in multiplicity, so do all the sciences that can properly be called Islamic reveal the unity of Nature." Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, pp.21-2.

²²⁴ Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones*, Ed. A. al-Mehri, Maktabah, Birmingham 2006, pp.121-2.

As Samar Dūdīn observed in the Jordanian school curricula, “the exclusion of the arts, philosophy and cultural studies from our schools and many of our education centres is but one manifestation of the approach of the hidden curriculum”, and part of the programme to enforce the “unfortunate singularity of viewpoint on the Self and on the Other”. This is because

the arts possess great symbolic significance ... The arts import depth, richness and the collective human experience. When we experience the arts, we live the lives of others, they allow the expansion of our vision about ourselves and about others, they make us more tolerant of our sins and our weaknesses, and whet our hopes and incentives to progress – questioning and innovating, expressing ourselves and sympathizing with others and advancing our knowledge – towards the vast universe.²²⁵

The product of this educational embargo is all too apparent. “There is not a single Islamist leader”, laments Tarek Heggy,

who is able to consider an art form such as ballet permissible. ... There is not a single Islamist leader who permits music, singing, acting, painting or sculpture without first hedging it with conditions that only strangle any spirit of art and creativity.²²⁶

The extreme application of textual prohibitions on art were recently witnessed in northern Iraq and Syria, as ISIS radicals very publicly destroyed ancient artefacts and monuments, to the consternation of the world community. With few exceptions Muslim authorities condemned the acts, just as they had condemned the destruction by the Taliban of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan. But the ambiguous position taken by some Salafist preachers on the issue troubled many Arab commentators, who noted the voluminous citation of Qur’ānic verses and hadith in support of banning public art that figured human or animal forms, or in support of removing ancient monuments such as the Egyptian Sphinx,²²⁷ for the temptations to idolatry that these posed. Such comments only underlined the ambiguity of the positions taken, and the potential for the antipathy to be actualised more widely. The question of cultural suppression of the plastic arts in this manner is of particular concern to educationalists since it combines religious instincts of cultural ‘abrogation’ with Islamist antipathy towards symbols that might strengthen ‘national’ identity over against religious or sectarian affiliations. It also embraces some more basic, narcissistic reactions towards archaeological remains as signals of an earlier ‘western’ cultural presence that answers to the cultural roots and pre-occupations of the repudiated rival faith. “Today, more than at any other time”, argues Samar Dūdīn,

we are in need of establishing a bold, dogged, long-term civil action to demand that philosophy and the Arts be included as core courses in education. We should pull together our efforts, fragmented over the years by the oppression and intervention of religiously extremist theses in our politics and our life, by the disruption of the whole education process by dangerous forces of exclusion, in place of the use of the intellect and the exaltation of science, knowledge and the Arts.²²⁸

The level of damage inflicted by this deficit should not be underestimated. An educational system that constructs so many red lines to constrict the space for intellectual freedom can only doom

²²⁵ Samar Dūdīn, *op. cit.*

²²⁶ Tarek Heggy, ‘A one-dimensional mentality’, *Almuslih.org*. The author goes on to relate a personal anecdote on this: “I have heard from the mouths of most Islamists with whom I have had dealings and exchanged conversation that they have barred their adherents from reading, for instance, works of ancient Greek philosophy and literature, or the writings of the Enlightenment intellectuals who prepared the ground for the French Revolution, or any of the works of the humanistic philosophers from the fifth century BC until the present-day.”

²²⁷ Cf. the comments by Murgan Salem al-Gohary in November 2012: “The idols and statues that fill Egypt must be destroyed. Muslims are tasked with applying the teachings of Islam and removing these idols, just like we did in Afghanistan when we smashed the Buddha statues”. The lack of condemnation of these comments from President Morsi angered tourist bodies enough to contemplate suing the President. The threat was repeated by the Kuwaiti preacher Ibrahim Al Kandari in March 2015 and more recently reiterated by ISIS in a video in June 2016.

²²⁸ Samar Dūdīn, *op. cit.*

any dithering attempts at awakening to an unchanging trajectory of failure.²²⁹ More than that, the Islamist quarantining of Arab Muslim societies presages fatal consequences, since

those who maintain that the Arts are forbidden by Islamic law and that expressing oneself freely through the Arts is to be stopped by some act of intellectual terrorism by the forces of extremism and obscurantism, are sowing the seeds of exclusion, and establishing a form of cognitive, social tyranny that vouchsafes all manner of violence.²³⁰

²²⁹ M. Sanduk, Intellectual self-isolation and the prospects of constructing a culture *Almuslih.org*

²³⁰ Samar Dūdīn, *ibid.*

III - Obstacles to educational reform

The struggle confronting the forces of reform is definitely of the *longue durée*, a generations-long reconfiguration of the educational system in the Muslim world that is placing obstacles – religious, social even epistemological – to integration into a global modernity. Arab Muslim analysts of the current educational programmes in the Middle East, as we have seen, express increasing concern at the evidence of the widening gap between regional and international standards of education, and see the current educational formula as untenable. The concern is merged with an apprehension as to what shape an educational reform should take.

In determining this shape, most analyses on educational performance in the Middle East understandably focus on developmental issues that are immediately recognizable as impacting on economic welfare, such as engineering, technology and information technology. The issue of reform is therefore steered towards the level of professional training, of pedagogic method, of the failings of a system that rewards those who are skilled at being passive knowledge recipients, as opposed to those proficient at higher-order cognitive skills such as flexibility, problem-solving, and judgment. This focus on the technical issues of pedagogy is conceived as something for bureaucrats in Arab ministries of education to attend to, without reference to the wider issues of the impact of what is being taught upon the progress of societal training. It is as if a campaign for the eradication of *alphabetical* illiteracy took no heed of *cultural* illiteracy.

The domination of the non-scientific fields of study in the MENA countries

Yet the countries of the Middle East and North Africa are an exception to the global norm precisely in this unresolved arena of societal training and cultural literacy. In most countries of the region the composition of post-compulsory education programmes continues to favour statistically non-scientific fields of study²³¹ and in this sector the average percentage of total instructional time allocated to religious education in Grades 7 and 8 is much higher in the region than in other parts of the world.²³²



Average percentage of total instructional time allocated to religious education and morals in Grades 7 and 8 ²³³

²³¹ “On average, about one third of university students in MENA countries major in scientific fields. This is lower than the averages of, say, East Asia and Latin America. In Djibouti, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and West Bank and Gaza, students in these non-scientific disciplines are 71 percent, 75 percent, 75 percent, 76 percent, and 76 percent of university students, respectively”. See *The Road not Traveled, Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa*, MENA Development Report, 2008, p.88.

²³² *The Road not Traveled, Education Reform in the Middle East and North Africa*, MENA Development Report, 2008, p.185.

²³³ Source: *The Road not Traveled*, p.185.

Reluctance to engage with a sensitive issue

Given this allocation, the quality of the education provided should be a subject of more concern than it is at present. Analyses on educational performance, however, have tended to avoid the issue of religious education or religious infiltration of the broader educational syllabus. This is because to do so is to enter into highly contentious territory, in which discussion will promptly conflict with preoccupations with authenticity and ‘cultural betrayal’ as mentioned earlier. For the issue of Arab intellectual heritage, as the *Arab Human Development Report* noted,

has never been purely a theoretical or scientific question in the strict meaning of the word. Rather, it has been, to a great extent, an ideological issue.²³⁴

The ideologisation of this question is caused by a confusion of competing identities: between ‘Arab’ and ‘Islamic’, between ‘inherited’ and ‘authentic’, between what is conceived as ‘modernising’ or merely ‘westernising’. The principal ingredient of this confusion is a grassroots fear among many that a reformed education sector must in some way no longer be true to the religious and cultural heritage. As a result of insecurity concerning where to locate authenticity, the educational reform debate has effectively split into two conflicting halves that interpret differently the cause and cure of the evident failure and cultural regression:

- 1) The Islamists accuse the West for having infected the region with ‘sick genes’ and empowered its agents to propagate these under the cover of ‘modernity’;
- 2) The ‘Revivalists’ see that there is no alternative to importing the achievements of modernity at all levels (arguing that the term ‘western’ is merely historical, not qualitative) and indigenising these things within the Islamic environment.

The explosive sensitivity of the debate has inevitably left the field to the safer option of what is ‘more familiar’, an option successfully monopolised by Islamist currents of thought. This has resulted in a reform stalemate, with periodic bouts of self-purging addressing superficial dimensions of the problems posed by traditional, and ‘re-traditionising’, interpretations of that heritage. These are little more than ‘cultural tinkering’, Mohammed al-Sanduk argues, which

characteristically were limited attempts undertaken by clerics and those who were – and still are – representing a class of people influenced by the prevalent mindset in society ... They amounted to no more than philosophical or intellectual discourses more akin to theoretical proposals than anything else.²³⁵

The failure should be laid not only at the door of conservative-minded clerics, but also of Arab thinkers more widely from the period of the late 19th and the early 20th century *Nahḍa* (‘Resurgence’). These failed to revisit intensively enough issues of authority, the state and the citizen, or update the traditionalist repudiation of any forms of ‘non-divine rule’ (*ḥukm al-ṭāghūt*) and indigenise developing contemporary forms of pluralistic governance that were answering more appropriately to increasing cultural interconnection and interchange. As Hassan Mneimneh explains:

The advocates of liberalism, nationalism and leftism in subsequent eras saw no need to focus on this issue ... They all relegated religiously derived thought to the status of an atavistic reflex that would soon be swept away by the organic reality of either progress or nation or class. And Islamism in general, and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, benefited from this omission.²³⁶

²³⁴ *Arab Human Development Report* 2003, p.114.

²³⁵ Mohammed al-Sanduk, Reform: a discourse of intellectuals or a rehabilitation? *Almuslih.org*. The author goes on to describe the circularity of the purging process: “They demolished things and built anew, but lost more opportunities faster than they constructed new ones... They embarked on the procurement of social, political and military systems that had been established by developed societies. The building up process was therefore a superficial and temporary one and these programmes began to collapse. Not only this, the construction and demolition operation went on, and still does, with the result that these societies, after having exited the prison of time, are still confusedly searching for their way. The construction and demolition process will thus go on unabated until it reaches the point of exhaustion.”

²³⁶ Hassan Mneimneh, ‘The Islamization of Arab Culture,’ in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 6, 2008, p.54.

Fascinated by western achievements, the Arab educated élite simply imported a foreign conceptual language. It was thus left to lesser minds, such as that of Ḥasan al-Bannā' – the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood – to seek the indigenization with the inherited Islamic corpus. The lack of an internal renaissance, as opposed to an imported one designed in haste to bridge a widening technological gap, did no more than produce administration structures and services which failed to focus on the building of a modern social culture, one that could harmonise with contemporary developments. The result was that initiatives such as 'Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq's attempt to disqualify as anachronistic the concept of a Caliphate in his work, *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*,²³⁷ stood little chance of absorption by the clerical class. The result, as Soheib Bencheikh laments, is 'a people living in a perilous disconnect between his status as a citizen and his quality as a believer'.²³⁸

Without a theoretical, Islamically indigenised footing for modernity or a reshaping of the deeper constituents of the heritage, no effective reform of education in the Middle East, sufficient to keep pace with developments on the global scale, was ever likely to take place.

Narcissism and defensiveness

In a rapidly Salafising environment in which the very concept of reforming (*iṣlāḥ*) as opposed to 'renewing' (*tajdīd*) is expelled, the call for educational reform meets stiff resistance. The first task for educational reformers is actually to establish among the public that a deep-seated problem exists at all. There is an incapacity, if not defensive refusal, to grasp the nettle. Arab thought still looks upon the evidence of contemporary decline as some form of natural phenomenon whenever it is not actually casting the blame on historical events or on other peoples. "Muslim societies still refuse to open the debate", as Soheib Bencheikh observes,

On the contrary, to raise these questions in public today is to subject yourself to the most unlikely censures and accusations – of being in the pay of the West, of serving American interests, or conniving with the Zionist enemy – of manifesting one's apostasy and thus deserving of the death penalty.²³⁹

The self-isolating trajectory from cultural pride to defensive chauvinism to conspiracy victimhood is so pervasive that, according to Nadia Oweidat, it has become deeply ingrained into the consciousness from the repeated glosses in the media and in the school: "You just have to turn the TV on randomly in the Arab world to hear these master narratives, over and over and over. Just get any textbook and one of these narratives is victimhood, which takes away our agency."²⁴⁰ Under the conditioning reflexes of this narrative, as Dr. Ibtihāl al-Khatīb explains, past deprivations, current restrictions, the localised effects of international and regional conflicts all feed into

this perpetual sense of discrimination and prompt Arabs and Muslims to play this tedious role of victim, which they embody so well that they end up believing in it wholeheartedly. However, the world, and we ourselves, have grown sick of this endless role, which no longer elicits any

²³⁷ With this work which appeared in 1925, a year after the abolition by Mustafa Kemal of the Ottoman Caliphate, 'Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq argued that the Qur'ān confirms the Prophet had no interest in political sovereignty, and that his "heaven-appointed work did not go beyond the limits of the delivery of the summons, entirely apart from any thought of rulership." The author adduced the following Qur'ānic passages as evidence: IV,83; VI,66,107; X,108; XVII,54; XXXIII,40; XXXIX,41; LXXXVIII,21-4.

For an analysis of the Caliphate as founded on an 'optical illusion', a projection of an episode of Muslims' history into a 'precept' of Islam, see Abdou Filali-Ansari, 'Turning back to Alī Abd al-Rāziq', *Almuslih.org* and his study (and translation) of 'Alī 'Abd al-Rāziq, *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*, Modern Muslim Thinkers, Aga Khan University, Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilizations, Jul 2012.

²³⁸ Soheib Bencheikh, *Marianne et le Prophète, l'Islam dans la France Laïque*.

²³⁹ Soheib Bencheikh, 'La propagande de Daesh et le fantasme de la venue du Mahdi, « sauveur des musulmans »', interview by Stéphanie Plasse in *Jeune Afrique*, March 5 2015.

²⁴⁰ Nadia Oweidat speaking at the conference Forum on the Future of Islam, Muslim Perspectives on Islamic Extremism, Panel I: Is Islamism(s) Prone to Produce Extremism?, Rethink Institute, Washington, January 2016, p.26.

sympathy or tears. So either we start seeing ourselves as we really are, or perish while continuing to play the role of victim to a theatre without an audience.²⁴¹

Any criticism, Dr. al-Khatib notes, thus comes to be viewed as a plot against Muslims, any raising of questions a plan to weaken the religion, and any suggested innovation a westernizing programme intended to destroy the foundations of faith. The response formula appears uniquely crafted to the Muslim Middle East. “Why did Japan not retaliate for their wounds after World War II with responses similar to ours?” asks Lafif Lakhdar,

because religious narcissism was not internalized in their modern culture... They imitated the West, assimilating into it, while we fought with it, struggled against it, and became locked in on our own values of ‘conflict with the infidels’ and military vengeance.²⁴²

The option for making realistic decisions and setting realistic priorities that set a country like Japan on the positive trajectory of imitating, equalling and even surpassing, he explains, is not available to a people educated to accept the intervention of religion into the fields of economy, scientific research and artistic creativity. Indeed, the very first stage of this trajectory is expelled outright by the exigencies of *al-walā’ wal-barā’* to prohibit “imitating the inhabitants of Hellfire – that is, the Jews and the Christians.”²⁴³

The criminalisation of critical thought

This is a difficult issue for educational reformers to undertake, to square the circle of cultural and religious authenticity with flexibility to the requirements of the contemporary political, cultural and legal environment without incurring the charge of westernizing. Soheib Bencheikh’s experience is mirrored by progressive thinkers across the region in an Islamist-dominated cultural environment that stamps down on critical thinking with the tools of blasphemy laws and apostasy punishments. The strictures particularly haunt the education sector. While Salafists are practiced in issuing *fatwās* condemning ‘liberals’ and ‘innovators,’ in 2003 progressive thinkers across the region were startled to hear of a first class doctorate awarded to a researcher whose thesis openly *proscribed* a long list of Arab intellectuals, explicitly calling them ‘infidels’²⁴⁴ with the implicit corollary of their capital punishment for apostasy. The thesis was not something produced in isolation, since an earlier work in 1998 by the Saudi cleric ‘Awadh al-Qarnī *Modernity in the Balance of Islam* subjected Arab authors, poets, researchers, philosophers, academics, literary critics, and journalists to the accusation of heresy – thus again opening them to the capital penalty.²⁴⁵ As the case of Professor Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, prosecuted and forced into exile for his comments on the historicity of the Qur’ānic text, illustrates,²⁴⁶ the threat is real. All of which convinced the progressive Saudi commentator Muḥammad Āl al-Shaykh, that the first, unavoidable, step for any contemporary movement of renewal to have any prospect of success,

²⁴¹ Dr. Ibtihal Al-Khatib, *كاتبه كويتية تدعو لاستبدال مناهج الدين بمقررات تاريخ الأديان* (‘Kuwaiti author calls for replacing the religious syllabus with the History of Religions’), *Al-Jarida* (Kuwait), November 30, 2015.

²⁴² Lafif Lakhdar, ‘On the Arab Identity Crisis and Education’, *MEMRI Special Dispatch No.576*, September 21, 2003.

²⁴³ See Lafif Lakhdar, *The Reform of Islam is both Necessary and Possible*, *Almuslih.org*.

²⁴⁴ Abd al-Hamid al-Ansari, ‘The 15 characteristics of Salafī discourse’, *Almuslih.org*. The work in question is: Sa’īd bin Nāṣir al-Ghāmdī, *الانحراف العقدي في أدب الحداثة وفكرها* (‘Credal Deviancy in the Culture of Modernism and its Thought’), a doctrinal thesis presented to the University of Imām Muḥammad bin Sa’ūd and published in 2003. For a discussion on this see Shākir al-Nābulṣī سور العرب العظيم - ما هو ولماذا؟, Beirut 2009, pp.124 foll.

²⁴⁵ ‘Awadh al-Qarnī الحداثة في ميزان الإسلام. On the publication of this work in 1998, the modernist literary critic Sa’īd al-Sarīhī lamented: “When the Kingdom’s Mufti speaks of the modernists as ‘a gang conspiring against the Nation’ I think that we are about to face a Holocaust, in that our isolation has become severe, and there is to be a form of cleansing of modernists”. (Interview on the programme *Idā’āt* on the *al-Arabiya* satellite channel, April 8th 2007).

²⁴⁶ Dr. Abu Zayd (1943-2010) was one of the leading liberal theologians in Islam and famous for his project of a humanistic Qur’ānic hermeneutics. In his work Dr. Abu Zayd argued that the Qur’ānic texts should be interpreted in the historical and cultural context of their time and that it should not be viewed solely as a text but also as a creative discourse, and therefore one that is constantly capable of new interpretations. His work was the subject of a specific study aimed at establishing his apostate status, and in 1995 he was found guilty of apostasy by an Egyptian court. After receiving death threats from *al-Gamā’a al-Islāmiyya* Dr. Abu Zayd moved to the Netherlands.

is that we should convince ourselves that renewal begins with criticism, objectivity and rationality. For as long as we are not convinced of this basic fact we shall remain unable to escape from our present state of backwardness, and that terrorism will persist, along with bloody associations inspired by 'jihadist Islam'.²⁴⁷

Islamist educational 'reform'

Islamist analysis of the cultural failure

Condemnations notwithstanding, the reality of the decline of the Muslim world and the global rooting of modernity and its epistemology has understandably exercised the Islamist educationalist to both filter out the contamination, and explain the problem of cultural under-performance. It has provoked three broad types of reaction:

- a) purification through education
- b) countermeasures against what it perceives as the widespread 'be-dazzlement' at western culture
- c) calls for investigative studies on the secret of the West's success.

○ *Purification through education*

Islamist reform endeavours are focused on *al-taṣfiya wal-tarbiya* ('Purification and Education'), founded upon a cornerstone of *al-itbā' lā al-ibtidā'* ('adhesion, not innovation'). This is because the backwardness and decadence of the Islamic world is seen as a result of the appearance of heretical, 'innovating' religious groups that have besmirched the doctrines of Islam. For Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, one of the leading theorists of Islamism's guiding intellectual infrastructure of Salafism, the purification function of the education programme was paramount. "It is necessary", he states,

for the learned people to undertake the nurturing of a new Muslim generation in the light of what the Quran and Sunna have set down, we cannot abandon people to the errors and concepts they have inherited ... This is what will bear fruit for us in a pure Islamic society.²⁴⁸

The purification dynamic, however, is destructive. As Ḥasan Abū Ḥaniyah and Muḥammad Abū Rummān detail in their study on the Salafist programme to Islamise society,²⁴⁹ its salient assumption that "Truth is single, not plural" opposes pluralism viscerally, while its constant importation of historic conflicts into the present reality necessarily foster a mindset that clashes with the assumptions and functions of the modern state and renders their relationship with it ambiguous. The educational orientations promoted by Islamists prime the mentality of its students to uncompromising, radical understandings of the faith that deliberately override the interests and rights of the 'other.' The fact that these activities appear to lie well within a neutral zone of 'cultural education' gives the false impression that they stand outside what may be defined as political activity. But the purpose of this orientation — the 're-Islamisation' of Muslims towards a rejection of modern values and standards, the call for isolation from symbols and institutions of modern society, the promotion of intolerance towards other groups, the repudiation of positive law — can act only to weaken those civic disciplines that constitute the soft underbelly of democracies and weaken social cohesion. Thus, while their self-image is primarily one of religious and social educators and reformers, there is an inexorable drift of

²⁴⁷ M. Āl al-Shaykh من الغيبوبة والغفلة إلى التجديد والنقد <http://www.alarabiya.net>, January 11th 2016.

²⁴⁸ See Ḥasan Abū Ḥaniyah and Muḥammad Abū Rummān, الدولة "المتنبسة" وسؤال العلاقة "أسلمة المجتمع" استراتيجية: المحافظة: استراتيجة "أسلمة المجتمع" وسؤال العلاقة "المتنبسة" مع الدولة, *Conservative Salafism: A Strategy to 'Islamize Society' and the Question of the 'Ambiguous' Relationship with the State*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Amman 2010, p.61.

²⁴⁹ Ḥasan Abū Ḥaniyah and Muḥammad Abū Rummān, *op.cit.*, pp. 58-9.

Salafist thought towards activism, as the pietistic requirements of the community are seen to be ill-served by the political and civic structures of the state.²⁵⁰

○ *Countering the be-dazzlement*

A constant feature of the apotropaic function of Islamist education is decontamination. As we have seen, this primarily focuses on the dangers of the in-workings of the ‘intellectual grammar’ of modernity and its manifestation on the ground in the popular imitation of ‘western’ models. Islamists style their position as one of liberating the Muslim from an all-pervasive ‘*khawāja* complex’²⁵¹ and inculcating an objective neutrality to perception based on cultural self-confidence.

Mocking the popular admiration of the achievements of modernity as a manifestation of the *khawāja* complex, however, has brought its own contradictions, as the Jordanian intellectual Shaker al-Nabulsi explained:

Why did Almighty God mark out the Arab nation for this dazzlement specialism, and complicate it with this *Khawāja* complex, as opposed to any other nations on the earth who have drawn from European culture what they found useful and omitted what was superfluous to needs, and took from western progress that which they considered appropriate, leaving aside what was not right for them? ²⁵²

Al-Nabulsi argued, instead, that the be-dazzlement has actually not occurred, since ‘western thought can only influence Arab thought according to how much Arab thought is capable of comprehending the former.’ Due to the educational failings this level of understanding is somewhat restricted, resulting in the paradox of Arab Muslims constituting

the *least* among eastern peoples to be influenced by western culture, but the *most* to take the outer shell of western culture and ignore its roots. ²⁵³

○ *Investigating the ‘secrets’ of western success*

The call to a proper investigative study of the West and the secrets of its success, in the sense of its operative techniques, is not yet occurring and, with respect to its intellectual infrastructure remains an unfulfillable wish. There are no institutes of ‘Occidentalism’ undertaking research into the philosophical or epistemological underpinnings of the scientific and technological advance (as opposed to institutes researching the West in the sense of ‘western Orientalism’). Similarly, the occasional Islamist calls for cultural contact and interchange on the grounds of ‘openness’ ring hollow, since

this is not so that we can understand ourselves in a better, deeper, more intellectual way; rather it is so that we can launch raids on western culture, aim our shafts of criticism against it, and isolate out its points of strength and weakness.

As al-Nabulsi archly observes, calling for such an isolation process ‘is making the assumption that the Arab nation at present possesses that ability’.²⁵⁴ It also fails to take into account an important observation made by Ibrahim al-Buleihi:²⁵⁵ that while modernity takes the West as its cradle, it can no longer be described as a single culture appropriate for some regions and not for

²⁵⁰ Salafism cannot long avoid the implications of this tension. As Stéphane Lacroix argues, “Politics is indeed not the only way to militancy; extreme puritanism or apocalypticism may also produce violence, as illustrated by the 1979 Mecca siege.” For a comprehensive treatment of the doctrinal elements in this event, see Thomas Hegghammer and Stéphane Lacroix, *Rejectionist Islamism in Saudi Arabia: The Story of Juhayman al-Utaybi Revisited*, International Journal of Middle East Studies (vol. 39, no. 1, 2007, pp. 103-122), Cambridge University Press.

²⁵¹ A label denoting cultural inferiority vis-à-vis the Westerner, from the Egyptian colloquial term *khawāja* (‘European’ - from the Turkish *hoca* ‘man of distinction, ‘teacher, ‘master’).

²⁵² Shaker al-Nabulsi, ‘Islamism as a Khawāja complex’, *Almuslih.org*.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ Ibrahim al-Buleihi, ‘Castles of Backwardness’, pp.42-3.

others, and as if there were an alternative. There is a qualitative difference, which may be summarised as the recognition of the human dignity of the individual, the veneration of reason, the constant recognition of its own shortcomings and illusions, and the stress upon a continuous need for criticism, review and correction as a ‘work in progress’. Each of these features is entirely foreign to the Islamist conception of culture and civilisation.

For as long as Islamist education operates upon such a weak conceptual foundation on the nature of modernity, its educational reforms can only be retrograde.

The pedagogic failure of orthodoxy

ISIS as a manifestation of a broader doctrinal paralysis

Progressive thinkers have noted the shortcomings of Islamist education to accommodate the working assumptions of a modern state, assumptions that include freedom of expression, freedom of conscience and religious profession, and full citizenship on the basis of political, legal and psychological equality of status. They note how the Islamist case is constantly supported by reference made to the core defining authorities of Muslim identity and the centrality which the Islamic faith is made to hold in their lives. The problem, as the historian notes is that the faith is understood by most Muslims “in terms of ritual observance and religious teaching. These were elaborated and formulated between the 8th and 12th centuries, and since that time have seen neither reform nor updating.”²⁵⁶

As a result of working within the contours of a 7th-8th century scripture, there is limited elasticity to accommodate these assumptions. More importantly, there is limited elasticity to cope with the challenge posed by contemporary radicals who dispense with them. The tragic events in Iraq and Syria highlighted this dilemma as the international community was perplexed to see the number of Muslim youths drawn into violent militancy under an apparent confidence in its religious justification. This overtly expressed and defended confidence left the somewhat generalised interpretation that the behaviour of ISIS had ‘nothing to do with Islam’ as an insufficient explanation. The depth of the insufficiency was impatiently spelled out by the former Mufti of Marseilles Soheib Bencheikh:

ISIS has invented nothing for it to be qualified in any sense as ‘sectarian’. Other than its extreme brutality, this group is simply applying to the letter what the Sunnis have always understood by their religion. So, according to a formal logic, the factions of ISIS and al Qaeda are the most coherent groups in the Sunni world – internally coherent, coherent with their archaism, and above all coherent with the single theological juridical version of Islam existing at present, one that is sacralised and promoted by everyone, above all by official Islam ... For what ISIS practices in broad daylight is taught and repeated one thousand times over in all the theological faculties of capital cities in the Muslim world. It is broadcast by the sermonisers of any and every mosque, and no doctor of *fiqh* or hadith can in all truth contradict the practices of ISIS or qualify them as un-Islamic. All he can say is “not like that, not now, not in these circumstances.” But he will not say anything against the foundations or the *raison d’être* of these practices.²⁵⁷

The implications of this gloomy diagnosis are that the doctrines and behaviour of radical militant groups are unable to be summarily dismissed as ‘un-Islamic’ as much as many analysts and Muslim scholars would wish. For closer inspection of the polemic argumentation revealed that the dichotomy most frequently boils down simply to the polarity of *scholarly consensus* vs. the *anti-madhabism* and literalist reading of the Salafists and of their Islamist activist dependents. “As abhorrent as radical Islamic theology and rejectionist Islamist practices are”, argues Hassan Mneimneh,

²⁵⁶ Soheib Bencheikh, *Marianne et le Prophète, l’Islam dans la France Laïque*.

²⁵⁷ Dr Soheib Bencheikh, *ISIS and radical Islamism as sclerotic theology* Almuslih.org.

they remain an integral part of the current manifestation of the multiple and plural Islam. The problem faced by the world community is that these currents — of a virulently predatory character — have little potent adversary in the body religion of Islam today.²⁵⁸

The problem is that the *‘ulamā’* do not offer an unambiguously defined neutral ground between modernity and orthodoxy compatible with the global assumptions of modernity and human rights. Discussions on reform of the religious discourse, for instance, or of the Islamic faith itself in all its fundamentals and incontrovertible beliefs, are expressed evasively with a basic purpose to keep one step ahead of the massive internal and external pressures confronting Islamic orthodoxy from time to time. This process is most frequently in evidence when it comes to the *ḥadd* punishments. “When they discuss these things”, observes ‘Abd al-Magīd al-Shehāwī,

we see them not opposing them in essence but merely deploring them for the right conditions not having being met. They do not oppose the cutting of the thief's hand *in principle* but make arguments against it out of a need to establish justice first, justice such as that achieved by ‘Umar ibn al-Khattāb. Afterwards, and only afterwards, is there any talk of the application of the *ḥadd* penalties. And, once again from the point of view of the principle, they are not against the open public killing of the adulteress in the street, but being ‘tolerant’ they make arguments against it by citing crippling conditions that make the application of this inhumane punishment well-nigh impossible.²⁵⁹

The main schools of orthodox jurisprudence thus still hold to slavery, gender-based discrimination, homophobia, child marriage, and offensive, militant *jihād* as authentic Islamic values. The Muslim community's rejection of the atrocities of ISIS has been virtually unanimous, but there is a tendency, nevertheless, to avoid challenging certain frequently accepted jurisprudential positions, which at times openly conflict with Qur'anic verses when those are taken in their historical context. As Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad notes,

the problem with the spread of extremism, is that we do not look critically at the jurisprudence as it's been handed down. At best what we do is “Let's not talk about things that make us uncomfortable; let's pretend that they don't exist,” and of course, as it has been pointed out earlier, that the radicals will be very happy to point out that it does exist and to make us look foolish in the process.²⁶⁰

Al-Azhar's paralysis

For a ‘potent adversary’ to the radicals, Sunni Islam in the Middle East, and indeed more broadly, looks to the prestigious institution of Al-Azhar as representative of scholarly orthodoxy. President Sisi's address in December 2014 was just one such expectation but, significantly, the response of Shaykh al-Azhar Dr. Aḥmad al-Tayyib to the President's call to ‘revolutionize our religion’ demonstrated the limited scope that will be allowed to any such measure. He stated that the aim of al-Azhar was, indeed, not to effect such a revolution in doctrine but rather to “renew its historical heritage and give it a form suited to our own times.”²⁶¹ It is therefore perhaps unreasonable wait for any true reform from orthodox religious clerics whose training will ill-prepare them to seek faults or deficiencies in the religious corpus, and for whom “talk of reform is nothing but a smoke bomb which they employ to ease the pressure from them”.²⁶²

Moreover, far from supplying its adversary, the restricted dimensions of the scripturally dominated universe of their training also enforce an unsettling parity in mindset to radicalism,

²⁵⁸ Hassan Mneimneh, *The Loss of the Universal? Radical Islamic Theology and Its Implications for the Elusive Peace of the 21st Century*, The Nexus Institute, October 2014.

²⁵⁹ Abd al-Magid al-Shehawi, ‘The reform of religious discourse – fact or fiction?’, *Almuslih.org*.

²⁶⁰ Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad speaking at the conference *Forum on the Future of Islam, Muslim Perspectives on Islamic Extremism*, Panel III: Extremism and Challenges of Coexistence between Muslims and non-Muslims, Rethink Institute, Washington, January 2016, pp.35-6.

²⁶¹ Interview with Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed al-Tayeb, *Il Sole-24 Ore*, 4 June 2015.

²⁶² Abd al-Magid al-Shehawi, ‘The reform of religious discourse – fact or fiction?’, *Almuslih.org*.

judging from reaction of the Shaykh al-Azhar who called for those who burned alive the Jordanian pilot to be punished with

the punishment mentioned in the Qur'ān for these corrupt oppressors who fight against God and his prophet: killing, crucifixion or chopping of the limbs.²⁶³

Such language is indicative of the limited expectations one must have of meaningful education reform from within this circle. It is clear that Islamic orthodoxy has fed the problem of Islamism by fostering intellectual and doctrinal impoverishment, and that this impoverishment may be ascribed to the problem of fundamentalism within al-Azhar's own portals. As some recent research²⁶⁴ has elucidated, the traditional teaching materials distributed by that institution are themselves in considerable need of updating if it is to fulfil the role of helping political leaders usher their states into the modern world.

"What is the pedagogical goal of the Education Ministry in its teaching of history?" asks Ahmad Abdou Maher when reviewing the Azhari dominated school curricula in Egypt:

Does it try to infuse our children with fighting spirit, as if they are about to join a military academy? ... Is this why we use [books on] 'Abd al-Rahmān ibn 'Awf, 'Uqba ibn Nāfi' or Usāma ibn Zayd? ... All these books are full of wars, blood, and slaughter. They never mention al-Khawārizmī, who introduced algebra into the world. It is he who should be studied in history lessons. We want a modern country, which promotes knowledge, industry, agriculture, science, education, and moral values, rather than one promoting blood, spears, and rolling or flying heads. ISIS is a loyal and *bona fide* implementation of our Islamic heritage, which is taught by Al-Azhar!²⁶⁵

The point was even more reinforced by Muhammad Abdullah Nasr, coordinator of a group of former al-Azhar graduates, on an occasion when the institution refused to condemn ISIS as 'infidel':

The Islamic State can never denounce the Islamic State as un-Islamic. For the Islamic State is the working, postgraduate project for graduates from Al Azhar ... Al Azhar's mask has fallen everything that the Islamic State does exists in the curriculum of Al Azhar and is taught to students, including apostasy, [Islamic] rule, the payment of jizya, sex slaves and the captivity of women.²⁶⁶

If the antiquated prestige of Al-Azhar cannot fulfil the role of potent adversary, there is little encouragement emerging from further afield. Some leading scholars have undertaken some high-profile initiatives against radicalism, such as *The Amman Message*²⁶⁷ (November 2004) and *The New Mardin Declaration* (March 2010).²⁶⁸ The legitimacy of ISIS specifically to issue *fatwās*

²⁶³ 'Al-Azhar calls for killing, crucifixion of ISIS terrorists', *alarabiya.net*, 4 February 2015. Dr. Ahmad al-Tayyib was quoting from Qur'ān V,33: *Indeed, the penalty for those who wage war against Allah and His Messenger and strive upon earth [to cause] corruption is none but that they be killed or crucified or that their hands and feet be cut off from opposite sides or that they be exiled from the land. That is for them a disgrace in this world; and for them in the Hereafter is a great punishment.*

²⁶⁴ Babikir Faisal Babikir, *Islamic Religious Curricula and Terrorism: A Case Study of the Azherite Religious Schools in Egypt*, MA Thesis, University of Denver.

²⁶⁵ Ahmad Abdou Maher, 'ISIS Implements Islamic Heritage Taught by Al-Azhar', *New Age Islam*, December 21 2015.

²⁶⁶ Shaykh Muhammad Abdallah Nasr, *الأهر العلي لخريج الأزهر مشروع داعش هي مشروع التخرج العلي لخريج الأزهر* MCN, December 12 2015. http://www.mcndirect.com/showsubject_ar.aspx?id=58518#.Vp0uWFI8PE5

²⁶⁷ The Amman Message was an attempt to halt the increasing wave of sectarian violence and gain control over anarchic scholars by promoting three essential positions: 1) recognition of the validity of all eight legal schools of Sunni, Shī'a and 'Ibādī Islam, Ash'arism, Sufism and 'true Salafi thought'; 2) prohibition of *takfir* between Muslims; 3) the establishment of concrete pre-conditions for the issuing of *fatwās*. But as Jordanian researcher Hasan Abu Haniyah observed, "despite all the conferences and efforts made, The Amman Message failed to produce a cultural and political current that could be adopted clearly and seriously. The result of this approach and methodology in managing these institutions and in defining religious policies has led to prioritizing pragmatic, security considerations over the need for religious reform and enlightenment within society and in terms of public opinion." See Hasan Abu Haniyah: *Conservative Secularism*, 94-5. The official website of the Amman Message is <http://ammanmessage.com/>.

²⁶⁸ A summary of this *New Mardin Declaration* is provided at <http://binbayyah.net/arabic/archives/1038>. The *Declaration* was issued as the proceedings of a conference convened in March 2010 to re-examine the *fatwa* originally issued in Mardin by Shaykh Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) which is frequently cited by jihadists. The *Declaration* attempted to delegitimize the jihadists use of Ibn Taymiyya's *fatwā* to justify *jihād al-talib* (offensive jihad) – using, amongst other things, the argument that there had been a

was challenged by the *Fatwa Against ISIS* promulgated by the Syrian Islamic Council²⁶⁹, by the *Fatwa of Ibn Bayyah*²⁷⁰ and by the *Letter to al-Baghdadi*.²⁷¹ A flavour of the approach can also be seen in the recent publication of the counter-ISIS magazine *Ḥaḳīqa* which focused on the radicals' scholarly 'illegitimate' methods of 'interspersing occasional out of context verses with hyperbolic arguments', scriptural exhortations against 'exaggeration,' or associating the groups with the *Khawārij* secessionists of old. The *Fatwa on Suicide Bombing and Terrorism*²⁷² by Tahir al-Qadri issued in December 2010 in London attempted the same exercise and adduced a list of Qur'ānic verses which appear to prohibit such actions. But at the same time many other troublesome segments of the scriptural texts were passed over in silence, effectively diverting the gaze of potential critics.

In fact the problem with addressing Islamist violent extremism from within the textual universe and the theological traditions of Islam is well illustrated by Tahir al-Qadri's *Counter-terrorism Curriculum* (2015)²⁷³ about which there was much fanfare. The curriculum aimed 'to help ensure that people have the necessary material to challenge the ideological arguments that ISIS are producing' in the cause of distinguishing a 'true' Islam from a deviant version.

But such an exercise can only, inadvertently, give credence to the extremist. For if there is a 'true' Islam, and if this may be demonstrated textually, there is little to prevent radicals from persuading others that the version they profess is the true one, by means of an equally textual reasoning. Having recourse to 'classical' *fiqh* and traditional Islamic *tafsīr*, also fails the test since the radicals can exercise the same selectivity, when not dismissing with scorn the doctrinal 'illegitimacy' of their authors.²⁷⁴

This type of reform amounts to little more than quarantining some of the more militant expressions of the Qur'ān, attempting to delimit the applicability of doctrines such as *al-walā' wal-barā'* and having recourse to arguments for prioritising the greater *maṣlaḥa* ('interest'), or for applying moratoria on *ḥadd* punishments.²⁷⁵ Conspicuous in the rationale for these measures is the pragmatic nature of the argumentation – the danger of promoting *fitna* among the Muslim community if such contradictions with modernity were made more publicly evident. The result is Muslim intellectual disarray, as Soheib Bencheikh archly observes:

The majority of Sunnis are manifesting a schizophrenic attitude. They operate according to what is probably an unconsciously subjective selectivity: they observe one part of the text, contemplate

mistranslation of *yu'āmal* as *yuqātal* in the following passage: "Muslims living (under Mongol/non-Muslim rule) should be treated according to their rights as Muslims, while non-Muslims living outside the authority of Islamic law should be treated (*yu'āmal* as opposed to *yuqātal* 'combated') according to their rights." How effective this was can be demonstrated by the response of the radical ideologue Anwar al-Awlaki who refuted it on the basis of a revisionism carried out by 'scholars of *bāḥil* (falsehood)' waging ideological warfare on the jihadist movement.: "The declaration calls for a blanket condemnation of 'all forms of violent attempts-to-change or violent protest, within, or outside, Muslim societies.' This might be the way of Gandhi or Martin Luther King, but it is not the way of Muhammad who said: *I was sent with the sword before the Day of Judgment* ... The Muslim masses today need to beware of any *fatwa* that calls for the re-interpretation of well grounded, accepted, and valid *fatwa*'s given by the classical scholars of the past whom the *ummah* accepted and recognized as righteous men of knowledge". Anwar al-Awlaki, *Inspire*, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, Fall 2010, pp.36-9.

²⁶⁹ Issued June 2014, <https://freehalab.wordpress.com/2014/08/23/fatwa-against-isis-by-the-syrian-islamic-council/>

²⁷⁰ Ibn Bayyah, *This is Not the Path to Paradise, Response to ISIS*, September 14 2014, <http://binbayyah.net/english/2014/09/24/fatwa-response-to-isis/>

²⁷¹ <http://lettertobaghdadi.com/14/english-v14.pdf>

²⁷² Muhammad Tahir al-Qadri, *Fatwa on Terrorism and Suicide Bombings*, (downloadable [here](http://www.minhajbooks.com/english/control/Download/bid/376/cid/17/Fatwa%20on%20Terrorism%20and%20Suicide%20Bombings.html), <http://www.minhajbooks.com/english/control/Download/bid/376/cid/17/Fatwa%20on%20Terrorism%20and%20Suicide%20Bombings.html>)

²⁷³ A description of this is available at <https://www.scribd.com/document/269928229/Islamic-Curriculum-on-Peace-and-Counter-Terrorism-by-Dr-Tahir-ul-Qadri>

²⁷⁴ In this respect Tahir al-Qadri's Sufistic Qadiri school that underpins the work of his organisation the *Minhaj-ul-Quran International*, condemns him in the eyes of radical thinkers.

²⁷⁵ The author of the *Counter-terrorism Curriculum* still holds that blasphemers and apostates are to be killed, as may be judged from his campaigns in that regard in his native Pakistan.

another (as a subject worthy of admiration) and relegate a third part to the zone of the ‘unthinkable.’²⁷⁶

In asking the question: “Where are the Muslims today? Rejecting, but proposing nothing”, the conference on ‘*Rethinking Islamic Reform*’ held in 2010 at Oxford University understood the current logjam and an assembly of progressive Muslim scholars and clerics attempted to loosen up the prescription for Islamic identity, arguing the case that ‘historical particularities’ were at the root of the problems. Nevertheless the ‘zone of the unthinkable’ made itself felt here too as discussions still argued that any ‘renovation’ must be drawn from currents exclusively within the heritage of Islam itself. Positions taken during the exchanges, that ‘Islam is not to be reformed, it is Muslims who are to be reformed’, or ‘we need a *tajdīd* (‘renewal’) of our understanding’ or the emphasis placed on not-to-be-reformed *thawābit* (fixed points’) such as elements of *al-aḥkām al-sultāniyya* (categories of governance and penal code), indicate the penetrative limitations of this conception of reform. The sanctity of the Text was still off-limits to evaluation, leading to the admission that

there are issues about sexual morality, homosexuality and also women’s rights that are seen as problematic. The inheritance laws in the Qur’ān are one of the few times where the Qur’ān is very explicit about who gets what. And that’s difficult.²⁷⁷

Efforts within the inherited contours to break the impasse illustrate the problem. The *Wasatiyya* trend, for instance, has simply continued the position taken by the late 19th century *Naḥḍa*. Its 1991 manifesto *The New Islamist School* sets out ‘to promote Islamic ideals within the context of contemporary global realities’, yet it fails to revisit the foundations and established tenets of Islam to do this. Instead of assessing the value and appropriateness of inherited values on the basis of universal human experience and ethical reflection, energies are focused on restricting the spectrum of thought to the scriptural universe by finding some wriggle-room *within* the Text. This is done by identifying verses which are *ẓanniyyāt al-thubūt* (with relative meaning) and *qaṭ’iyyāt al-thubūt* (with absolute meaning that cannot be open to interpretation).²⁷⁸ Since the Text itself may not be qualitatively evaluated, the aspiration to reform is transferred to the level of ‘discourse’, that is, to conditioning the interpretation of these texts.

Whether the reform of education is undertaken by the prevailing ‘reconciling’ or ‘intermediate’ school of the *Wasatiyya*, conceding only western material superiority and filtering out its philosophical and ethical infrastructure, or even the more radical approach of the Qur’ānic school of Muḥammad Maḥmūd Ṭāḥā and Ahmad Subhi Mansour, which seeks to liberate Islamic thought by jettisoning most of the ‘bedouinising’ corpus of the Sunna, or even the legalistically and militantly forthright Medīnan verses of the Qur’ān – such initiatives to date have been hamstrung by their avoidance of the pressing issue that was successfully resolved in the West. This issue is whether it is useful or wise to hand over to a religious, scriptural template sovereignty over scientific, political and legal structures, or whether to construct an independent edifice detached from the Texts but drawing from it such ethical guidance as it can yield where appropriate. The weighting is important, for as al-Sheḥāwī expressed it,

freeing oneself from the *dominion* of religion does not necessarily mean *dispensing* with it altogether – it means dispensing with its unwarranted comprehensiveness and arbitrariness.²⁷⁹

But the fact that the argumentation must be conducted with the tools of scriptural authority means that the Texts are turned into an impermeable barrier to meaningful educational reform. Under the conditions of these inherited borderlines, the room to manoeuvre is confined to ‘renewal’

²⁷⁶ Soheib Bencheikh, ‘La propagande de Daesh et le fantasme de la venue du Mahdi.’

²⁷⁷ Shaykh Yusuf Hamza, ‘Rethinking Islamic Reform’ conference, Oxford May 26, 2010, in response to *Question 3* – ‘On the compatibility of unchangeable aspects within the Islamic tradition and Western Liberal Democracies’.

²⁷⁸ Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, الأولويات في الآراء الفقهية (‘Priorities in Fiqh Opinion’) <http://qaradawi.net/>.

²⁷⁹ Abd al-Magid al-Shehawi, ‘Modernisers under the dominion of religion’, *Almuslih.org*.

using the self-same raw material. Given the amplitude and self-contradictory nature of this raw material the radical interpretation can never be disproved, either quantitatively or qualitatively. And given this impasse, a default religious and legal culture continues to dominate, so that effectively

only the archaic version of Muslim law is allowed to remain accessible to all, a version that is internally coherent and offers a global vision for things. However, its application to its associated domains spells madness.²⁸⁰

Towards a deeper dimension of educational reform

To renew the historical heritage is therefore effectively to renew the problem, since the process of renewal does not answer the requirement voiced by President Sisi to “step outside” and “reflect from a more enlightened perspective.”

What is clearly required to resolve the logjam is a more radical reassessment of the core intellectual and doctrinal structures of the Islamic heritage. Up to now, the majority, if not the entirety, of Arab Muslim intellectuals have failed to address this most important issue – the issue of a serious, but constructive critical study of the heritage in terms of its historical record – and have simply not entered into the arena of the historical development of religious and theological thought in anything other than a superficial fashion. They consequently fail to get to a point where they can target the root of the problem: anachronistic Islamic doctrines and the challenges posed by the contents of the scriptural authorities when detached from their location, in time and place, within history.

We have seen that the cradle for this dislocation has been the gravitational pull of ‘authenticity’ to a static conception of Islam’s religious heritage, and that this authenticity has latterly come to be mediated almost exclusively via the scriptural texts. The centrality of the Text, therefore, logically calls for the critical focus to be directed there. This focus has yet to be applied; to date the response to any disconnect between the Text and the implications of its application on the ground has been sidestepped by recourse to what al-Shehāwī terms a ‘giant firewall’

built up and maintained by religious authorities over the centuries: a complete division between, on the one hand, the divine and religious Text and concept and, on the other hand, their human applications and practices in reality. This means that whenever a fault or disaster in application or practice takes place there is always a safe exit route open for the holy Text in the mere re-reading, reinterpreting and re-commenting of it. In this way we endlessly orbit around the same divine sanctified Text which remains just as it has been upheld for millennia. It becomes read, commented and interpreted over and over again until we start the ball rolling right from the beginning, whenever need dictates.²⁸¹

The unchanging orbit fails to open up and examine what Mohamed Arkoun terms the *official closed corpus*, of the texts and of traditional *fiqh*. Together they erect what he observes as an entire, self-contained *dogmatic enclosure* that is comprised of “the totality of the articles of faith, representations, tenets and themes” that

allow a system of beliefs and unbeliefs to operate freely without any competing action from inside or out.²⁸²

The firewall of “discursive constraints and procedures” immunises the ingredients of this enclosure from examination or review and, through its collective authoritative weight as something uncritically called ‘the faith’, overrides and stifles all other interpretations of what Islam is, so that the corpus becomes, in itself,

²⁸⁰ Soheib Bencheikh, *Marianne et le Prophète, l’Islam dans la France Laïque*. Part III, Chapter 3 : *Le simplisme des musulmans modérés*.

²⁸¹ Abd al-Magid al-Shehawi, ‘The reform of religious discourse – fact or fiction?’, *Almuslih.org*.

²⁸² Arkoun, *Op. Cit.*, p.87.

a *tanzīl*, a revealed given that abolishes through interpretation and in experience, that is, in the course of history, the status of the corpus as analysed by historians.²⁸³

This confiscation of history is the most destructive product of this artificial *tanzīl*. To resolve the logjam the corpus is to be prized open, the exclusivity of its domain from any operation of reason or human experience denied to it, so that its system of beliefs may no longer operate freely in some compartmentalised state immune from any competing scientific or cultural challenge, and instrumentalised by jurists to erect a wall of prohibitions that must ever multiply, in a losing battle against the constantly multiplying innovations and creativity of modern life and the ethical challenges that these present. For it was these ethical challenges that the Oxford Conference diagnosed as the chief ingredient in the crisis of contemporary education:

We need real ethicists. We need people who are trained in ethical philosophy. Not just a kind of modern book on ethics or a *hadīth* that teaches some ethical truism, but [one that teaches us] to reason ethically...because if we had people reasoning ethically we would never have come up with *fatwās* that supported suicide bombing, ever.²⁸⁴

Ultimately, to unleash the intellectual and ethical creativity of the student, a reform programme must mount a challenge to the immunity of the enclosure, and this means to the very fabric of Scripture itself. An entirely new hermeneutics has to be established and taught.

The key to this reform is *educational* reform, one that penetrates far deeper for having stepped outside the closed corpus, and analysed and evaluated it from a more enlightened perspective. The task before us therefore is to create a new type of syllabus for the humanities that de-quarantines the student on the ethical, political, intellectual and cultural levels and inculcates a new conception of the legacy of Islam: a heritage that acknowledges its enrichment from, but also its signal contribution to, global modernity's interdependence of nations, cultures, philosophies and faiths, to the common weft of human achievement.

The goal is to be able to present Arab, Islamic cultural heritage in a modern, objective, dispassionate light, and make this the 'new authenticity', something that the Arab Muslim youth can appreciate with a yardstick of realism, and at the same time something for which they may express a justifiable pride. A pride, that is, in Islam's true legacy to the world, in place of a mythical, supremacist, fantasist legacy that is currently being taught as standing apart from it. A new form of syllabus, in short, that replaces illusory cures for illusory resentments with a programme that prepares the student to participate in modernity with energy and self-confidence.

²⁸³ Arkoun, *Op. Cit.*, p.82.

²⁸⁴ Shaykh Yusuf Hamza, 'Rethinking Islamic Reform' conference, in response to *Question 4* – 'On dealing with the crisis of community leadership'.

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