1 Understanding Knowledge Creation: A Re-Reading of Female Islamic Education Movements

In August 2010, when I was engaged in fieldwork, women were in regular attendance at the famous Umayyad Mosque, located in bustling Souk Hamidiyah in the heart of old Damascus. One of the foundational mosques in the Muslim world, whose foundations were laid in the very first century of Islam (706),[1] the mosque had a dedicated prayer area for women. This was, however, not the only mosque with a growing female presence; in most mosques in Damascus, whether located in the rich or poor neighbourhoods, increasing numbers of women had been evident in the previous decade; some mosques also hosted female *halaqas* (study circles). The Lala Basha Mosque, located in the affluent Shari' Baghdad (a main road in central Damascus), was a good example of the growing demand for mosque attendance and pursuit of Islamic learning among women in Syria. In the last '*ashra* (the final ten days)[2] of Ramadan, the large turnout of women for the *'Isha'* (night prayer) made it difficult for attendees to secure a spot inside the prayer hall, a fact which obliged some women, as well as men, to pray in the street outside. Other prominent mosques, such as the Kuwaiti Mosque and Abu-Nour Mosque, experienced a similar demand for separate prayer sections for women, and some held regular weekly halaqas. This growing female participation in mosques was in addition to the home-based study circles which continue to some extent even in today's troubled Syria; increased state restrictions on gatherings at mosques since the 2011 uprisings have, however, severely curtailed the mosque-based activities in cities under the control of the regime (Pierret 2012), while in the rebel-held areas, most notably

[1] The Umayyad Mosque remains an important Islamic landmark in Syrian imagination. During my fieldwork, the Ministry of Awqaf had organised a major event in the courtyard of the mosque to celebrate what it called the four 'foundational mosques' in Islam. Masjid-i-Nabwi in Medina, Masjid-i-Aqsa in Jerusalem, and the Grand Cordoba Mosque were the other three mosques. For a brief introduction to its period of construction and Islamic architectural style, see Yalman (2000).

[2] The last 'ashra is viewed to be particularly auspicious because of the promise of *Layla-tul-qadr* (Night of Destiny), which can fall on any odd night in the last ten days of Ramadan.

Aleppo, mosques have been a major casualty of the ongoing conflict[3] (Reuters 2015). The home-based study circles were most noticeably associated with *Qubaysiat* – a movement which in the last three decades has played a major role in creating demand for the study of Islamic texts among women from affluent families in Syria.

Women were known to be actively involved in the transmission of Islamic knowledge in Damascus in the early periods of Islam (Nadwi 2007). The trend gradually declined from the ninth to eleventh centuries, and subsequently revived between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries, after which it largely disappeared.[4] Since the 1970s, this tradition has seen a revival, and a growing number of girls and women of all ages are joining the mosque-based or home-based study circles to gain knowledge of Islamic texts. There is little evidence to suggest that Syrian women have taken an active part in the armed rebel resistance that has gripped the country since early 2011.[5] Sources, however, confirm that these female Islamic study groups, especially those meeting in private homes, such as Qubaysiat, have continued to convene during the resistance, even though the government has restricted the mosque gatherings for men and women alike.

In the Indian subcontinent, over 3,385 km away, (unlike Syria) there is no recorded evidence of women ever being actively involved in teaching Islamic texts in the earlier period of Islam's emergence in the region (Nadwi 2007),[6] even though a vibrant madrasa tradition for the training of '*ulama* (Islamic religious scholars) evolved from the twelfth century

[3] Since some of the initial protests in 2011 against the Assad regime had taken place in the mosques or after Friday prayers, Pierret (2012) documents how this led the state to clamp down on mosque-based activities. However, in the rebel-held cities, mosques have remained central to the resistance; both the Assad regime and the Russian military have accused Syrian rebels and ISIS (the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) of using mosques to hide ammunition and to plan attacks (Reuters 2015). The most widely condemned destruction has been that of Aleppo's Umayyad Mosque, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and its famous minaret; the rebels blamed the destruction on the regime's aerial bombing, while the government in turn blamed the rebels (Diplomatie 2013; Martinez and Alkhshali 2013).

[4] Nadwi is primarily concerned with tracing the involvement of women in the transmission of hadith scholarship. He finds names of women teachers and women students in the records of major centres of hadith scholarship in Damascus during this period. Popular venues for such learning and teaching activities included Al-Madrasah Al-'Umariyyah, Umayyad Mosque, Jami'a Al-Muzaffari, and other mosques, gardens, and private schools (Nadwi 2007: 267). From the sixteenth century onwards, however, women's participation in these educational platforms steadily declined.

[5] Fears of sexual assaults in state custody have limited women's participation in armed resistance; many have, however, been able to support the rebels by providing humanitarian assistance (Fotini 2013).

[6] Nadwi (2007) records that only a few female hadith scholars emerged in South Asia, and only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

(Malik 2008; Bano 2012a). Today, however, there is a continually expanding demand among women for formal study of Islamic texts. Islam gained a hold in the subcontinent in the twelfth century,[7] i.e. five centuries after it arrived in present-day Syria. Although few mosques in the Indian subcontinent, especially those in the regions that became part of Pakistan, have dedicated prayer areas for women that are as accommodating as those in their counterparts in the Syrian cities of Damascus or Aleppo, today a larger proportion of women than ever before are accessing madrasas, which normally evolve as an extension of a mosque, for the study of Islamic texts. Traditionally, women in this region gained knowledge of Islam by learning to recite the Quran at home under the supervision of older family members or of respected elderly women in the neighbourhood; some families went further and engaged a trained '*alim* (Islamic scholar) from a neighbourhood mosque or madrasa to provide home tuition. Today, a growing number of women are enrolling in female madrasas, which emerged only in the 1970s.

These madrasas offer students boarding facilities and a formal four-year degree programme covering Islamic subjects, thereby constituting an even more formal education system than that offered in the mosque- or home-based female halaqas in Damascus or Aleppo. Twenty per cent of registered madrasas in Pakistan today cater for female students (Bano 2012a: 125–54). Further, like Qubaysiat in Syria, there is also an informal movement promoting the textual study of Islam among women of all ages, which has made major progress among educated women from affluent families in Pakistan. Known as *Al-Huda*, this movement is distinct from the older tradition of hosting home-based *dars* (sermons) by women for women, which does also continue.[8]

In West Africa, in the most populous and Muslim-majority northern Nigerian state of Kano, where initial contact with Islam developed in the eighth century[9] and was consolidated in the nineteenth century after the Jihad of Usman dan Fodio, female Islamic scholarship did flourish during the reign of dan Fodio family but petered out soon after[10]. Today,

[7] Islam's initial contact with the Indian sub-continent is recorded as early as the seventh century. A visible Muslim community, which emerged within Syria in the very first century of Islam (Berkey 2002), however, developed only gradually from the twelfth century onwards with the establishment of successive Islamic empires, starting with the Delhi Sultanate (1173–1351) and culminating in the rule of the Mughal Empire (1526–1858) (Malik 2008).

[8] For a comparative account of some of the home-based Islamic study groups in Pakistan, see Ahmad (2009).

[9] The spread of Islam in West Africa took longer than in the other two regions; even when local rulers converted, many retained pagan beliefs and practices (Hill 2009).

[10] A Fulani Islamic scholar who led a jihad against the Muslim leaders of Hausa city states for following pagan practices, Usman dan Fodio ended up establishing the Sokoto

however, a similar rise in demand for the pursuit of formal Islamic education for women is evident in northern Nigeria as in the other two contexts. The most pronounced expression of this demand takes the form of *Islamiyya* schools. These schools present a complex landscape of education provision; some operate in the morning, others in the evening or at night, and others operate multiple shifts (Bano 2008). Among them they cater for women of all ages. The Islamiyya school model of Islamic education in northern Nigeria emerged as early as the 1950s.[11] In the first two decades (the 1960s and 1970s), there were, however, only a few such schools, and they were targeted primarily at men. These schools were different from traditional Islamic learning platforms in Kano, popularly known as *Tsangaya* and *Ilmi* schools,[12] and they offered an integrated education model which combined modern education with study of the Quran and acquisition of basic Islamic knowledge (Bano 2008). From the 1970s onwards, however, these Islamiyya schools also began to attract female students. Today these schools have a higher ratio of female students: on average between 55 and 60 per cent of the student population in the mixed Islamiyya schools in Kano is estimated to be female (ESSPIN 2011; Antoninis 2014).

There are in addition many Islamiyya schools catering exclusively for young or married women of all ages from a range of socio-economic classes. Hajiya Fatima Tasallah Nabilisi, a prominent female preacher in Kano, runs one such statewide network of Islamiyya schools, targeted primarily at married women of all ages.[13] Further, the education in these schools never stops; enrolled students often view themselves as students for life and not for a specified period of time. At the same time, as in the case of the other two countries, even in northern Nigeria there is also

Empire, which covered northern Nigeria, northern Cameroon, and parts of Niger, and is referenced by northern Nigerian Muslims with great pride. As we will see in Chapter 2, women from dan Fodio family were very active in scholarly pursuits. For a detailed analysis of the rise and fall of the Sokoto Empire, see Last (1967); for the life and times of Usman dan Fodio, see Shagari (1978) and Hiskett (1994).

[11] Interviews in the schools, with Islamic scholars from the two main Sufi *tariqas* (orders) in Kano, Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya, as well as those from the more puritanical movement, *Izala*, and with officials within the Ministry of Education, verify the foundation dates of the oldest Islamiyya schools in Kano. Umar (2001) similarly identifies the 1970s as being important for the emergence of new Islamic schooling platforms in Kano.

[12] Tsangaya schools provide Quranic education to boys mainly between the ages of 5 and 20; Ilmi schools are normally organised around a senior *malam* (Islamic scholar) who is a specialist in a specific Islamic text.

[13] In northern Nigeria, many girls still get married when they are only 14 or 15 years old. Government regulations do not encourage married girls to join government schools, a fact which makes Islamiyya schools a popular choice within this group. Consequently, Islamiyya schools for married women often have a student population ranging from teenage girls to women in their seventies or eighties.

a more elite-based Muslim women's movement named FOMWAN (Federation of Muslim Women's Association in Nigeria);[14] today broader in its scope than its counterparts in the other two countries, the movement's origin is linked to the growing demand for Islamic education among Muslim women in the north.[15]

These three locations, which represent three distinct regions of the Muslim world, have been my field sites since 2008 or earlier.[16] They are, however, not the only sites to have witnessed the emergence and steady expansion of this demand for the formal study of Islamic texts among Muslim women, starting from the 1970s. A similar phenomenon is observable in most Muslim-majority countries, as well as among Muslim diaspora communities in the West (Bano and Kalmbach 2012). From Indonesia to Morocco, and from Muslim diaspora communities in the United States to South Africa, a similar trend in supply and demand for the formal study of Islamic texts, in the form of both formal certified courses and informal study circles, is visible and is on the rise (Bano and Kalmbach 2012). Further, there is no evidence to suggest that the emergence of this phenomenon at one site was triggered by awareness of a similar phenomenon at another site. The women joining halaqas in mosques in Syria whom I interviewed did not know of female madrasas in Pakistan, and vice versa – just as neither of the two groups was aware of the Islamiyya schools in Kano, or they about them.

Other studies show a similar lack of mutual awareness among groups in the other countries (Bano and Kalmbach 2012). The fact that a similar phenomenon emerged at the same time across different sites, without any mutual awareness then or now, makes the emergence and growth of these movements a fascinating topic of research inquiry for social scientists for a number of reasons: one, they have emerged across the different contexts at the same time, mainly the 1970s; two, the rate of expansion has been fast, and the trend is continuing; three, in most contexts, despite their organisational or doctrinal differences, most of these movements follow what is normally categorised as orthodox Sunni scholarship, with due respect for key texts produced by the four Sunni *madhhabs* (schools of

[14] The FOMWAN's stated mission is to 'propagate the religion of Islam in Nigeria through da'awah, establishment of educational institutions and other outreach activities' (FOMWAN 2015a).

[15] Its current area of activity is more diverse than that of Qubaysiat and Al-Huda, as its members are now involved in many development projects funded by government or development agencies. As we will see in Chapter 3, the emphasis on the study of Islamic texts and modes of engagement with those texts is very similar across the three groups.

[16] In Pakistan, my initial interviews in female madrasas started as early as 2006 as part of the fieldwork that I conducted for *The Rational Believer* (Bano 2012a) – an ethnography of the overall madrasa network in Pakistan.

Islamic law), as opposed to heeding the modernists' call for independent interpretation of the Quranic verses.[17]

Why a similar phenomenon, namely, demand for formal study of Islamic texts among Muslim women, has emerged across different Muslim societies and Muslim diaspora communities in the West at the same time and why this demand has apparently tilted in favour of respecting and reviving the orthodox Sunni scholarship, rather than adopting the reformist reading of Islamic texts, are critical questions that need to be addressed in order to understand the real implications of these movements for the shaping of Muslim societies. At a deeper level, such a focus acts as a lens to understand the broader institutional mechanisms that have facilitated the emergence and expansion of Islamic revival and reform movements since the 1970s. The emergence of these female Islamic study groups since the 1970s, and their preference for a scripturalist reading of Islam, becomes particularly noteworthy when seen in the context of major cultural transformations that are simultaneously underway in Muslim societies as a result of accelerated processes of globalisation.[18]

In most Muslim societies, inclusive of the three contexts under study, steady growth in access to television and cable network, increased media connectivity through the Internet, and the rolling out of gender-empowerment programmes supported by the state and funded by Western aid programmes have put religiously inspired gender norms under pressure (Larkin 2008; World Bank 2010; Bano 2012a). An increasing number of Muslim women today are accessing modern education (UNDP 2014); the male-to-female ratio in university enrolment has already been narrowed in many Muslim countries (Klugman et al. 2014; BBC 2015); and, a higher percentage of women are securing employment outside the restricted list of sectors, such as teaching,

[17] The term 'orthodox' is normally used to indicate groups that adopt a literal interpretation of Islamic texts, while modernist approaches are argued to support more context-bound interpretations, thereby allowing more flexibility in making Islamic dictates adjust to the needs of modern times. This volume finds such a distinction superficial, as even orthodox groups recognise the difference between fixed and changeable rulings in Islam, and some are more literalist than others. The main difference between the two positions is argued to rest in their treatment of the scholarship produced by the four madhhabs. The orthodox approach places this body of shari'a at the heart of the interpretative process; the modernists are often dismissive of it. The core features of the two approaches and their implications for how Islamic law and moral teaching is related to contemporary life will become clear in Chapter 3.

[18] This cultural transformation has not been confined to the last three decades, but was part and parcel of Western colonial rule. For an engaging account of how colonial rule, among other changes, also influenced the cultural sensibilities of the educated Muslims, especially the elites, see Rogan (2011).

traditionally viewed as suitable for them (Kelly and Breslin 2010; World Bank 2010; GoP 2012). Women are increasingly visible across the different spheres of economic activity, as well as in the media, and some also enter the political arena. Recent studies also document changing household dynamics and an increasingly assertive role assumed by women in household decision-making among younger couples in Muslim societies (Kelly and Breslin 2010; World Bank 2010; Klugman et al. 2014).

Seen through the lens of modernisation theory, which predicts a decline in religious adherence with the onset of modernity,[19] this relaxation in gender norms within contemporary Muslim societies, which allows for increased socio-economic mobility and opportunities for political engagement for women, is understandable. The broader societal shifts would be expected to reduce religious adherence, especially if the prevalent religion, as is the case with Islam, is seen to be inherently restrictive of female agency (Mernissi 1991, 1992; Ahmed 1992). Further, those who retain the faith would be expected to demand a reinterpretation of particularly restrictive Islamic norms. Such demands for reinterpretation would find natural support in the works of scholars who argue that it is the 'ulama and the dense body of shari'a that evolved over the centuries, and not necessarily the guidelines presented in the Quran, that are responsible for the perpetuation of patriarchal structures within Muslim societies (Mernissi 1991; Wadud 1999; Barlas 2002). The emergence of female mosque- or madrasa-based Islamic study platforms and informal study circles as convened by Qubaysiat and Al-Huda, which permit educated Muslim women to study Islamic texts, could thus be expected to challenge male interpretation of these texts to argue for more liberal gender norms from within the Islamic tradition. The scholarship available on these movements to date, however, reports otherwise.

What then explains the demand for these apparently orthodox contemporary female Islamic education movements? And how are the readings of Islam that they promote shaping the socio-economic and political institutions within their host societies? This rare comparative study of one form of Islamic associational life across three diverse contexts argues for a major revision to the arguments advanced to date about the causes of expansion and spread of female Islamic movements and their bearing on shaping the public sphere within Muslim societies. It also serves as a lens to understand the broader phenomenon of Islamic resurgence since the 1970s. In order to understand the significance of these movements, and

[19] For a review of how the founding fathers of sociology expected modernity to lead to the demise of religion, see Stark and Finke (2000).

the argument advanced in this volume, it is best to proceed by briefly elaborating the reasons why from an analytical perspective the emergence of these female Islamic education movements and the persistence of Islam in fast-changing domestic and global contexts is not a trivial achievement.

The Persistence of Islam: Not a Trivial Achievement

The 'ulama and their attempts at Islamic revival[20] through supporting movements such as these female Islamic education movements are often held responsible for the apparent stagnation of intellectual spirit within Islam and the apparent inability of Muslim societies to experience economic prosperity and political stability in modern times. Such arguments often assume the persistence of Islam to be a product of the weight of history and custom, rather than possibly the product of reason and efficient adaptation by the scholars to demands of the changing times. It is often argued that the doors of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) were closed in the Muslim world from the twelfth century onwards,[21] curbing the intellectual reasoning and associated creativity and socio-economic and political prosperity that marked the period of early Islamic history. The centrality of scientific progress and rational reasoning associated with the Western renaissance and the rise of Western colonial power made many Muslim political elites attribute the decline of Muslim political authority to the nature of Islamic scholarship.[22] It was this conviction that made many postcolonial Muslim leaders embark on major Islamic modernisation projects (Berkey 2007) involving reform of the traditional centres of Islamic authority and learning. Interestingly, such views of the 'ulama and their reading of Islamic texts were not confined solely to Western scholars or the modernising Muslim political elites, but were also shared by the university-educated Islamic reformers, who in the twentieth century increasingly started to challenge the 'ulama's understanding of Islam. Unlike the secular reformers, these Islamists, such as Maulana Maududi in India and Sayyid Qutb in Egypt, did not find Islamic texts incapable of answering modern challenges; they did,

[20] 'Ulama, unlike the modern-educated Islamists who often argue for the capturing of state power through the establishment of movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Jamaat-i-Islami, have instead normally focused on Islamic revival movements through encouraging the spread of Islamic knowledge and personal piety (Metcalf 2002; Loimeier 2003).

[21] For a review of such positions and their critique, see Saliba (2011).

[22] Ataturk's reforms of the Islamic education institutions under the Turkish Republic (Agai 2007) are arguably the most visible expression of this cynicism towards orthodox Islam and Islamic authority structures within twentieth-century Muslim political elites.

however, find the 'ulama and their readings of Islamic texts out of sync with the needs of modern times.[23]

Central to such conceptions of the 'ulama, and the rigidity associated with orthodox readings of Islamic texts, is an assumption of stagnation and uncritical thinking within classical methods of Islamic teaching.[24] 'Ulama as religious elites in this line of reasoning are presented as highly orthodox, lacking dynamism, and capable only of protecting the traditional texts that they know best. The analytical challenge posed by such narratives, however, is major: it fails to account for the reasons why the 'ulama and the orthodox Islamic scholarship that they preserved could survive the major upheavals faced by Muslim societies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[25] Colonial rule not only made Islamic education irrelevant to modern economic and political realities and opportunities, it also came with a Christian civilisational agenda. Yet, Islam survived. In the words of (Geertz 1971: 64): 'Beyond the economic and political, the colonial confrontation was spiritual: a clash of selves. And in this part of the struggle, the colonized, not without cost and not without exception, triumphed: they remained, somewhat made over, themselves.'

While the Muslim political and economic elites failed to defend their turf in the face of Western economic and political institutions introduced by the colonisers, the 'ulama (despite coming under direct state control in many Muslim contexts[26]) successfully defended their authority over the religious sphere and ensured the successful transmission of core tenets of the faith to successive generations of Muslims. The continued demand for madrasa education in Muslim societies,[27] despite the improved provision of modern education systems, the growth of female Islamic

[23] For a review of the different orientations of the Islamists and the 'ulama of Al-Azhar, see Mitchell (1993) and Calvert (2010).

[24] For a review of such positions and their critiques, see Zeghal (2007); Zaman (2010); Pierret (2013).

[25] When researching how elite families in medieval Damascus (1190–1350) used the demonstration of knowledge and cultural practices to preserve their status, Chamberlain (1994: 176) draws on Charles Maier (1975) to argue the same: 'In an era of upheaval, it is continuity and stability that need explanation.'

[26] Al-Azhar in Egypt being the most studied example (Zeghal 2007).

[27] Even when pursuing modern education, in all three societies under study, the majority of the public at some point either studies in a mosque or a madrasa or is taught at home by a teacher trained in this traditional Islamic education system, to secure basic Islamic education. In Kano, the 2003 government census recorded 23,000 Islamiyya, Quranic, and Ilmi schools, as compared with fewer than 6,000 state primary and secondary schools (GoK 2003); for Pakistan, see Nelson (2006) for an analysis of how even when pursuing modern education, part-time enrolment in the form of evening classes in mosques for both boys and girls remains critical to parental conceptions of what constitutes basic education.

education movements, and at times even the more radical expressions of Islam, highlight the success of the 'ulama and traditional scholars in defending their turf and retaining among the majority of Muslims an appreciation of core Islamic values. To successfully perpetuate appreciation of beliefs which are apparently out of sync with the demands of modernity, and to ensure effective transmission of these beliefs from one generation to the next, is not a small feat.

It is therefore not surprising that recent studies of 'ulama and traditional platforms of Islamic authority have focused on highlighting the dynamism shown by the 'ulama in preserving their authority, and retaining adherence to core tenets of Islam, in fast-changing times (Zeghal 2007; Zaman 2010; Pierret 2013). Robinson (2008) similarly has shown how constant attempts at internal reform have been central to 'ulama scholarly tradition and how these trends found a heightened expression during the nineteenth century. Saliba (2011), while documenting evidence of scientific progress in the period between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries otherwise associated with a decline of intellectual thought and rationalist spirit in Muslim societies, has also argued that widely shared claims among Western scholars to the effect that the publication, and subsequent popular endorsement, of Imam Al-Ghazali's (1058–1111) *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* indicated the death of intellectual reasoning within Islamic scholarly tradition are a gross misreading of historical developments.[28] By recording the rapid sociopolitical changes against which the 'ulama and their reading of Islamic texts have survived, these studies have shown that the persistence of orthodox Sunni Islam cannot be taken as a given, or as a mere persistence of habit: we have to account for the dynamic agency of the 'ulama. They also show that even within its apparently most orthodox incarnations, intellectual reasoning and justification has been very important to the survival of Islam across time. The evidence presented on female Islamic education movements in this volume will further pursue this

[28] In *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Imam Al-Ghazali, who belonged to the Ash'ari school of Islamic theology (which combined an emphasis on literal readings of the script associated with the Hanbali tradition with Mu'tazila's emphasis on the use of rational argumentation) critiqued aspects of Ibn Sina's and Al-Farabi's works on Islamic philosophy. Its popular reception within the public and scholarly community of the time is often viewed as marking the defeat of the rationalist voices within the Islamic tradition; the assertion that 'gates of ijtihad were closed in the twelfth century' often draws on this as evidence. However, this position is strongly refuted by influential scholars of Islamic history, either explicitly or implicitly: see Saliba (2011) and Robinson (2001), respectively, who show how rational reasoning remained important to knowledge creation in successive generations of Muslims. It is also important to note that Al-Ghazali critiqued only aspects of Ibn Sina's and Al-Farabi's philosophical debates; he did not discredit the importance of philosophical inquiry per se.