HIBA KHODR

Political Studies and Public Administration, American University of Beirut, Beirut, Lebanon

# Policies and Politics Surrounding Islamic Studies Programs in Higher Education Institutions in the United States

*The Perfect Storm in the War against Terrorism, Extremism, and Islamophobia*

ABSTRACT  In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the long and checkered relationship between Islam and the West entered a new phase. The sense of suspicion and denouncement that swept through the public sphere of many European countries and the United States was accompanied by major changes in governmental policies and a shift in the politics in each country that has witnessed or suffered from the repercussions of these attacks; this has been exasperated further by the rise of Islamic State (ISIS). This study uses different types of data sources and focuses on the previous academic work on establishing institutions of higher education within an existing unique context to examine the challenges that these institutions face on both the policy and political levels due to the prevailing current geopolitical climate vis-à-vis Islam. While focusing on the present and offering some insights into the future, this paper provides a base for a more comprehensive historical overview of the main policy changes by creating a timeline of key changes in the policies and mapping the significant events that have had an impact. It is designed to investigate challenges and opportunities of Islamic higher education institutions and programs from a policy perspective and within the changing political governmental agenda specifically in the United States, and it offers a preliminary analysis of the dynamics of these evolving transformations. Considering the emerging need to revisit these institutions and the more recent recurring calls to reform existing Western Islamic studies programs, this paper fills another gap in the literature by providing some recommendations.

KEYWORDS: higher education institutions, Islamic studies, education policy, politics of higher education, extremism, counterterrorism, Arab–American relations, Western world, United States, Islamophobia, 9/11

## INTRODUCTION

The past seventeen years have seen a major change in the role of Islam and higher education, one that generates questions that must be analyzed through

the lens of the changing status quo regarding Islam and Islamic ideologies in the United States. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001 (henceforth 9/11), issues relating to the present and future of programs in the field of Islamic studies and of Islamic higher education institutions (IHEIs) gradually assumed greater importance, both on university campuses and in the political and policy arenas in Western and Muslim contexts. Some have considered Islamic studies useful in examining the drivers behind terrorism and extremism and identifying challenges faced by the wide spread of Islamophobia and as an entry point to a new conception of the *sharīʿah* and to the relationship between religion and state. The presence of Islam in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Europe and the United States and the connection between Islamic movements and the perceived surge of Islamophobia have been the focus of many scholarly studies as well as of several conferences and academic meetings. However, there is a pressing need to study the effects of the political process on policy outcomes and to take account of the variety of interests and stakeholders involved. In fact, the effects of other factors such as economic, ideological, cultural, and religious factors on universities, and vice versa, have rarely been examined in a scholarly manner.

This paper presents a preliminary framework to help understand political and policy dynamics in higher education policy in general, and the changes surrounding IHEIs and Islamic studies programs in particular, in the United States in the wake of the events of 9/11 and with the rise of Islamic State (ISIS) a few years later. It highlights the complex connection between policy outcomes and the politics of higher education based on the existing literature related to the topic. Further identified are some of the challenges and opportunities associated with the establishment of such institutions and the existing institutions/programs within the changing context in which Islamic studies were pursued both from a policy perspective and within the changing political governmental agenda due to the prevailing current geopolitical climate vis-à-vis Islam. It looks at the resulting impact on teaching methods and aims, as well as content and scope, and offers a preliminary analysis of the dynamics of these evolving transformations. Finally, considering the emerging need to revisit these institutions and their Islamic studies field of study and the recurrent calls for its reform for the last decade or so, this paper fills a gap in the literature by providing some recommendations.

This study uses a qualitative approach in which different types of data sources are employed. Data are mainly derived from a careful and thorough review of major newspapers, other media outlets, and key publications. They

are analyzed using an iterative thematic content analysis, whose findings serve to illustrate some of the theoretical perspectives in the prevailing relevant literature. Using these data and focusing on the previous academic work on establishing institutions of higher education within an existing unique context, the paper addresses the following two equally important questions:

1. What are the major policy changes regarding Islamic institutions or programs post-9/11?
2. How do politics and political institutions, as well as political actors, affect the establishment of these HEIs or Islamic studies programs and dictate their roles and directions?

The long tradition of research on national politics and public policy of higher education has produced a well-developed body of literature. Numerous issues of recent years that deserve greater attention remain to be discussed as the first decade of this millennium witnessed changes in both the politics and the policies of higher education. Moreover, even though the existing literature has started to note changes in the policy process and participants post-9/11, a policy perspective with regards to Islamic education and institutions has received insufficient attention, and the dynamics of the relation between policies and politics has not been assessed in that context. This paper addresses this gap and, as such, constitutes a valuable part of the public policy and the political science researcher's repertoire.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section briefly reviews the scholarly literature on Islamic higher education, followed by an overview of its historical developments and contextual aspects. A description of the policy-making framework in terms of the process, participants, and policy determinants is followed by an examination of the political actors and institutions and the role of politics in higher education. An analysis of the relation between the policy and politics of establishing IHEIs, mainly in the United States, as well as a discussion of the main opportunities and challenges in the aftermath of 9/11 and the rise of ISIS are provided. Finally, concluding remarks, suggestions for future studies, and some preliminary recommendations are offered.

## HIGHER EDUCATION AND ITS INSTITUTIONS: ISLAMIC UNIVERSITIES AND PROGRAMS

The role of higher education in the society of knowledge is well recognized. This level of education is called upon to make a significant contribution to

achieving countries' objectives in terms of economic growth, prosperity, and social cohesion as well as regional development (Chatterton and Goddard 2000). Higher education includes universities and also a range of institutions offering higher degrees (i.e., vocational establishments, academies, and research centers).

In the Muslim world, Islamic education has been decentralized, and its practice has varied. In order to distinguish Islamic higher learning from either religious training or higher secular education, it was mainly informal for the first centuries of Islam (seventh–tenth centuries); it was formalized with the founding of the *madrasah* in the eleventh century by Nizām al-Mulk in Baghdad (Barazangi 1998). For centuries, early Islamic institutions such as the *Bayt al-Hikmah* (House of Wisdom) in Baghdad, established in the ninth century, produced great scientists and philosophers who set the parameters for the Islamic educational system. The reduction of "Islamic" education to "religious" education occurred when Islamic philosophy and pedagogy were separated and generations of mostly male religious leaders or jurists emphasized the Qurʾān as either an absolute moral code or a law instead of viewing it as a universal guide for the community. Husaini and Waqqar (1981) report that at the end of the eleventh century, science, the humanities, and the social sciences were excluded from curricula. Based on *waqf*, or charitable trust, Makdisi (1981) argues that Muslim-institutionalized education was religious, privately organized, and open to all Muslims who sought it. The state or governing powers had no control over the institution and the content of education and its methods were left to the teaching profession itself because the founder was usually a layman guided by the wishes of the professor for whom he instituted his foundation.

Later on, in response to colonial policies, the HEIs evolved in one of two ways: into traditional, privately sponsored religious schools with some Western orientation or into government-sponsored secular schools with added religion courses. The traditional form is represented in the remnants of *kuttāb* and *madrasah*. Some of these institutions, such as al-Azhar and Deoband, still grant Islamic higher degrees, but are weakened by their consideration of religious knowledge as separate from other knowledge.

When modernist elites of the early twentieth century sought reform from outside their society, they created private religious schools. Their indiscriminate adoption of Western systems, combined with nationalistic and politicized Islam, emphasized a secular morality in teaching natural and social sciences, which gradually separated Islam from its Qurʾānic base and favored

secondary literary and historical sources of religion. In the mid-twentieth century, "revivalists" assumed the preservation of Islamic principles by teaching *ʿibādāt* (rituals) and moral codes and adding courses on religion—*al-dayanah*—that took secondary place in the curriculum in the secular government-sponsored system. Very few secular universities in the Muslim world offered any such courses on Islam outside the college of Islamic law referred to as *kulliyat al-sharīʿah*.

Since the Islamic resurgence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there has been a noted emergence of IHEIs. Islamic teaching diversified further through the emergence of the international Islamic universities at the behest of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) beginning in the late 1980s (Barazangi et al. n.d.). National modern Islamic universities were created in countries such as Indonesia and South Africa with a similar profile. These institutions aim to graduate a generation of scholars, expert in Islamic ideology, and equip them with the appropriate ways to tackle the challenges facing Muslims around the world (Mourad and El Karanshawy 2013). The internationalization of higher learning education was encouraged as it became potentially an essential part of the globalization process. Shuriye (2011) contends that internationalization would improve the quality of academic standards, services, and research projects, and recommends ways to internationalize these institutions. At the same time, the existing Islamic studies programs in the United States were growing exponentially at prestigious universities across the nation, and Muslim minorities attempted to create IHEIs in the West. While many failed to replicate earlier institutions, mainly because they continued to separate religious from other academic subjects, considered by many to be secular, and insisted on using the methods of lecturing with particular perspectives and interpretations (Barazangi et al. n.d.), others have taken a different approach. The first Muslim liberal arts institutions that received regional accreditation are Zaytuna College in Berkeley, California, in 2015 and Cambridge Muslim College in the United Kingdom in 2009. Not only did both institutions see themselves as mediators between Islamic traditions and Western modernity, but also as responsible agents in the development of Muslim minorities and the wider societies within which they operate. With authentic Islam as their essential bridge-building tool, they aim to target a long list of apparent dichotomies: tradition/modernity, West/non-West, Islam/non-Islam, science/Qurʾān, liberal arts/religion (Sinclair 2016) by also providing publications, audiovisual materials, and educational programs for Muslims nationwide. Furthermore, both colleges, especially Zaytuna College, have

made considerable contributions to the global fight against violent extremism in all its forms. Through their curriculum and the active research agendas of many of their faculty, they certainly play an important role in countering terrorism, understanding Islamic radicalization and extremism, and reducing Islamophobia by studying it empirically. Hamza Yusuf Hanson, one of the three founders of Zaytuna College and a leading Islamic expert in the United States, has put significant effort in the domain of counterterrorism, confronting its organizations such as ISIS, and promoting a culture of moderation across all sectors of society, both locally and internationally. He also works closely with Sheikh Abdallah ibn Bayyah, President of the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies. The Abu Dhabi forum, launched in 2014, gathers scholars and researchers to discuss challenges and issues related to violent extremism within Muslim societies in the world and to develop effective initiatives to defeat violent extremism (Kruse 2016). Through such initiatives, and by bringing home the recommendations, Hanson has been working on developing through Zaytuna an alternative narrative and a different religious discourse that establishes not only the pure message and nature of Islam, which targets Muslim youth, but also one that could be used as a tool to combat violent extremist groups. In addition, Hatem Bazian, a co-founder and Professor of Islamic Law and Theology at Zaytuna College, focuses on deconstructing Islamophobia and the "othering" of Islam. In 2009, he founded at Berkeley the Islamophobia Research and Documentation Project, a research unit dedicated to the systematic study of othering Islam and Muslims; in 2012, he launched the *Islamophobia Studies Journal*.

Other Muslim-Americans joined this challenge by establishing Islamic schools and institutions. They adopted parallel strategies for confronting and dealing with violent extremism and engaged in the fight against Islamophobia. They include: Sheikh Muhammad Al-Ninowy, a leading Islamic scholar and founder of an Islamic university called the Madina Institute which combines modern technology with Islamic teachings; Dr. Umar Faruq Abdullah, who founded the Nawawi Foundation, a non-profit organization based in Chicago; and Drs. Abdullah and Tasneema Ghazi, founders of the IQRA' International Educational Foundation (Eraqi 2015).

In the Western world, Salleh (2013) identifies three categories of countries based on their treatment of Islamic education. The first is those countries that have a unitary and national system, national curriculum, and secular education. The second is those countries that neither control nor support Muslim education as an alternative system of education or a supplementary component of the present

system. The third includes countries that have chosen a multicultural framework that tries to accommodate immigrant and minority cultures, hence opting for a compromise to establish supplementary education based on a national curriculum and economically subsidizing such an arrangement.

Regarding Islamic studies in the United States, the field is often institutionally fragmented, contained within a number of different settings from religious studies departments to Middle Eastern studies departments. This institutional fragmentation has resulted in a difficulty to remain up to date with developments across the field and, therefore, has yet to reach a universally agreed definition of the field. The main debate centered around whether Islamic studies was a single discipline or a wider subject area, and if it should be focused on the study of texts or of people and, if both, how the two types of study should interact. Some had suggested that it should have a core of key areas and texts, but that these should be contextualized; researchers should remain conscious of how particular readings of these texts developed within specific traditions and social contexts (Suleiman and Shihadeh 2007). The need to consolidate efforts to contribute in the continuation of Islamic studies in the fields of religion, history, civilizations, and culture was voiced in many academic circles. In a 2018 conference at the American University of Beirut (AUB), Hanafi criticized the outcome of the Islamization of social science and called for the use of post-colonialism as the only suitable perspective. In his work, which focuses on analyzing Shari'a and Islamic studies curriculum in the Arab world, he discusses the need to establish a connection between the social sciences and Islamic sciences and humanities.[1] He examined the programs of Shari'a and Arab Islamic studies faculties and categorized them into Classical *Azhari*, Salafi, and *Maqasidi* school. The latter, implemented in Morocco, is similar to Shari'a studies, but open to social sciences and humanities, but with some multidisciplinarity but not interdisciplinarity. He questions whether Islamic studies could be considered as a locomotive for Islamic reform or as a microcosm replicate of what the society is.

## HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY: PROCESS AND PARTICIPANTS

Public policy is traditionally defined as "what government chooses to do, or not to do," that affects the public (Dye 1987). However, policies are certainly

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1. "Towards the Reconstruction of Islamic Studies" workshop, American University of Beirut (AUB), Lebanon, 28-29 April 2018.

not made in a vacuum as many driving factors affect national policies, some being more influential than others; higher education policy is no exception. The relationship between governance structure, state political characteristics, and higher education policy outcomes has been the focus of several scholarly works. Nicholson-Crotty and Meier (2003) find that higher education governance structures significantly affect how political forces influence higher education policy outcomes, although the direction and strength of these relationships appear mixed. In education policy, politics matters in states' decisions to support higher education as a result of its multidimensional character as both a provider of public and private goods and its diverse sources of financial support. These policies are often not insulated from state political influences, such as partisanship, political ideology, and legislative characteristics.

While the US constitution does not mention education, the influence of federalism on the governance of education establishments is uncontestable. For most of the nation's history, education policymaking was a much decentralized affair. Although the federal government exerts no direct control over universities and colleges in the United States, it remains a powerful motivator of institutional behavior through its substantial investment in both research and student financial aid (Wegner 2008). Recently, the US administration has been re-evaluating its national policies and approaches to higher education; while evolutionary rather than revolutionary, change is clearly evident. Elected government officials and their appointees increasingly are becoming directly and actively engaged in shaping educational policy; in fact, a special committee on education in the House was created. However, given evidence of higher education's commitment to address public priorities, elected leaders seem mostly inclined to respect the tradition of granting flexibility and relative autonomy and educational governance to the academic community during this period of change. Important national debates are ongoing concerning the strategic policies of higher education, which involve a wide range of stakeholders in federal and state policy communities and among higher education governing boards, faculty, and administrators, and across the business sector. The role of higher education policy is evident not only in preparing students to be economically productive but also in educating graduates to contribute as citizens to a democratic society whose wellbeing is increasingly entwined with that of other nations in a global society. Historically, institutions have played a key role in nation-building and continue to underpin a wide range of national institutions through the participation of their academic staff in numerous public bodies (Chatterton and Goddard 2000). The potential impact of

policymaking on academic freedom had been noted, as had the dangers of self-censorship and of the notion of academia as a public intellectual realm.

The major higher education issues under consideration by policymakers as well as other stakeholders include: structures of governance, funding, regulation, admissions, financial aid, and the curriculum. Given that higher education provides both public and private goods leading to public and private benefits, policymakers keep these two dimensions in mind—or consider them separately conditional on economic or political circumstances—whenever they make decisions related to spending and regulation (Bowen 1977; Merisotis 2005).

The shift in policy priorities reflects not only budget constraints but also a growing perception in states' governments that higher education must be more efficient, accountable, and instrumental in its goals (McLendon 2003). Some have explained policy processes in the area of higher education while incorporating simultaneous changes in the general policy environment (Besley and Case 2003), while others have offered a comprehensive discussion of how economic and social changes have affected US politics, policy choices, and social inequality (Bloland 1969). Bloland argues that the issue is no longer whether organizations should attempt to influence public policy but in what kinds of policy questions they should become involved. He distinguishes between "narrow" issues, affecting only higher education, and "broad" issues, affecting many groups in society. The academic associations have engaged in the process of narrow politicization in their participation in shaping educational policy.

In the United States, the key players in higher education policy include: academicians, policymakers including Congress, state government, Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) bureaucrats, and influential interest groups and lobby groups (such as the American Council on Education and the Association of American Universities), employers, campus decision-makers, and political parties. Inconsistent results relating to the direct effects of political parties in higher education policy choices are to be expected. A brief overview of the available literature on the politics of higher education shows that there is no clear pattern to the role of political parties with regard to the amount of state government expenditures. It is plausible to assume that, because higher education competes directly with other policy areas favored by Democrats (K-12 education, welfare, and healthcare), Republicans may be more supportive of higher education (McLendon 2003); others show that parties do not matter (Bailey et al. 2004; Hearn and Griswold 1994).

## HIGHER EDUCATION POLITICS: POLITICAL ACTORS AND INSTITUTIONS

By the term "politics" we mean the institutional arrangements in which government decisions are made, the processes by which such decisions are made, and the causes and consequences of the public policies that represent the sum of governmental activity (Dye 1987). Relatively little published research has examined how state political institutions and processes have affected higher education, and vice versa (McLendon 2003). It is generally believed that the federal government is much involved with higher education, but higher education is little involved with the federal government. The question of higher education's relationship to external political forces and processes in the United States is, by no means, a uniquely contemporary one. Indeed, debate about the extent to which American colleges and universities should be insulated from external political influences, especially partisan influences, has persisted throughout the history of US higher education.

More recent scholarship has shown that politics matters in higher education policy and in the states' decision to support, or not, higher education (Doyle 2007; Tandberg 2008; Weerts and Ronca 2008). Although for most politicians education is a no-win issue, Doyle (2007) describes higher education as both a salient and a politically charged issue. Contrary to earlier views of higher education as a non-partisan issue, there is an inherent political and contested nature to any decision-making in this area. Democrats are more likely to support higher education because they spend more on average on it than do Republicans (Alt and Lowry 1994), favor more redistribution (Besley and Case 2003), or are more likely to support the public provision of higher education.

Among the different barriers that higher institutions face, mainly public comprehensive institutions, political barriers are among the main ones. State and local politics have and can significantly impact higher education; this is especially true for public institutions as, in most cases, not only is the university mission defined by state legislation but also these institutions are accountable to a wide range of political constituencies including governors, state legislators, state boards of education, state and local boards of governors or trustees, and, of course, taxpayers. Thomas (1975) notes that the increase in both research and student support from the federal government was not based on, or accompanied by, a general policy. HEW officials were not doing any planning, except at the level of political survival in the short term (Thomas 1975).

Moreover, the relationship between government ideology and decisions on higher education spending is evident. Dar (2009) argues that the growing polarization of ideological preferences explains, in part, shifts in states' policy priorities, leading to a gradual privatization of public higher education. He further presents a framework to explain the dynamics of political competition in higher education policy and shows how the multidimensionality of higher education's policy space leads to shifts in ideological dimensions and, hence, instability in the relationship between political variables and policy outcomes. One example can be found in the conflicting evidence on the direction and relevance of the relationship between political factors and public higher education spending decisions. In addition, the effects of public opinion, politicians' preferences, and political institutions vary according to the context, timing, and nature of the higher education policy under evaluation (Barrilleaux et al. 2002; Besley and Case 2003; Rigby 2007).

By looking at universities and colleges as political actors, Lynch (1993) examines how marketing decisions can be affected by the political activities of citizens/consumers' groups. He uses the parallel political marketplace conceptualization to provide a framework for assessing the political and legal environment in which universities and colleges operate that allows the institution to place itself within a political system and identify and anticipate the actions and reactions of other political players.

Another issue that has led to conflict among stakeholders of higher education is that of the "politicization" of universities—in the sense of the involvement of academic organizations in political controversy. Sommer (1995) explores the political context of higher education and looks at the politicization of higher education since World War II, addresses the tensions and conflicts that trend has created, and offers reasons why institutions of higher education need and should have government aid. Encouraging the federal government to provide greater support to higher education has provoked little controversy with conflict among association members rising over broad political questions; advocates of involvement argue that overspecialization and dependence on federal aid have reduced scholars' incentive to be responsibly critical of social ills. Those resisting broad politicization contend that members of a disciplinary society do not share ideological views and politicization would compromise the association's professional status and autonomy. Associations should show their concern by enhancing their activities related to solving social problems, but they do not need to engage in overt political activity.

Regarding Islamic higher education, the role that politics has played is no less apparent. Islamic higher education has been and remains dominated by the socioeconomic and political atmosphere of the respective countries, whether in countries with strong or less influential Muslim traditions (Salleh 2013). In the West, politics appear to be dominating Islamic studies more than any other field in the same way as it had dominated the field of African American studies in the past. The scope of Islamic studies at the higher education level had traditionally been influenced by a number of factors, including state diplomacy and security interests. Actually, the growing political profile of Islamic studies, in both American and Western settings, and in Muslim contexts, is evident. Soon after 9/11, the UK government launched a major review of the teaching of Islam in colleges and universities in an effort to stamp out extremism on campuses. Suleiman and Shihadeh (2007) note the widely seen increasing politicization of Islamic studies and discuss the perception of an existing link between these studies and extremism. However, the university remains an important institution principally committed to free speech and debate and it is urged to provide discursive and physical mobility; it would contribute to reducing the opportunity for radicals within other spaces under the constraints of radicalization and counter-radicalization discourses (Brown and Saeed 2015). An Independent Commission on British Muslims and Islamophobia released a major report urging the government to bridge the gap between Muslims and the government (Bail 2015). As part of the UK counterterrorism policy (CONTEST), the Prevent Policy introduced in 2003 aimed at preventing the radicalization of people to terrorism. In 2015, it was given a statutory footing in the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act and has led HEIs, among others, to work towards ensuring their compliance with this legal duty (Qurashi 2017).

## POLICY AND POLITICS POST-9/11: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

While education in general, and higher education in particular, are about more than technological and economic progress, educational institutions affect, and are affected by, the development of the sociocultural, economic, and political contexts. Seen as both ends and tools of modernization, the importance of reforming these institutions and the increased awareness of the importance of their diversification for sociocultural and economic development were acknowledged since the time before the turn of the century (Anon 2015). These reforms presupposed

major changes in higher education and became among the top priorities on the policy agenda and in the national strategies of most European countries and the United States in the aftermath of 9/11. A policy consensus accompanied by a political will to consider these institutions and programs as vessels through which to eradicate extremism, counterterrorism and reduce Islamophobia started to form. Scholarly interest in Islamic studies mushroomed to include Middle East area studies and social sciences studies. To meet stakeholders' expectations, IHEIs and Islamic studies programs had to respond to some major challenges, some of which are common to HEIs, but more specific. These challenges are, in fact, opportunities if seriously addressed; they fall under four main categories: administrative, social, and political, as well as challenges related to international relations with special attention given to the new developments in the Arab–American relationship following the events of 9/11 and the rise of ISIS.

### Administrative Challenges

These challenges are related to the administrative function of the HEIs and include: the lack of effective branding, good strategizing for Islamic education, and common conceptualization of the field. The brand identity of these institutions has to be created and should constantly be one that uses the international exposure's image parallel to the preservation of Islamic culture as a unique identity communicated among the labor market (Mourad and El Karanshawy 2013). This would allow these institutions to compete in the new dynamic higher education market. Also, although the primary responsibility for political activities would remain with public affairs offices (including public relations, government affairs, and lobbyists), colleges and universities should not ignore the political contributions of marketing.

Some argued that the credibility of Islamic studies in the United Kingdom and the United States was decreasing among some—principally, but not exclusively—Muslim students. This might be the result of the strategy and scope of Islamic education in these institutions that have been mostly confined to Muslims and not reaching beyond ethnic–religious groups. Finally, at present, experts in the field have not reached a common conceptualization of Islamic studies in the West. There is a need to broaden the narrow definition of Islamic studies to include not only the classical religion–intellectual discipline and traditions (seeing Islamic studies as a discipline with its own methodology, core subjects, and texts—classical religious texts and religious sciences) but also to incorporate the ethnographic and sociological study of Muslim societies—the cross-disciplinary study of Islam.

## Social Challenges

One of the main challenges to overcome is the minimal and inconsistent engagement with society in which these institutions are based and the weak responsiveness to regional needs on the part of these institutions. Many of the established institutions have not been able to contribute systematically to the debate about the perceived problems or challenges of modernity (building bridges between establishments and the wider community) and conduct research on the basic problems of their societies (health issues, social welfare, environmental matters, etc.). Higher education in Muslim contexts, in general, and in non-Muslim contexts, in particular, is often criticized for being incapable either of contributing to the sociocultural and civilizational developments of society or of doing research that effectively contributes to local, regional, and national contexts and producing relevant knowledge. While the international organizations accuse universities of not helping the societies to become knowledge based and to compete at the global level, some Muslim scholars call for the creation of "authentic Islamic" educational structures that would, as they think, solve the problems of higher education.

## Political Challenges

Islamic higher education faces two main challenges in the West. These are related to their low political engagement and minimal involvement in the policymaking process, as well as their "less-than-optimal" ability to deal with the widespread Islamophobia and fear of terrorism and extremism in their home countries.

While HEIs have often taken a political function in society, serving as centers of political thought and sometimes action and training those who become members of the political elites, this has not been true for many Islamic programs in HEIs. The ability of most of these existing establishments to devise a strategy for negotiating with legislators and regulators for forming strategic alliances with external organizations, and for direct appeals to constituencies (including its own target segments), has, so far, been somewhat insignificant with few exceptions. Islam in the West and Islamophobia are subjects of vital global importance that has preoccupied policymakers and academics alike. Frank and Ortega (2013) outline the configuration of social, political, and religious processes that have given rise to new kinds of Muslim organizations. Examining these various Muslim groups and institutions that have branched off from Islamic movements, the authors outline the configuration of social, political, and religious processes that

have given rise to these organizations. They consider not only the relationship of these organizations to their "parent" movements, their connections with transnational Islamic networks, and their impact on the state, but also the presence of Islam in education and HEIs and the connection between Islamic movements, and the perceived surge of Islamophobia in both Europe and the United States. Post-9/11, Islamophobia is prevalent and many still view Muslims with suspicion (Doebler 2014). Universities, as one of the most politically active spaces in any country, are being accused of being breeding milieux for extremism (Brown and Saeed 2015). There is evidence of serious, though not necessarily widespread, prominent Islamic extremist activity in HEIs. Since 9/11, some have been accusing Islam and its institutions, especially *madrasa*s, of being terrorist establishments (Al-Azmeh and Fokas 2007). Yet, these criticisms fail to consider the diverse historical evolutions of social institutions, including those of higher education, and the way political, ideological, and economic contexts have an impact on them. These claims and generalizations are often made without sufficient evidence from the grass root level or conducting in-depth qualitative or historical research on the subject. The Islamic institutions and programs have not been working extensively on responding to these claims and criticisms. They are lessons to be learnt from the American experience of dealing with Islamic studies at universities as well as opportunities to impact policymaking regarding the issue of Islamophobia. The challenge to the Islamic programs in the West is to engage in the discourse and contribute to the academic literature on the subject matter by asking the relevant questions and conducting empirical research.

In sum, one of the most important challenges facing IHEIs and programs in the West is to create a coherent system in which stakeholders work together to develop a research agenda, a common conceptualization of the field, and a better engagement socially and politically in the countries in which they are operating.

### International Relations Challenges: Arab–Western Relations

American–Arab relations have had their ups and downs with each conflict changing them. Over the last few years, these relations have been relatively strong economically; the Arab world was the third largest exporter to the United States, and the United States is the largest importer to the Arab world at the end of 2017. Nevertheless, these strong economic relations fail to show in the international relations arena; the old ties of cheap oil and geopolitics

that have long bound the US administration to some of these countries have loosened as America's dependence on foreign oil declines and it embraces a somewhat new direction in its foreign policy. The latter was certainly affected when the covert Arab financing of terrorism and the foreign funding of extremist Islamic groups, through arming, training, or spreading ideologies, from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan was uncovered. The striking revelations made by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in March 2018, when he declared that it was the West that initially asked Saudi Arabia to spread Wahhabism to counter the then-Soviet Union, came as a big surprise to the international community. The fact remains that it was the Western powers led by Britain and the United States that encouraged the spread of the extreme form of Islam. The Saudis for decades have disbursed hundreds of billions of dollars in order to propagate Wahhabism, considered by many as an extreme form of Islam, across the globe while building hundreds of mosques, schools, libraries, and Islamic centers and recruiting young Muslims to commit to their ideology.In addition, direct donations from Muslim governments, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), to departments and centers in a burgeoning number of Western universities, considered among the top academies, in Europe and the United States had been growing. The targets of such Islamic financing, the overwhelming majority of which goes to support or create large departments and academic centers for Middle East, Islamic, or Arabic studies, are, for the most part, specific and form part of a distinct agenda. The influence that these Muslim states have over the way in which Islam and Middle East studies are taught in key Western universities cannot be denied; however, it can still offer an opportunity to provide a counter-narrative to extremist ideologies in the light of the newly discovered development mentioned above.

These events and facts, in addition to 9/11 and the rise of ISIS, have led to a significant increase in national attention on the role of the Islamic establishments in the United States, including universities and other academic institutions, in combatting terrorism and fighting extremism as well as Islamophobia. Academic research that analyzes these issues and identifies future trajectories in both theory and practice, as well as offering recommendations becomes the most important contribution that these institutions could make in the War on Terror. The dissemination of the findings of such research in scholarly conferences, governmental, and non-governmental policy communities and in media outlets makes these institutions crucial agents of change in what might

be considered to be one of the most challenging times in the history of the United States and the West.

## CONCLUSIONS

Given the prevalence of higher education among Western extremist groups, a simple assumption has been made which is that universities are a significant meeting point, trigger, or birthplace of radicalization, and as such represent a growing problem. Education remains a key instrument of political and social control and change. Among the issues discussed in the 2006 conference on teaching and research in Islamic studies is the way that the political, institutional, and funding contexts have shaped academic and teaching practices. The increase in pressure from political interest groups has led to government guidance on surveillance and extremism on campus and the dangers of academics taking public political stances, in addition to the increasing role of government in deciding what it deems valuable topics for research.

Islam and Islamophobia remain subjects of vital global importance currently preoccupying policymakers and academics alike. With over a decade since the attacks of 9/11, major changes continue to occur in public policy in the Western world; HEIs were not immune to the repercussions of these events and as a result have been affected by the resulting national and international politics that have since altered policy outcomes. Islamophobia and fear of extremism and terrorism have yet to lessen and policymakers continue to realize that long-term planning for their respective countries requires a higher education policy plan that would secure not only economic growth, social prosperity, and political stability but also the country's security against the threat of terrorism.

Today, IHEIs and Islamic studies programs in the West are at another critical juncture with respect to their sustainability and legitimacy, particularly in terms of their political engagement and community contribution. A deliberative discussion of the future of these institutions in the West—the goals they want to achieve and the policies necessary to achieve them, on the one hand, and the policymakers and higher education's perceptions and misconceptions of the workings of these institutions, on the other—is essential in such a context.

This paper has attempted to initiate the development of a better explanation for the complex relationships between political processes and policy outcomes in HEIs of an Islamic nature in the aftermath of 9/11 and the rise

of terrorist organizations such as ISIS. It identified the main challenges and opportunities that such institutions located in the West are facing with a special focus on the policies and politics surrounding them, as well as the dynamics of Arab–American relations within that particular context. These challenges are those framed by the history of these institutions and, mainly, the political and policy structures of the countries in which they are established and the new directions in foreign policy in terms of Arab–American relations. Some of these challenges require new alignments of their capacities and resources and the commitment of public policy and government resources, while others necessitate revisiting the role of these establishments in the War on Terror and extremism. They also call on these institutions to re-evaluate their role, reconceptualize their disciplines, engage locally and internationally, and, finally, form a network among them and improve their involvement with political institutions and policy communities. For Islamic studies to establish itself as a legitimate and respectable field of teaching and intellectual inquiry, a deep commitment to scholarship of the most rigorous kind in that field, and a willingness to stand up to those who would demean the field by bending to the political winds, are required. Also, strategizing Islamic higher education requires two fundamental elements: defining the nature of Islamic educational institutions, and enhancing and reforming certain aspects of the Islamic education itself while ensuring that the former is "embedded firmly within the Islamic philosophical and epistemological underpinnings reflecting by all of its deeds, from management, teaching-learning method, and research methodology" (Salleh 2013). These institutions should thrive to function most effectively as contexts for the scholarly examination and study of emerging social issues, thus helping to prepare their members for more informed participation in both the political and policymaking processes. They need to make a contribution to civil society through the extracurricular activities of the staff who are recognized as the third role—community service—alongside teaching and research. Such endeavors would culminate to create a valuable platform for a new religious discourse that promotes peace and confronts extremism.

This paper serves as a preliminary theoretical source for much needed further explanatory analysis. Although its main components may extend the literature meaningfully and contribute critical insights to policymakers and analysts concerned with the development of better policies, it is just a start of for much-needed future work on the subject. Research on the politics of Islamic higher education policy in the West may benefit from an explanatory

comparative approach, incorporating multiple case studies. Such work may not only clarify the factors motivating policy adoption but also assist in creating a conceptual policy model specific to countries with a predominantly non-Muslim context. While focusing on the present and offering some insights on the future, this paper could also be used as a base for a more comprehensive historical overview of the main policy changes by creating a timeline of key changes in the policies and mapping the significant events that have had an impact. In fact, the spring revolution across the Arab world in 2011 has yet to be explored at a deep level to discover the dynamics of the relationship between universities and wider society. IHEIs have to respond to opportunities by also developing research agendas that reflect the historical, political, or economic characteristics of the context of the region.

A careful examination of the history of HEIs reveals that such institutions were never, by any means, static institutions; they have changed and adapted to new various circumstances. This ever-changing role mandates a change in the IHEIs and programs, in both their mission and vision—a change that requires them to assume new responsibilities including addressing an array of critical challenges confronting the society locally and globally. These establishments are in a unique position to be particularly effective in building bridges between East and West, in ensuring the making of research evidence policies, and in denying space for radicalism by reducing the exposure to existing radicals and radical ideas and discourse. More work needs to be done to examine their specific role, in Muslim communities outside the Middle East, in terms of how they could facilitate and condition the subjectivity formation of modern Muslims.

The happy ending to the story is that the field of Islamic studies has a conceivable and justifiable future in the current modern Western context, achieving the educational balance between tradition and enlightenment, as is believed by the well-known Dutch education philosopher Wilna Meijer (Meijer 2009). This is in harmony with the Islamic fundamental philosophy of embracing "contemporary realities" while maintaining "authenticity." Contrary to the belief that the interaction between East and West is not beneficial to Islamic education, Islam has a place in the Western academic model, and the model could benefit from it. The lesson we learn from Islamic history and the politics of higher education is one we also need to learn in all academic fields. Perhaps a lesson well learned will strengthen our resolve to shape higher education into an even greater instrument for the improvement of international relations, the betterment and wellbeing of all

mankind, and the implementation of the preventive agenda aimed at clamping down on extremist sources in society. ■

HIBA KHODR is Associate Professor of Public Policy and Public Management, Political Studies and Public Administration, American University of Beirut. Her main research interests are focused on public policy making in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and on bridging policy and research to generate evidence-based policy in the Arab World. Email: hk39@aub.edu.lb

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