

I

Global Shifts and the Rise of Islamic Rationalism

In 1994, in the mountains of Granada, a family of Spanish converts opened a *madrashah* (Islamic school), Alqueria de Rosales, extending over 116 hectares of land. Abdus Samad (Antonio Romero), the head of the household, had taken his young wife and two children to Saudi Arabia in mid-1980s at the invitation of King Fahd to pursue Islamic education. Though formally registered as a student at Umm al-Qura University in Mecca, he acquired his actual knowledge of Islam (as he came to understand and practise it) in the *halaqahs* (study circles) led by non-Saudi shaykhs in the surroundings of Kabah as well as the Masjid-i-Nabawi. In these study circles, Samad was with a friend and fellow convert, Dr Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, an American; the two had first met in Granada in the early 1980s, when it was home to a growing community of Muslim converts. The close affiliation developed in the sixteen years spent in Saudi Arabia translates today into the hosting of a number of Islamic-knowledge retreats at Rosales. The oldest-established of these – a five-day course on al-Ghazali – is co-taught by Dr Umar and Tim Winter (Abdul Hakim Murad), another convert (an Englishman); the two had first met in Saudi Arabia. Tim Winter, himself a student then, is today an influential Islamic scholar in the United Kingdom. Connected to them is Hamza Yusuf, the president of the first Islamic liberal arts college in the United States, who today is a leading Muslim public figure in the West. Dr Umar, who credits his return to the United States in 2000 to Hamza Yusuf, had first met him during his time in Granada, where, as new converts, both were studying Islam; Granada is also where Tim Winter and Hamza Yusuf first met. Together these individuals, in their capacity as scholars or founders of important Islamic scholarly platforms in the

West, are part of a fast-expanding Islamic revival movement that is noticeable for inspiring young modern-educated Muslims in the West, but also some among their counterparts even within Muslim-majority countries, to undertake serious study of Islamic scholarly tradition.

A normal mapping of this network of scholars and institutions that they are establishing would have begun in the hills of Berkeley instead of those of Granada, simply because Hamza Yusuf, the most important nodal point in this network (as we will see throughout this volume), is based there. I have, however, chosen to introduce the key characters of this network in the order that I was first introduced to them. This is for two reasons: first, it is important to appreciate how young Muslims come to join this informal network of like-minded scholars and the institutions that they have founded through different nodal points; and second, it also helps to demonstrate how this network, while based in the West, is closely intertwined with many traditional scholarly networks in the Muslim-majority countries. It was in Damascus during the summer of 2010, when I was doing fieldwork with female Islamic study circles in Syria (Bano 2017), that I was first introduced to Rosales. Damascus, being a popular destination for the study of traditional Islamic sciences and the Arabic language, at the time hosted many Western converts. In particular, at Al-Fatih Institute, one of the two leading Islamic education foundations in Damascus, to which I was linked, connections with the Spanish Muslim community were strong. It was there that a young British undergraduate of South Asian origin, based in Damascus for a year-long intensive Arabic-language course, first brought Rosales to my attention. She talked about its effort to revive the Andalusian Islamic scholarly tradition, with its focus on rationalist and mystical scholarship in Islam that had produced figures such as Ibn Arabi and Ibn Rushd. I made a note to visit this institution. It was, however, only in the summer of 2012 that I finally managed to make my first visit.

My arrival at Rosales coincided with that of Dr Umar, who, though based in Chicago, commits to spending time at Rosales each summer. During this time he takes part in retreats and since 2014 he has in fact initiated a new week-long annual retreat programme, named *Zawiyah*, that he himself plans and leads, but chooses to host at Rosales.¹ Repeat

¹ The *Zawiyah* retreat takes the form of a week-long series of lectures organised around a specific theme: the 2017 retreat, for example, focused on *al-fitra* (our primordial nature). Dr Umar personally develops the curriculum for each *Zawiyah* retreat. This retreat is unlike the other examples that we will discuss in the next chapter: rather than repeating the

visitors to Rosales, however, get to appreciate that he is more accessible in the days that he spends there outside of these retreats, when he has more free time. During these days, he makes a special effort to prepare and deliver lectures in Spanish to cater to the local Spanish Muslim community – a commitment that he takes very seriously.² My arrival outside of the formal retreat days thus allowed for in-depth discussions with Dr Umar. However, I came to appreciate the real significance of this network when I returned in August of the same year to take part in the annual al-Ghazali retreat, which is the longest-running retreat at Rosales. More than seventy young Muslims, many of whom are graduates of (or current students of) leading Western universities, or upwardly mobile professionals, were among the participants; some also came from Muslim-majority countries.³ These were confident young Muslims: confident of their religious identity, but also actively engaged with modern everyday institutions. Those whom I interviewed appreciated the calm surroundings offered by Rosales, which allowed for reflection and introspection; they took an active interest in the lectures, and most were very respectful of the scholars. Some of them had in the past also attended the Rihla programme – a three-week Islamic education retreat initiated by Hamza Yusuf under the Deen Intensive Foundation (see Chapter 2), at which Tim Winter and Dr Umar also teach.

The participants at the retreat thus had heard these scholars speak on many similar platforms; however, it took me more than three years and fieldwork across multiple sites in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, and in Muslim-majority countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, to recognise the full expanse of this network and to appreciate that there is a deeper coherence to their approach. Though entirely independent of each other, these scholars and institutions are consciously coordinating their efforts to revive what they view as the authentic Islamic scholarly tradition: an understanding of Islam that

same programme each year, it aims to attract back the same students who have attended previous retreats by focusing on a new topic each year. This is a deliberate strategy to encourage the students to dwell deeper on specific themes each year. The focus of the first Zawiyah retreat was on Hadith Jibril, which, as we will see in Chapter 2, is central to the teaching of scholars within this Islamic rationalist network.

² It arises primarily out of a sense of obligation to support recent converts, but it also stems from the desire to increase Islamic teaching resources in the Spanish language in order to facilitate learning among Muslim populations in Latin America.

³ In the 2012 retreat, for example, there were participants from Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia.

combines close adherence to classical Islamic legal scholarship as represented by the four Sunni classical schools of Islamic law (*madhhabs*), and appreciation of the strong rationalist foundation of Islamic theology, while also retaining a heavy emphasis on moral and spiritual training in search of deeper mysticism (*tasawwuf*). In defending this concept of Islam, these scholars are keen to link back to the work of classical Islamic scholars; the twelfth-century mystic and jurist Muhammad al-Ghazali features prominently in this list. It is due to this three-fold focus that these scholars are often labelled as traditionalists, or revivers of traditional Islam (Mathiesen 2013). I, however, argue that this label is inadequate to explain the essence of their appeal to young educated Muslims. My first reservation is that all Islamic groups, irrespective of their approach or method, claim to represent traditional Islam, because of the implicit association between the word ‘traditional’ and authentic practice.⁴ My other reservation is that in Western media and policy reports on Islamic institutions, the word ‘traditional’ is often used interchangeably with ‘conservative’ or ‘orthodox’ Islam, which is understood to be irrelevant to modern realities. Such conceptions of traditional Islam run counter to the rationalist and mystical dimensions of Islam and its inbuilt ability to relate to changing times that these scholars are keen to highlight. I, on the other hand, argue for recognising the importance of this network in reviving *Islamic rationalism*, which in my view makes the distinctive contribution of this network most apparent, as will be illustrated in this volume.⁵ The scholars in this network indeed claim to present traditional Islam, but what makes them distinctive is their effort to establish that in historical terms Islam presented a balance that could both appeal to the rationalist mind and also nurture the inner spiritual life, and it is this balance that enables Islam to stay relevant and responsive to the needs of the changing times.

Scholarship on Islam in the West to date remains largely focused on mapping the expansion of Islamic schooling networks, or Sufi *tariqahs* (Sufi orders), from the Muslim-majority countries to the diaspora communities in the West (Gilliat-Ray 2010; van Bruinessen and Allievi 2011).

⁴ Mathiesen (2013) notes that the term ‘traditional Islam’ does not actually exist in Arabic. In self-appropriating this label, the Islamic rationalist scholars and those who have chosen to label them as such have tried to establish their claim to historical authenticity.

⁵ In order to fully grasp this argument, it is, however, important to appreciate how Islamic rationalism differs from the more restricted notions of human rationality associated with Western philosophical tradition (Walbridge 2011) – a subject that we will discuss in detail in the next chapter.

Existing studies have thus focused on the practice of hiring imams for the American, British, or European mosques from among the graduates of Islamic universities or madrasahs in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, South Asia, or North Africa (Gilliat-Ray 2010; van Bruinessen and Allievi 2011). Scholars have, however, failed to recognise that a major shift in power dynamics between Islamic institutions in the Muslim-majority countries and those emerging in the West is under way (Bano 2018a; 2018b).⁶ The Muslim-diaspora communities in the West are no longer mere recipients of Islamic knowledge. They are increasingly becoming a base for the emergence of powerful Islamic scholarly networks. Scholars within these networks do indeed continue to seek their training from specialists in the Muslim-majority countries, but on return relate these teachings to the demands of modern realities in ways that are making their teachings more effective in encouraging young, educated, and socially liberal Muslims to fully embrace Islam. These scholars are not only attracting young Muslim university students and young professionals in the West; they have also begun, as we will see in Part II of this book, to attract the attention of young Muslims from affluent and culturally liberal families within Muslim-majority countries.

It is important to note that the network of scholars under study is not the only one attracting young educated Muslims in the West; as we will see in Section 2 of this chapter, many other parallel networks are emerging where scholars in the West are relating Islam to modern reality in ways that are proving more effective in enabling young Muslims to appreciate Islam and adhere to its moral dictates than has been possible for the mosque-based imams recruited from overseas. However, this network is particularly noteworthy because of the profile of its followers: these scholars are appealing to educated and culturally liberal young Muslims from affluent families. These Muslims, due either to their affluent family background or to their education in prestigious universities, acquire a degree of social capital that makes them particularly well placed to influence socio-economic and political institutions among Muslims in diaspora communities and within the Muslim-majority countries. These are the young Muslims who are able to influence societal institutions in the light of their convictions. However, due to it being well integrated in the modern socio-economic and political institutions that are largely

⁶ Even studies that are focused on the new Islamic scholarly platforms emerging in the West (Grewal 2013; Korb 2013) do not fully explore their relationship with the older Islamic-authority platforms.

shaped by the Western secular framework, this is also the population that is at risk of moving away from Islam; or at least it lacks the conviction that Islam can provide a legal or moral framework for the modern world. These are the young Muslims who fail to relate to the highly conservative and rigid readings of Islam often promoted by the mosque imams in their neighbourhood; they are also embarrassed and perturbed by the violence promoted by extremists in the name of this religion.

This book is the first in-depth study of this network of scholars, whose individual members (in particular Hamza Yusuf and Tim Winter) are often profiled or interviewed in the Western media and consulted by Western governments, and who themselves increasingly act as spokespersons for Muslims. Their existence as a collective or as a community, their understanding of Islam, and the critical implications of their work for shaping the future of Islamic scholarly debates have, however, as yet remained unexamined. Existing studies of Islam in the West have begun to note the individual impact of some of these scholars, but they fail to connect the dots and recognise the links between them, and to see them as a movement. Scott Kugle's (2006) work is one exception, but he does not map this specific network; instead, concerned mainly with establishing Hamza Yusuf's role in introducing Ahmad Zarruq, a fifteenth-century Sufi-jurist, to young North American Muslims, he presents Hamza Yusuf as part of a loose network of Sufi-jurists who are gaining prominence in American Islam. Most importantly, existing studies of these scholars, even when cognisant of their growing influence, do not situate their methodological, theological, or philosophical approach within traditional Islamic scholarship. Consequently, many end up dismissing these scholars as representing a soft Islam (a 'pop Islam', appealing to young Westernised Muslims, which lacks scholarly rigour and depth, just as is often the case with the growing number of Sufi platforms in the West, which are attracted to Sufi's message of love but have little knowledge or appreciation of the Islamic legal dictates or ritual practices). This limited engagement with the actual methodological approach of these scholars has resulted in a failure to recognise that this network is emerging as an important Islamic revival movement in the twenty-first century that is helping young educated Muslims, especially from affluent families, to appreciate the creative spirit within Islam, and that it thereby has great potential to bridge the assumed gap between Islam and modern reality.

This book presents a rare in-depth account of this contemporary Islamic revival movement. Such an effort also provides a fascinating opportunity to map the intergenerational shifts in the attitudes of young

Muslims in the West as well as among some of their counterparts in the Muslim-majority countries, who are keen to discover both the intellectual and the deeper mystical dimensions of Islam. A study of this movement thus also directly relates to a broader conceptual concern in social science: namely the relationship between knowledge creation and societal conditions (Nonaka 1994; Nonaka and Toyama 2003; Ober 2008). The conceptual concerns addressed through a study of this network and its followers help us to address ongoing debates within social science about how texts acquire meaning. Are texts static, or do scholars and students bring their own experiences to their interpretation? How is a certain form of knowledge kept dynamic and responsive to the changing needs of society? What role, if any, does financial affluence within a society and that of the scholarly classes play in ensuring creativity within any field of knowledge?

Despite extensive research on Muslim societies since the events of 11 September 2001, the dominant narrative led by the media, Western think tanks, and policy documents often attributes Islamic radicalisation to Islamic texts; Islam is perceived and presented as a religion that is inherently violent and anti-modernity, whose foundational text, the Quran, makes numerous explicit references to jihad, denies women basic freedoms, and endorses dictatorial over democratic regimes.⁷ A close study of this Islamic revival movement, however, helps to expose the limits of such assertions: it shows that a society with material affluence, political freedoms, and easy access to higher education is key to the revival of rationalist and philosophical strands of Islamic scholarship which were central to classical Islamic scholarly tradition but underwent a major decline during the colonial period in all Muslim societies (Robinson 2003; Saliba 2011; Bano 2017). There is a close association between societal conditions and textual interpretations. Further, a key conclusion of this book is that the engagement of the social elite with a scholarly tradition is critical to the flourishing of knowledge and creativity within that tradition. In this volume, the term ‘elites’⁸ is used loosely not only to refer to hereditary elites but to point towards those individuals who exert influence on social, economic, and political institutions because

⁷ The Islamic emphasis on jihad can mean many things, including working to purify one’s inner self (Malik 2006), but many of the Quranic references to jihad also explicitly refer to armed struggle.

⁸ This interpretation is close to how Oxford dictionary defines the term, ‘A group or class of people seen as having the greatest power and influence within a society,’ accessed 15 December 2017, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/us/elite>.

they hold government office, or lead major financial institutions, or lead prominent cultural, artistic, or literary platforms that influence societal attitudes, or because they control print and electronic media. This is so because for a field of knowledge to remain dynamic it is important that the state and society make demands on the scholars to provide answers to the challenges at hand; it is also equally important that a knowledge base continues to receive adequate financial patronage for it to be able to attract the best minds. (See Section 3 of this chapter for the conceptual foundation of these arguments.)

How societal conditions shape knowledge formation and transmission is an area of active research inquiry in different fields of social science (Nonaka 1994; Ober 2008), including the sociology of education; this association is, however, routinely ignored by Western policy makers and media outlets, many of whom attribute Islamic militancy or radicalisation to Islamic texts. In my book, *Female Islamic Education Movements: The Re-democratisation of Islamic Knowledge* (2017), I presented a detailed conceptual framework to illustrate how the societal conditions which ensured that the state elites as well as ordinary members of the public engaged with the study of Islamic texts were key to creating the Golden Age of Islam; I also argued that creating incentives for Muslim elites to engage with Islamic texts is key to reviving the intellectual spirit within Islam in modern times. In developing this framework, I drew on the work of a classicist, Josiah Ober, who in a bid to explain the success of democracy in classical Athens emphasised the need to mix different forms of knowledge in a society for it to find optimal solutions to collective societal challenges (Ober 2008). His primary concern was to establish the importance of non-technical knowledge, which he refers to as dispersed knowledge held by the people, instead of merely drawing on the knowledge of the experts in finding optimal answers to collective societal challenges. Equally, he established the importance of having incentives in society to encourage people to engage with a given knowledge base, in order for them to invest in this mixing of knowledge. Simply put, this argument is very close to Tariq Ramadan's view that to make Islamic *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) relevant to modern reality, we need not just the scholars of text but also scholars of the context, as only then can socially relevant answers be found from within the Islamic framework (Ramadan 2009).

In *Female Islamic Education Movements*, I advanced a similar argument. Drawing on historical accounts of Islamic knowledge transmission, I traced how, in early Muslim societies, Islamic knowledge was always

socially embedded; the fact that Muslims had political authority meant that Islamic law and moral code were the dominant framework. Consequently, it was not only the scholars of the text but also scholars of other sciences, and lay members of the public, who contributed to the evolution of both rationalist and transmitted sciences in Muslim societies, as the state and the society provided incentives for everyone to innovate in all fields, while at the same time respecting an Islamic frame of reference. This balance was, however, entirely disrupted during the period of colonial rule. Colonial rule replaced Islamic knowledge platforms with Western schools and colleges and replaced *shari'ah* (Islamic law) with common law, thus eroding incentives within Muslim societies to innovate within the Islamic framework. This led to the isolation of Islamic knowledge and the division of knowledge into Islamic and Western sciences, a division which historically did not exist.⁹ Islamic educational platforms became marginalised, and Islamic law became largely irrelevant to the shaping of political and economic institutions; consequently, the state and society also stopped making demands on the Islamic scholarly classes to find answers to the demands of the time from within the Islamic moral and legal framework. The most significant damage to Islamic knowledge-transmission practices occurred as a result of the exit of the Muslim elites from the Islamic scholarly platforms. Islamic education and its scholars became more and more inward looking, losing the creativity and intellectual energy that were evident in earlier Muslim societies.

I concluded in that book that any intellectual revival in Islam requires a reversal of this colonial legacy and the creation of incentives within Muslim societies for all segments of society, especially the elites, to re-engage with the study of Islamic texts; and that it further requires the creation of incentives within society to apply the Islamic moral and ethical framework to modern challenges. I then moved on to demonstrate how female Islamic education movements that have emerged across the Muslim world since the 1970s are important for precisely this reason:

⁹ Islam encourages the pursuit of knowledge and does not make any distinction between Islamic and secular knowledge. Thus, classical Islamic scholarship contributed to fields such as mathematics, medicine, and astronomy, which today are regarded as modern or Western subjects (Hodgson 1977a). For the religiously oriented, the Islamic sciences indeed had a more special status, but that did not mean neglect of the modern or rationalist sciences (Robinson 2001); in fact, as we will see in the next chapter, while Hellenist philosophical influences on Islamic scholarship did peter out by the end of the twelfth century, the rational mode of reasoning and argumentation became a cornerstone of all Islamic sciences (Walbridge 2011).

many of them are motivating educated, modern, and culturally progressive women from elite Muslim families to study Islamic texts. These women bring their contextual knowledge to the study of Islamic sciences and in the process create incentives for the scholars to demonstrate Islam's ability to provide answers to the demands of the time. The evidence presented in this book sustains the same framework. However, in this book I do not try to present the entire framework in detail again (readers are strongly encouraged to read chapter 2 in *Female Islamic Education Movements*, to understand the underlying assumptions that such a framework makes about human decision-making and processes of institutional persistence and change); here, instead, I focus on going deeper to explore three specific aspects of the broader framework developed therein: first, the importance of different forms of knowledge; second, the importance of engagement by societal elites in the creation and use of knowledge if a knowledge base is to remain creative¹⁰ and dynamic; and, third, the relationship between societal conditions and knowledge creation. Existing debates in the social sciences about these important questions must be discussed in detail in order to understand the significance of this movement as I see it; before that, however, we need to define the core members of this network in some detail.

I CONNECTING THE DOTS: A MOVEMENT IN THE MAKING

Social movements remain a critical area of research in social theory because of their transformative potential. Movements work to bring change to the existing societal order, but this change is not always aimed at creating a new system; in fact, religious movements often work to revive what their members maintain was the authentic tradition but which has been lost in the modern world.¹¹ Thus, religious movements can often

¹⁰ Some anthropologists working on Muslim societies have argued that this emphasis on highlighting the creativity within the Islamic tradition reflects a bias in favour of the Western liberal framework; in their argument, creativity can equate to deception, because it requires Islamic scholars to find ways to shape the tradition to fit the Western liberal framework – see Agrama (2012) and my critique of his work (Bano 2018a). In this book, we will see how for the scholars leading this Islamic rationalist movement, as well as the young Muslims who follow them, Islam's historic ability to be creative and responsive to the changing needs of the time is central to its appeal.

¹¹ Within sociological theory, scholarship on religion and social movements has been primarily focused on analysing how religion often acts as a powerful resource (see Burns and Kniss 2013). But, if we interpret social movements as consisting of loosely connected platforms that work together towards achieving a shared goal (Killian